



Tracing Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Bengal: A Critical Examination of Literary and Periodical Discourses

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Page No. 64-77

Abstract: This article undertakes a comprehensive examination of the discursive construction of masculinities in nineteenth-century Bengal through an analysis of select literary works and periodical publications. Focusing on the writings of Nabinchandra Sen, Chandranath Basu, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and the contemporaneous periodicals *Bangadarshan* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, this study maps the complex and often contradictory notions of manhood that emerged during the Bengal Renaissance. The article argues that masculinity in this period was not a monolithic construct but rather a contested terrain where conventional hegemonic ideals coexisted with emergent forms of "soft masculinity," where patriarchal authority was simultaneously reinforced and interrogated, and where the colonial encounter produced profound anxieties about Bengali male identity. By tracing the various shades of masculinity—from martial heroism and ascetic discipline to romantic sensibility and ethical introspection—this study establishes the critical backdrop against which Rabindranath Tagore's more nuanced explorations of manhood would later unfold.

Keywords- Masculinity, nineteenth century Bengal, hegemonic masculinity, soft masculinity, active female-passive male.

1. Introduction

The concept of masculinities has evolved over time. As R.W. Connell has influentially argued, masculinity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic configuration of practices within gender relations that is constantly being constructed, contested, and reconstructed across historical contexts. In the milieu of the Bengal Renaissance, the concept of masculinity took on a new dimension. There were Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who paved the way for a new path of masculinity based on affection and compassion. Rammohan was the chief propagator of the abrogation of the barbaric custom of Sati (burning the widows alive), and Vidyasagar initiated women's education and commenced the widow remarriage. They thought much for the plight of women. The educated young men from Hindu College were the prime supporters and bearers of these essential acts.

This article traces the period between the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Bangadarshan* and Tagore's *Sadhana*. It can be called the period of mind-reformation. In the arena of literature, three types of poetic writings were prevalent. First, heroic poetry flourished in the hands of Micheal Madhusudan Dutta, and later on, his baton was passed on to Hemchandra Bandhyopadhyay and Nabinchandra Sen. The second was satirical poetry initiated by Ishwar Gupta and carried forward by Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay and Indranath Bandyopadhyay. And the third stream was the innovation of lyric poetry in Bengal with the



writings of Dwijendranath Tagore and Biharilal Chakraborty. Later, Rabindranath Tagore pioneered in this genre.

The literature at that time is surfeit with hero worship embedded in past glory. The period valorizes war, death in war, bloodshed and mass killing. These are considered masculine acts based on courage and cruelty. Nabin Sen hails these types of masculinity in his writings. Chandranath Basu also glorifies heroism. Bankim differs from them in style and content. Bankim's heroes are engaged in warfare against the Muslim rulers and the British but they show tender traits of masculinity in their actions. The periodicals of that time are ahead of contemporary fictions in terms of contents related to masculinity and gender issues. The writers of the periodicals mainly that of *Bangadarshan* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika* write about the burning issues of that time like men's polygamy, women's monogamy, widow immolation, widow remarriage, adultery, celibacy, the qualities of modern men and women, the cowardice of Bengali men, the true masculinity of Englishmen, the past glory of heroism of the Bengali men, the Bengali men's endeavor to attain masculine traits, gender equality and women education. Through these articles one can get an idea of contemporary notions of masculinity and femininity of the nineteenth century. Bankim's writings also help to form an idea about the prescribed ethos of that period in respect of masculinity. In this article alongside this celebration of martial masculinity, one finds alternative articulations—figures of tender affection, ethical introspection, and even gender fluidity that complicate any simple understanding of nineteenth-century Bengali manhood. This article seeks to map these various shades of masculinity, grouping them according to their distinctive traits and tracing the intellectual genealogy that would ultimately find its most sophisticated expression in the works of Rabindranath Tagore.

2. Literature Survey

The scholarly discourse on masculinity in colonial Bengal has evolved considerably since Mrinalini Sinha's foundational *Colonial Masculinity* (1995), which established that the colonial stereotype of the "effeminate Bengali" was actively engaged with by indigenous intellectuals who both internalized and resisted its implications. Building on this, Indira Chowdhury's *The Frail Hero and Virile History* (1998) examined how the glorification of Rajput and Maratha heroism served as a compensatory mechanism for perceived emasculation under colonial rule. Within literary studies, Sipra Mukherjee (2007) and Sambudha Sen (2014) have explored Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's construction of masculine ideals, demonstrating how his novels provided a cultural script equating masculine strength with national pride while remaining deeply hierarchical and gender-constrained. Studies on Nabinchandra Sen and Chandranath Basu, however, remain sparse, with existing scholarship focusing on literary contributions rather than gender analysis. The turn to periodical studies has opened new avenues, with scholars like Tapti Roy and Rosinka Chaudhuri demonstrating the centrality of the press in shaping public discourse, yet comprehensive analyses of masculinity in *Bangadarshan* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika* remain absent. Works by Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Partha Chatterjee (1989) have illuminated the gendered dimensions of nationalism and reform, while comparative frameworks from Ashis Nandy (1983) and Sikata Banerjee (2005) provide theoretical tools for understanding colonial masculinity. Despite these contributions, no study systematically traces the construction of masculinity across multiple authors, genres, and periodical discourses within a single analytical framework, a lacuna the present work addresses by examining the writings of Nabinchandra Sen, Chandranath Basu, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee alongside contemporaneous periodical debates, thereby establishing the discursive



