

Sangshar Sukher Hoi Romonir Gune: Examining Gender Roles in Lakhir Panchali

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Abstract

Incanting the Lakkhir Panchali is a hebdomadal custom of every Hindu household. However, owing to its spiritual connotations, believers fail to regard the faulty gender-biased foundations on which stands this entire religious construction. Standing on the soil of feminism, our generation cannot afford to overlook the undertone of such “Thursday-enchanting”. A belief system operates in every Hindu household that reciting this piece of narrative can fetch wealth and prosperity to every household. However, the conflict arises when the set parameters of the book (to bring wealth and prosperity) are to be met only by women, releasing the men from its clutches. The set regulations that women must achieve to bring fortune to their households are nothing but adding feathers to the hat of patriarchy.

Keywords: gender stereotypes; weekly recital; feminism; ideology

What is the definition of a “good girl”? Or more specifically of a লক্ষী বৌমা? The answer to this perplexing notion has been multiple. Yet the base of these multiple definitions rest on the supreme dominating force called “SOCIETY” on the phrase লোকে কী বলবে? And our society has always, from time immemorial, been

Generous enough to provide us the “women of the society”, with all the directives that would help us fit well into this bewildering category of “good girl”. Hence, when people shout out the maxim, সংসার সুখের হয় রমনীর গুণে, there is an invisible burden of responsibility under the sweet veil of the maxim. This responsibility, if kept unattended, would in no time transform your identity from Lakhi to Olokhi. Whether overtly hostile (such as women are irrational) or seemingly benign (women are nurturing), harmful stereotypes perpetuate inequalities.

Gramsci says in the *Representation of Gender in folk paintings of Bengal* by Ratnabali Chatterjee, “There is a morality of the people understood as a determinant of principles for practical conduct and of customs that derive from them or have produced them. Like superstition, this morality is closely tied to religious beliefs. Yet this concept of morality is not unilinear. Within the complex strata exist the fossilized ones which reflect conditions of past life and are therefore conservative and reactionary and those which consist of a series of innovations often creative and progressive determined spontaneously by forms and conditions of life which are in the process of developing and which are in contradiction to the morality of the governing strata.”

Lina Gupta, for example, writing in Paula M. Cooley et al, eds, *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (1991), reviews the nature of the Hindu divine revealed as the goddess Kali. She shows that this female figure repeatedly adopts patterns of behaviour that do not fit with the proper role of women within Hindu tradition. She is a wife but is rarely found with her partner, Siva. She has no children, lives mostly outdoors and has no fixed household. Moreover, she appears as the personified wrath of other goddesses, who are much more conventional. Lina Gupta suggests that this anger represents a deep and repressed rage against the perceived

injustice faced by women in particular. She argues that Kali's bad reputation and questionable behaviour cannot be dismissed as due to malevolence, and she believes that Kali's "unfeminine" behaviour is largely problematic from the privileged perspective of men.

Hence, the society calls for a woman who would be obedient to the 'good girl' strictures and would "by consent" be dominated by the male super-powers. After all, the entire well-being of the nation lies in the hands of women, rather "good women", and hence it is their responsibility to live up to this expectation!

On a similar note, Partha Chatterjee says in chapter six of the book *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* "...the practices of the outside world which men have to get used to are in the end inconsequential, since what truly matters in the life of the nation are practices in the inner space of community life"(243).

My paper intends to explore the recital of Lakhir Panchali, that explores an intimate relationship between patriarchy and rituals, and the incentive for the continuity of such rituals in the socio-cultured economic and ideological setting of family life in contemporary Bengal when the cultural markers supporting the Griha Lokhi identity are getting raptured in the process of globalization.

This study proposed to develop this paper by retrieving information as to why a ritual like Lakhir Panchali is central for a woman to practice, as professed by the ideologies of the traditional post and its continuity with time. Apart from holding an 'every-Thursday' position, the Panchali forms an integral part of the traditional invocation process of goddess Laxmi, or Lokhi Puja. Almost all the pujas performed in Bengal have such narratives associated with them, and in the majority of these, the narrator is a woman. Although all the narratives refer to the betterment of society in general, they are usually on themes related to women. They typically speak of experiences that women can identify with, and usually reaffirm their status as those whose only resource is the particular home.

A version of the Panchali reads, "লক্ষী রূপা নারী সৃষ্টি পাঠানু মর্ত্যেতে। আমারে ভুলেছে তারা পরিয়া মহতে। লজ্জা আদি গুণ যত রমনীর আছে। ক্ষণিক সুখের লগি বর্জন করেছে। স্বামীরে না মানে তারা না শোনে বচন।

ইচ্ছামতো হেতা- সেথা করিছে ভ্রমণ।” Thus, proposing to portray that the sole cause behind all suffering is the free independent thought of woman who is no more bound within the periphery of patriarchy. The free will exercised by her provides her the title *olokhi* which is highly condemned in any household.

The recitation however, ends in a prescriptive manner where a solution to end all sufferings is explicitly advised, “লক্ষী বলে গৃহে ফিরি করো লক্ষী- ব্রত। গুরুবারে সন্ধ্যাকালে লইয়া বধু যত।” Thus, the burden falls on the women of the households to conduct all rituals effectively and religiously to bring back the lost peace and prosperity of the household. Yet in another version of the Panchali it is written, “পতির অগ্রেতে যেনা করে আহার। চিরদিন কাটে তার করি হাহাকার।”

A set standard of rules and regulations State that woman of the household cannot have their meals before their husband. The result would be ill luck that would be fetched to the household. সুখের সংসার can only be achieved once the women of the house obey the patriarchal strictures and Perform all such rituals regularly and whole-heartedly. Hence such garden disparities call for studies on feminism.