field within which Rabindranath Tagore's more nuanced explorations of manhood would later unfold.

3. Research Gap

Despite significant contributions, four lacunae persist in the scholarship on nineteenth-century Bengali masculinity. First, no comprehensive study traces masculine construction across multiple authors and genres within a single analytical framework. Second, existing scholarship emphasizes hegemonic martial ideals while neglecting "soft" or "emergent" masculinities evident in figures of tenderness and gender fluidity. Third, the relationship between literary texts and periodical discourses remains unexplored, with novels and journalistic prose examined separately rather than dialogically. Fourth, while Tagore's works are extensively studied, their relationship to preceding masculine discourses has not been adequately traced. This study addresses these gaps by examining Nabinchandra Sen, Chandranath Basu, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee alongside *Bangadarshan* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, establishing the discursive field for Tagore's later explorations.

4. Shades of Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

The discursive construction of masculinity in nineteenth-century Bengal reveals not a single, monolithic ideal but rather a complex spectrum of masculine possibilities. This section groups these various shades of masculinity according to their distinctive traits, examining how they were articulated across literary texts and periodical discourses.

4.1 Hegemonic Masculinity: The Warrior-Hero

The most visible and valorized form of masculinity in nineteenth-century Bengali literature was the hegemonic ideal of the warrior-hero, whose identity was forged in battle, tested through adversity, and proven through acts of courage and self-sacrifice. This ideal drew upon both indigenous traditions of Kshatriya masculinity and the colonial fascination with martial races, producing a composite figure who embodied physical prowess, moral integrity, and nationalist aspiration.

4.1.1 Nabinchandra Sen's Martial Epic

In the writings of Nabinchandra Sen, heroism, bravery, and valiance are explicitly equated with masculinity. His epic poems—*Palashir Yuddha* (1876), and his trilogy *Raivatak* (1886), *Kurukshetra* (1893), and *Prabhas* (1896)—are populated by mythical and historical figures whose masculinity is measured by their performance on the battlefield. In *Raivatak*, Sen conflates conventional masculinity with robust physique through the characters of Saila and Kishore: "Sailakakshe jeno/ Drirh Sailastambha ek hoilo sthapito /Barna Krishna, deho kharbo, bolishtho sorire/ sthane sthane mangsopeshi uthichhe phatiya" (Sen, p. 43) (As if in the lap of the mountain/ A firm pillar of rock stood erected/ Dark complexioned, short bodied, but in a robust physique / Here and there, muscles swelled out bursting. – author's translation)

The equation of masculinity with physical strength is further reinforced through animal imagery. Conventionally, lions and tigers are considered the epitome of physical strength, and Sen repeatedly employs such imagery to valorize his masculine figures. In *Raivatak*, he hails the valorous queen by comparing her to a tigress: "Uthi baghinir moto ek laphe rani" (Sen, p.151)(The queen springs into action like a tigress – author's translation). Similarly, in *Prabhas*, masculine men like Satyaki are compared with lions.

Yet even within Sen's celebration of martial masculinity, one finds moments of complexity. His *Palashir Yuddha*, which dramatizes the Battle of Plassey, presents a nuanced picture of masculine failure and success. Siraj-ud-Dowla, the last free Nawab of Bengal, is portrayed through the words of Rani Bhabani, Jagat Seth, and Krishnachandra as cruel, vulgar, mean, a



sinner, improvident, fickle-minded, and even nearsighted—a disgrace to the Mughal family. Siraj is depicted as goaded by lust and sensual desires, a coward among heroes. In contrast, Sen valorizes the heroic deeds of Mirmadan and Mohanlal, who embody the masculine virtues that Siraj lacks.

It is significant that Sen's portrayal of Siraj aligns with the colonial historiography written by English historians, raising the question of how colonial discourse shaped indigenous constructions of masculinity. The figures who sought power through devious means—Lord Clive, Mirzafar, Umichand, Jagat Seth, Krishna Chandra—are portrayed not as real heroes but as foils to masculinity, their "unmanly" methods contrasting with the straightforward courage of true warriors.

4.1.2 Bankim Chandra's Martial Heroes

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels, while more psychologically nuanced than Sen's epic poetry, also participate in the construction of martial masculinity. In his debut novel *Durgeshnandini* (1865), all the major male characters are well-versed in the grammar of warfare, proving their masculinity through valor, heroic deeds, truth-speaking, and oath-keeping. Kumar Jagat Singh of the Mughals and Osman Khan of the Pathans are declared enemies on the battlefield, yet they help one another as friends, their camaraderie based on mutual respect and admiration of each other's character, courage, and honor.

Bankim's construction of martial masculinity is explicitly comparative, positioning Bengali manhood against that of other communities. In *Durgeshnandini*, he writes: "Pathanera bangali nohe; kakhono adhinota swikar korena" (Chatterjee, p.29) (The Pathans are not like the Bengalis; they never give in to anyone. – author's translation). This observation aligns with the colonial discourse that constructed Bengalis as effeminate in contrast to the martial races of northern and western India. Bankim's project, in part, was to counter this stereotype by constructing an ideal Bengali masculinity that could hold its own against both Pathan valor and British power.

In *Anandamath* (1884), Bankim carries this project further, depicting the "santans" (members of a secret society dedicated to driving Muslims from Bengal) as brave, spirited men who practice celibacy. Through the hermit Satyananda and his chief followers Jibananda, Bhabananda, and Dhirananda, Bankim constructs an ideal of masculinity rooted in ascetic discipline, physical fitness, and organized resistance. The novel itself is the fictional fulfillment of Bankim's desire to portray ten thousand "santans" as unconquerable, fearless, assiduous, courageous, and a terror to the enemy.

Bankim's emphasis on organized attack, physical fitness, and the use of arms reflects a vision of masculinity that is both traditional (drawing on Kshatriya ideals) and modern (responding to colonial power). As he writes in *Devi Choudhurani* (1884), through the voice of Bhabani Pathak: "sokoleri pithe lathi bandha- ei bangalar jatiyo hatiyar. Bangali ihar prokrito bybohar janito; lathi chhariyai Bangali nirjib hoiyachhe" (Chatterjee, p. 364) (Everybody ties sticks on their backs—this is the national weapon of Bengal. The Bengali knew its real usage; abandoning sticks the Bengali race has become dull. - author's translation).

4.1.3 The Discourse of Heroism in Periodicals

The periodical press of the nineteenth century actively engaged with questions of Bengali heroism and cowardice, producing a discourse that both reinforced and complicated literary constructions of martial masculinity. Haraprasad Shastri's article "Ekjon Bangali Governorer Adbhut Biratwo," published in *Bangadarshan*, satirically depicts the weakness and cowardice of a Hindu governor of Orissa, Roy Durlabhram, who failed to resist the Maratha army and had



to be ransomed by Nawab Alibordi Khan. Shastri's concluding comment—"Amader biratwo purushanukromik" (Shastri, p. 139) (Our heroism is hereditary- author's translation)—carries a biting irony that indicts the entire Bengali community.

Rajani Kanta Gupta's counter-article, "Bangalir Biratwo," attempts to refute Shastri's allegations by citing multiple examples of Bengali heroism: the naval skills documented in Kalidas's *Raghuvansham*, the chivalric activities of the Pala and Sena kings, the Gangavamsiya kings of Orissa, the kings of Vishnupur, the Baro Bhuiyas, Isa Khan of Khijirpur, and Kedar Roy of Bikrampur. Gupta writes: "Khrishtiyo saptodash satabdi porjonto bangalay bangalidiger eirup protap chhilo" (Gupta, p. 216) (The Bengalis had this type of power and glory in Bengal till the seventeenth century. – author's translation).

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee entered this debate with his articles "Ahar versus Bibaha" and "Bangalir Bahubal," in which he disagreed with Gupta and aligned himself with Shastri's assessment. Bankim attributes Bengali physical weakness to dietary deficiencies (excessive rice consumption leading to malnutrition) and the practice of child marriage (leading to excessive procreation and further nutritional stress). However, in a significant move, Bankim also redefines "bahubal" (power of arms) to include intellectual power, unity, and moral courage, thereby constructing an alternative basis for Bengali masculinity that does not depend solely on physical strength.

Taraprasad Chattopadhyay's article "Bangalidiger Pourush" further complicates the discourse by arguing that masculinity is habitual rather than innate—a product of training and circumstance rather than racial essence. A Santal boy is fearless in the deep forest, a fisherman's boy can tame the fearful sea, but if their positions were changed, their masculine capacities might also change. Chattopadhyay's environmental and pedagogical approach to masculinity opens up possibilities for reform and self-improvement that align with the broader project of Bengali Renaissance.