In the book *Spivak: In Other Worlds*, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak says, “I speak of what I do as a woman within literary criticism. My definition of a woman is very simple: it rests on the word ‘man’ as used in the texts that provide the foundation for the corner of the literary criticism establishment that I inhabit”(Spivak 102). Cultural texts naturalise the oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak, or vulnerable, seductresses and many more. The task of criticism is, therefore to reveal the underlying ideologies within these texts because these ideologies are instrumental in continuing women’s oppression. Feminism revolves around this notion: The inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so that they can retain power. Religion, the family, education, the arts, knowledge systems are all social and cultural “structures” that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality.

Although the struggle for women's rights can be traced back to the eighteenth century when the enlightenment emphasis on equality foregrounded the deprivileged status of women, it was only in the twentieth century that the issues relating to gender position came to occupy both the public sphere and the discourses of critical theory. The early landmark in this context is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which sought to re-situate the terms under which women were viewed and understood. In many ways, Wollstonecraft was in a radical position. Her views on the subject supported by the excerpt "For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same; Yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience (Wollstonecraft 51)."

Many of the central concerns of the women's liberation movement are encapsulated in Wollstonecraft's summary: the idea of equality, examining the patriarchal ordering of the world, and questioning of the situation of women as objects of utility. Another important aspect of the above passage is the way ideology has served the purposes of patriarchy in the dominant discourses of the west. In England, especially from the time literature was disseminated in the popular imagination, ideological constructs have worked to establish a particular vision and function of women. When critics like Virginia Woolf in the early twentieth century highlighted this aspect of popular discourse, the same Wollstonecraft stain was being articulated. In seminal works like *A Room of one's own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf highlighted the hypocrisy of the patriarchal system by deconstructing the strategies involved in the dominant configurations of women. The deconstruction of the ideological assumptions informing the canonical texts and which, incidentally, have been influential in determining the circulation of women's images in popular discourse, has been a common rallying process for feminists throughout the twentieth century.

Feminist critiques of religious scriptures are growing in number. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza is one of the best-known feminist biblical scholars, writing within the Christian tradition. She has attempted by exercising what she calls the hermeneutics of suspicion, to reveal how processes of censorship and redaction have often served to preserve the

masculine tradition within Christianity. She is suspicious of all forms of interpretations that marginalise women or their concerns. In her earlier work, in particular, she showed how, when the privileged view is abandoned, the writings of the earliest Christian church in the New Testament reveal traces of a much stronger female presence and the formulation of a radical emancipatory praxis. Riffat Hassan has done similar work on the Qur'an (the book of Revelation believed by Muslims to be the word of God) and the Hadith (the sayings attributed to the prophet Mohammad).

Hence Partha Chatterjee, in his book, *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, proclaims, "...the nationalistic idea of the "new woman" as a hegemonic construct would seem to have been actualised; her struggle has been completely encapsulated in the project to produce the nation everything else is erased from public memory" (Chatterjee 151).

Women have long been included in the spheres of nature and emotions and have long been included in the spheres of nature and emotions and have been assigned the role of earth mothers and passive, child-bearing beings, while men have been associated with reason, civilisation and raw virility. Mary Wollstonecraft's question, "In what does man's Pre-eminence over the brute creation consist?" (Wollstonecraft 113), echoes this intersectional connection. The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the word 'ecofeminism' in 1974 to describe the large-scale violence inflicted on women and nature as a result of male domination.

My conclusion is again appropriated by Partha Chatterjee on page 120, chapter VI of *Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* when he says, "The world is external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme... The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world — and woman is its representation and so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir" (Chatterjee 120).

Conclusions

The “good girl” concept is a societal construct shaped by patriarchal norms, cultural narratives, and religious traditions, prescribing obedience, submission, and self-sacrifice as virtues for women. Texts like Lakhir Panchali reinforce these ideals, binding women within domestic and moral responsibilities. Women who deviate from these norms, asserting independence, are stigmatized as Olokhi, facing social consequences.

Feminist scholars such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, and Riffat Hassan critique these narratives, exposing gender oppression as a socially engineered system rather than a divine truth. They argue that cultural texts, religious doctrines, and nationalist ideologies reinforce restrictive roles for women, legitimizing male dominance.

In Bengal, the study of Lakhir Panchali illustrates how traditional narratives continue shaping women’s identities, despite globalization’s influence. The expectation that women ensure household prosperity through devotion acts as a mechanism of control, burdening them with familial well-being.

Ultimately, the “good girl” label is an ideological tool perpetuating gender inequality. Feminist discourse urges the deconstruction of these myths and the redefinition of women’s roles beyond patriarchal dictates. As modernity challenges these norms, it is crucial to ensure women’s agency, autonomy, and dignity in a more equitable society.

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Chandrani Chatterjee is a visiting faculty member in the Department of Basic Science and Humanities at Asansol Engineering College. She has successfully qualified the UGC-NET in English and has participated in numerous seminars, reflecting her deep engagement with academic discourse. Her primary areas of interest include translation studies and cultural studies, and she is currently in the process of enrolling herself into her preferred field of research to further pursue these interests.

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