4.2. Ascetic Masculinity: The Discipline of Self-Control

Alongside the martial ideal, nineteenth-century Bengali discourse constructed another form of masculinity rooted not in physical prowess but in ascetic discipline and self-control. This ideal drew upon indigenous traditions of brahmacharya and sannyasa, which were reinterpreted in the colonial context as sources of moral and spiritual power that could compensate for physical weakness.

4.2.1 Bankim's Santans and Sannyasis

In *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee presents the "santans" as embodiments of ascetic masculinity. Their celibacy, rigorous discipline, and devotion to the motherland constitute a form of masculine power that is not dependent on physical strength alone but on the spiritual and moral authority that comes from self-denial. Satyananda, the leader of the santans, derives his authority not from martial prowess but from his spiritual insight and his ability to inspire devotion in others.

This ascetic ideal is further developed in *Devi Choudhurani*, where Bhabani Pathak, the self-proclaimed king of the jungle near Durgapur, serves as a mentor who transforms the young lady Prafulla into the bandit queen Devi Choudhurani. Bhabani's masculinity is rooted not in physical display but in his ability to teach, guide, and empower others. His authority comes from his mastery of traditional knowledge—Sanskrit grammar, Indian philosophy, yoga, the classics, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and wrestling—and his ability to transmit this knowledge to his disciples.



The ascetic ideal also appears in Chandranath Basu's analysis of Kanwa in *Shakuntalatattwa*. Unlike King Dushyanta, whose masculinity is exercised on the battlefield and in the courtroom, Kanwa's masculinity is expressed through his Gurudharma—his role as teacher, mentor, and spiritual guide. His power lies in his tutelage, his ideals of renunciation, and his self-control. Kanwa's authority is earned through morality and austerity, backed by holy scriptures and religious customs. He can exert his authority through his power to bless and curse—an ability earned through strict discipline, penance, and truth.

4.2.1 The Discourse of Celibacy and Self-Control

The periodical press also engaged with questions of ascetic discipline and self-control. In *Bangadarshan*, discussions of polygamy and celibacy reveal the extent to which masculine identity was understood in terms of sexual self-mastery. The anonymous article "Bahupatnitwa" traces the origin and cause of polygamy from the primitive era, stating that "Jahar bolbirjo asadharan tahari bohu stree" (*Bangadarshan*, p. 89) (One who has remarkable strength and vigor keeps multiple wives. - author's translation). Multiple wives, in this formulation, are signs of masculinity, glory, muscle power, wealth, and vigor.

4.3 Soft Masculinity: The Emergence of the Compassionate Man

While martial and ascetic masculinities dominated the literary landscape, one also finds in nineteenth-century Bengali texts the emergence of what might be termed "soft masculinity"—figures of tenderness, emotional sensitivity, and ethical introspection who complicate the conventional association of masculinity with hardness and aggression.

4.3.1 Nabinchandra Sen's Birendra

Nabinchandra Sen's narrative poetry *Rangamati* (1880) presents a particularly interesting case of soft masculinity. The protagonist, Birendra, is depicted as a character with romantic traits—poetic insight, respect for women, and a unique thought process. Yet Sen repeatedly portrays him as involved in warfare, reprisal, and counter-reprisal, rescuing helpless women, and killing tigers to demonstrate his masculinity. Birendra, despite displaying certain features of soft masculinity, ultimately succumbs to the demands of contemporary prescriptions of mainstream conventional masculinity, embracing death in a sordid war mired in blood and horror.

The core of Birendra's masculinity, however, is not brute strength but a moral imperative to protect female virtue. When he rescues his childhood fiancée Kusumika from a rape attempt by a wicked Brahmin, the threat emanates not from an archrival but from a figure of religious authority depicted as amoral. Masculinity is here posited as an antithesis to social hypocrisy. Birendra's violence is not for personal desire but to uphold honor and justice, embodying what might be called controlled and purposeful masculinity.

Sen scales up Birendra's masculinity by making him a true patriot when he defends his land from the Portuguese. The microcosm (protecting Kusumika) mirrors the macrocosm (protecting the community and nation), suggesting that the ideal masculine figure is the protector at all levels: familial, social, and national.

Significantly, Birendra also exhibits moments of tenderness that diverge from conventional masculine norms. He addresses his fiancé Kusumika along with his parents as his worshipped deities. (Sen, p.163) In the last part of the nineteenth century, this comparison of a ladylove with one's goddess of heart is indeed a novel attribution, suggesting the emergence of romantic sensibilities within masculine self-understanding.

4.3.2 Bankim Chandra's Romantic Heroes



Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels are populated by heroes who embody softer, more romantic forms of masculinity. Nabakumar in *Kapalkundala* (1866) is a nature lover and virtuous Brahmin who loves his wife from the core of his heart but never acts as a hindrance to her freedom. When the forest-girl Kapalkundala does not reciprocate his love as expected, Nabakumar's heart bleeds, but he never speaks for himself or takes the upper hand in their conjugal life. Finally, when Kapalkundala commits suicide in the name of religion, Nabakumar follows her—an act of devotion that challenges conventional notions of masculine autonomy and self-preservation.

Nabakumar can be seen as an example of a "new man" with novel features—one who does not exhibit his masculinity through arrogance and barbaric dominance but believes in gender equality, space in conjugal relationship, and exhibits respect towards women. His willingness to follow his wife in death subverts the conventional gender dynamic in which women follow men, suggesting a more fluid understanding of masculine and feminine roles.

Hemchandra in *Mrinalini* (1869) similarly exhibits soft masculine traits, willing to do anything for Mrinalini's safety and security. The male warriors in Bankim's novels—Kumar Jagat Singh, Osman Khan, Pratap, Hemchandra, Jibananda—are notable for their empathy and humanity, which Bankim presents as the highlight of his idea of masculinity.

In *Bishbrikhsa* (1873), Bankim depicts Nagendra, a wealthy landlord of rural Bengal, with traits of soft masculinity. He is good-looking, generous, dutiful, and affectionate to his subjects, and a loving husband to Surjamukhi. Yet Nagendra also has a tragic flaw—his love and weakness toward the dependent widow Kundanandini. In the course of events, he marries Kundanandini, and immediately after, he realizes his guilt toward his first wife. Through Nagendra, Bankim explores the tension between masculine desire and masculine duty, presenting a protagonist whose softness leads him into moral complexity rather than heroic simplicity.

Shreesh Chandra, Nagendra's brother-in-law, is depicted by Bankim as a wonderful human being who is labeled "hen-pecked" by his subordinates. Shreesh's willingness to treat his wife as an equal, his confidence in facing the condescension of his peer group, and his rejection of performative dominance constitute a subversive model of masculinity that challenges patriarchal standards. His true courage, Bankim suggests, is mislabeled as cowardice by a system that relies on public spectacle over private ethics.

4.3.3 Masculinity, Eroticism, and Performance and the concept of Asexual in Chandrasekhar

In *Chandrasekhar* (1875), both Pratap and Chandrasekhar can decipher Saibalini's inner conflicts and trauma and act accordingly. Pratap always respects the desires of Saibalini, his childhood fiancée. Saibalini dislikes her husband's way of displaying love and affection towards her. She craves for light and humorous conjugal relationship, but Chandrasekhar is elderly and serious. Masculinity, eroticism, and performance are deeply intertwined. Conventional views often link masculine identity with sexual prowess, and the ability to perform sexually as sexual prowess is a marker of masculinity. As a result, the onus is on the men to feign high sexual desire. This hegemonic model constantly demonstrates sexual dominance. Chandrasekhar is preoccupied in reading books and gathering knowledge. He cannot spend much time with his wife, Saibalini and cannot satisfy her sexually. Thus Saibalini laments her husband's lack of vigor to her neighbor, Sundari. Saibalini dislikes her husband's sexual performance. Hearing that Sundari rebukes Saibalini—"Je swamir moto swami jogote durlabh,tnahar snehe tomar mon othena. Ki na, baloke jemon khelaghorer putulke aador kore,



tini streeke serup aador korite janenna.” (Chatterjee, p. 164). (You do not acknowledge the affection of your husband who is unique in the world. Your reason is that he does not know how to become intimate with you like a boy’s endearment with a doll in a playhouse.- author’s translation) Here Chandrasekhar is a man with soft masculine feature while Saibalini wants someone rustic/ rough masculine man. It raises a valid question whether Chandrasekhar falls under the category of an asexual man or not.

4.3.4 Gobindalal's Tragic Masculinity

Perhaps Bankim's most complex male character is Gobindalal in *Krishnakanter Will* (1878). Unlike Bankim's other heroes, Gobindalal is not satisfied with his wife Bhramar and becomes attached to a neighboring village widow, Rohini. When Gobindalal's uncle gives his share of property to Bhramar in his last will, and Bhramar immediately makes a gift deed to Gobindalal, his male ego is wounded. He declares: "Tomar jogyo kaj tumi koriyachho. Kintu tomay amay ki sambandha? Ami tomay alangkar dibo, tumi poribe. Tumi bishoy dan koribe, ami bhog koribo-e sambandha nahe" (Chatterjee, p. 244) (You have done the right thing. But what is the relationship between you and me? If I give you ornaments, you wear them. But it is not the relationship that I shall accept the property you gift me. – author’s translation).

Here Gobindalal voices the traditional man-woman relationship where the man is the giver and the woman the receiver—the husband is the subject and the wife the other. He cannot bear the reverse situation and leaves the house. Living with Rohini for several years, he finally kills her when she proves unfaithful. Gobindalal's tragedy lies in his inability to reconcile his tender feelings with his conventional masculine expectations, leading him to violence and self-destruction.

4.3.5 Cuckoldry and Masculinity in *Krishnakanter Will*

In an article named “Cuckolds and Masculinity” the author analyses a ninth century episode of an indissoluble marriage of Count Boso and his wife Ingiltrude. Ingiltrude ran off with one of her husband’s subordinates. Boso neither divorced nor killed her. Instead he requested the Pope to bring her back which obviously damage Boso’s masculine image. According to the author the motif of cuckoldry is a common theme in medieval and early modern texts like Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603). In *Krishnakanter will* Gobindalal is seen deceived by his mistress, Rohini, which is humiliating for Gobindalal. According to patriarchy, the man should be superior to the woman and the man has a superior brain to detect the deceit of his woman. A relevant issue is how a husband is expected to act when he discovers the adultery of his wife/mistress. Does the husband have to kill his wife? Though it is illegal to kill an unfaithful wife, not taking violent revenge in this situation looks like cowardice. Similarly, if a man fails to take revenge in such a situation where his woman’s family or the adulterer is more powerful than him, this also looks unmanly. Prevalent literary texts voice for the punishment of the guilty wife. In Bankim’s text, Gobindalal shoots Rohini, obeying the conventional norms of masculinity. Rohini is an orphan, and her only acquaintance, her uncle, is powerless, which enables Gobindalal to kill her easily. On the other hand, Gobindalal himself commits adultery with his wife Bhramar. But we do not become astonished in finding different treatment for the same unjust act. Here the shame is Bhramar’s not her husband’s. Bhramar’s father even makes frees Gobindalal from legal custody instead of reprimanding him for his adultery.

Rohini raises a question – is cuckoldry an escape from toxic masculinity? Gobindalal in *Krishnakanter Will* confines Rohini in a house in Prasadpur, Jessore. Rohini is not allowed to go outside or communicate with the visitors. Gobindalal assumes a new identity in Prasadpur



for executing his adultery. When Rohini secretly meets Nishakar Das alias Rasbihari De at the fatal night she is not aware of the mean conspiracy of Nishakar Das, a friend of Bhramar's father. For Rohini cuckoldry acts as a solution to the toxic masculinity practiced by Gobindalal. The men can avoid punishment and social humiliation but all doors are closed for the women as she must be the victim for the same heinous act.

4.3.6 Masculinity and Kingship in *Mrinalini*

In *Mrinalini* (1869) Bankim exhibits the masculinity of Hemchandra and Pashupati through war and heroic deeds. Pashupati has a latent desire of becoming the king of Nabadwip and attaining this he commits treachery and finally dies. The king of Nabadwip is portrayed as old, frightened and coward. The idea of masculinity and kingship can be explored here. Katherine J. Lewis in her book *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (Lewis, pp. 1- 284) analyses the relationship between monarchy and masculinity. Lewis represents two opposite types of masculinity of Henry V and his son, Henry VI. The masculine identity of a king is important in ruling his kingdom. Henry V has the ideal masculine identity in respect to military might, self-controlling power, and above all, his larger-than-life image. On the other hand, Henry VI lacks manly vigor and has no interest in martial arts. Henry VI fails to establish his masculinity through marriage and sexual potency. His nervousness and mental breakdown damaged his public image as a king. It is said that the notion of masculinity is built up with contrasts. The lack of manliness of Henry VI becomes prominent in sharp contrast with the virility and overt manliness of his father. Moreover, Henry 6th's wife is domineering and aggressive, which equally affected the manliness of the king. Similarly, here in *Mrinalini* the king of Nabadwip fails to attain the status of a king as fear and cowardice are not associated with the royal image. It is stated here a mere contrast between an ambitious masculine character (Pashupati) and a weak king. It obviously raises a valid argument whether there are differences between a hero and a king. Is a king must be a hero?

4.4. Gendered Fluidity: When Women Are Masculine and Men Are Tender

One of the most striking features of nineteenth-century Bengali discourse on masculinity is its occasional recognition of gender fluidity—moments when female characters exhibit conventionally masculine traits and male characters exhibit conventionally feminine tenderness. These moments challenge the rigid binary of active male and passive female, suggesting a more complex understanding of gender than is often acknowledged.

4.4.1 Chandranath Basu's *Savitri*

In *Savitritattwa* (1900), Chandranath Basu presents the legendary Savitri as a character who breaks the boundary of active male and passive female through her grit and determination. Savitri marries Satyaban after attaining youth (unlike the child marriages prevalent at the time) and chooses her own groom through "swayamvara" (self-choice). When Satyaban dies, Savitri confronts Yama, the God of Death, and through her intelligence, determination, and moral strength, secures her husband's revival.

Basu's analysis of Yama reveals a similar fluidity. Looking beyond the robust veneer of Yama's terrible outer self, Basu discovers a tender inner self—merciful, graceful, kind-hearted, tender, patient, and truthful. Savitri's "masculine" actions (rational, active, rebellious, intelligent) discover Yama's "feminine" tenderness, creating a moment of gender reversal that challenges essentialist notions of masculine and feminine traits.

4.4.2 Bankim Chandra's Active Women

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels are populated by female characters who break the binary of active male and passive female. Coined by film critic Laura Mulvey this concept of 'active



male and passive female' suggests that the male perspective has been the standard for a long time in media based on patriarchal power dynamics. Ayesha and Bimala in *Durgeshnandini*(1865) are exceptions among Bankim's female characters. Ayesha, the daughter of Pathan king Katalu Khan, saves the life of Kumar Jagat Singh with the help of Osman Khan. Being a woman from the Muslim community, she disobeys purdah and acts humanely, standing for truth and enduring pain according to her own will.

Bimala, the secret wife of Birendra Singh in guise of a maid servant, is the driving force of the novel, possessing traits conventionally deemed masculine—intelligence, physical prowess, political sagacity, and valor. She acts as a catalyst in the blossoming of love between Kumar Jagat Singh and Tilottama, works to prevent Pathan attacks on Birendra Singh's fort, secures Tilottama's escape from prison, and finally stabs Katalu Khan, the killer of her husband.

Through Bimala, Bankim challenges the binary that only male characters are active while women are passive. Bimala takes agency in her hands, challenging gender stereotypes and proving that courage, intelligence, and valor are not essentially masculine traits but human possibilities.

In *Devi Choudhurani*(1884), Bankim takes this gender fluidity even further. Prafulla, a young lady, undergoes five years of rigorous physical and mental training under Bhabani Pathak's guidance—learning Sanskrit grammar, Indian philosophy, yoga, classics, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and wrestling—and emerges as the bandit queen Devi Choudhurani. Bankim emphasizes her education, rigorous training, and practice, suggesting that masculine qualities are not innate but cultivated.

At the end of the novel, Bankim compares Prafulla's philanthropy to that of Lord Krishna, quoting the *Bhagavad Gita*, "Paritranay sadhunang binashay cha dushkritam / Dharmasangsthaponarthay sambhabami yuge yuge" (Chatterjee, p. 372) (To protect the righteous, to annihilate the wicked, and to reestablish the principles of dharma, I manifest myself age after age. —translated by Prabhupada). When Bankim explicitly compares a mythical male figure like Krishna with a fictional female figure like Devi Choudhurani, what comes to the fore is the fluidity of these traits. Devi Choudhurani is not merely a female character imbibing masculine trait; rather, she is doing away with the age-old practice of labeling certain features as inherently masculine and others as inherently feminine.

Smita Sahgal's definition of masculine women—"when women are assertive, physically strong or enter public arena or violate their varna-jati frames they are often called masculine" (Sahgal, p.06)—captures the conventional response to such figures. Yet Bankim's treatment of Devi Choudhurani suggests a more radical possibility: that the very categories of masculine and feminine may be inadequate to describe human potential.

4.5 Colonial Masculinity: The Crisis of Bengali Manhood

The colonial encounter produced a profound crisis in Bengali masculine identity, as Bengali men were confronted with the visible power of the British colonizer and the colonial discourse that constructed them as effeminate, weak, and cowardly. This crisis generated multiple responses—from internalization and self-criticism to resistance and the construction of alternative masculine ideals.

4.5.1 The Discourse of Effeminacy

The colonial charge of Bengali effeminacy was not merely an external stereotype but was actively engaged with by Bengali intellectuals. In *Durgeshnandini*, Bankim writes that "Pathanera bangali nohe; kakhono adhinota swikar korena" (Chatterjee, p. 29)(The Pathans are



not like the Bengalis; they never give in to anyone. – author’s translation), aligning himself with the colonial view that Bengalis lack the martial spirit of other communities.

In his essay "Babu," Bankim sketches the characteristics of educated Bengali men of the nineteenth century who tried to imitate the Englishmen. They are portrayed as gourmands, multilingual, consumers of tobacco and alcohol, keepers of mistresses, lazy and decadent, dandies, and sycophants. Bankim despises the imitating Bengali men who reproduce a blank as well as blunt representation of Englishmen. According to Bankim, a mimic man neither belongs to his original race nor the mimicking race, vainly attempting to bridge the insurmountable gulf between colonizer and colonized.

4.5.2 The Discourse of Resistance

Yet alongside this self-criticism, one finds a discourse of resistance that seeks to recuperate Bengali masculine pride. Taraprasad Chattopadhyay's "Bangalidiger Pourush" eagerly wants to eradicate the badge of cowardice from Bengali men. He points to the power and strength of stick-player brothers Gagan Mian and Mohan Mian of Bakharganj district, the masculine power of the Malla kings of Bishnupur who fought against the Maratha army, and the heroic acts of Titumir and his chieftain Golam Masum. While acknowledging that many Bengali men are coward, Taraprasad insists that the European notion of all Bengali men being coward is not true.

Rabindranath Tagore, in his article "Ghushaghushi" published in *Nabaparjay Bangadarshan*, provocatively addresses the English tendency to beat native people. Tagore provokes the native people to hit back, arguing that when a native man hits an Englishman, it is seen as an attack on royal power and prestige, elevating his guilt beyond that of a mere beater. Tagore writes: "Amader modhye ei gurutoro asamakakshata ache boliyay je maar khay, tahar cheye je maare, sei kapurush beshi" (There is major disparity between the Bengali and the Englishmen. So he who shows power and strength over the weaker section is more coward than the oppressed). Tagore labels the Englishman as coward, reversing the colonial accusation and constructing an alternative moral framework for evaluating masculine conduct.

4.5.3 The Critique of Patriarchal Masculinity

In *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Akshay Kumar Dutta's article "Palligramostho Prajader Durabostha Barnan" catalogued landlords' brutal tortures—beatings, starvation, submersion—as expressions of masculine power. This critique reveals displaced aggression: native officials, emasculated by colonial masters, vented rage on subordinates to salvage their male ego. The exposure of such cruelty thus becomes an indictment of a masculinity that compensates for its own subordination through tyranny over the vulnerable.

4.5.4 The Reformist Masculinity of Periodicals

Periodicals articulated a reformist masculinity challenging traditional privilege. *Tattwabodhini Patrika*'s articles on polygamy ("Bahubibaho") critiqued this male prerogative, highlighting unhappy marriages, neglect of brides, suicide, infanticide, favoritism and questioning why only women must observe monogamy. While reformers condemned polygamy as uncivilized, traditionalists cited *Manusmriti* in its defense. Ishan Chandra Basu's "Streejatir Adhikar" revealed reformist limitations, fearing women's freedom and advocating gendered division of labor based on "natural" physical capacity. Though accepting some gender equality, such discourse ultimately preserved masculine authority by prescribing separate spheres, demonstrating how reformist masculinity sought transformation within boundaries that maintained fundamental patriarchal structures.



5. Conclusion

By tracing the concept of masculinities in nineteenth-century Bengal in literary texts and periodicals one can come across several readings. The hegemonic ideal of the warrior-hero coexisted with emergent forms of soft masculinity that emphasized tenderness, emotional sensitivity, ethical introspection, and gender fluidity. Second, the construction of masculinity was deeply shaped by the colonial encounter. The colonial charge of Bengali effeminacy produced a crisis of masculine identity that generated multiple responses—internalization and self-criticism, resistance and counter-construction. Third, the periodical press played a crucial role in shaping and contesting masculine ideals. There are many opinions regarding masculinity, cowardice, monogamy, polygamy, women's education, and gender equality. In this article the relationship between masculinity and kingship, masculinity and cuckoldry, masculinity and asceticism, and masculinity and performance are briefly discussed. Aspects of masculinities are evident in both the structure of conventionality and the emergence of new traits. In the early writings, heroism and bravery are equated with masculine features. In the writings of Nabin Sen, Chandranath Basu, and Bankim Chandra, we find figures like Krishna, Arjun, Abhimanyu, Dushmantlya, Kumar Jagat Singh, and Osman Khan, for whom exhibiting valiance is equivalent to masculinity. On the other hand, the chapter discusses empathetic men who promote compassion, gender equality, women's education, emancipation, and participation in the social forum. Chandranath Basu's depiction of Lord Yam, filial love of Arjun and Krishna depicted by Nabin Sen, and romantic heroes of Bankim's novels fall under the category. In contemporary periodicals, the writers are divided between the traditional standpoint and the newly emerging concept of masculinity as well as femininity. They despise widow immolation, polygamy of men, and the cowardice of Bengali men, but stick to women's monogamy. They speak out for gender equality but restrict women's socialization. They want women should be educated but dislike women's free will and reckless behaviour. They understand the evil customs meant to subjugate women and are willing to argue against them, but they formulate a boundary as well, beyond which a woman cannot go. This is the common feature of any age of transition as ambivalence and hesitation are there to accept the new thought. In the writings of Bankim Chandra in his later years one can find male characters with novel thoughts which would also flourish in the writings of Rabindranath. They overcome the societal pressure and stigma and depict their male protagonists with modern traits of masculinity. So, it may be said that the seeds of soft/modern masculinity are embedded in the projection of conventional masculine figures in the literature of nineteenth century.

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