

Discourse on Masculinity and the Theatre: Experiences of Colonial Bengal in the Second Half of Nineteenth-Century

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Abstract

The British colonial rulers had introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity in this country, which was based on aggressive militarism, physical power and hyper-masculine culture. Bengali nationalists almost accepted that notion of masculinity endorsed by the imperialists. The reason of this acceptance was deeply rooted in their anti-colonial struggle. The British imperialists always tried to argue that they were superior as well as muscular, and colonial natives, especially the Bengali men, were effeminate and inferior, and the muscular race had right to rule over the effeminate races. It became, therefore, necessary for the nationalists to pretend and prove their masculinity as much as possible. This passion for masculinity had great impact on various sectors of the society. It even had a serious impact on Bengali theatre in the second half of 19th century. The present article has attempted to show how the development and discourse on hegemonic masculinity occurred in Bengal in the second half of 19th century through the nationalists and what major change had come in Bengali theatre under this discourse of masculinity.

Keywords: *Masculinity, Colonial Bengal, Theatre, Nationalists, Nineteenth Century, Female Impersonators.*

Introduction

Generally one can describe masculinity as a “set of images, values, interests, and activities held important to the successful achievement of male adulthood” (Jeffords 1989: xiii). In other words, masculinity is a set of qualities or attributes regarded as characteristics of men. The concept of masculinity is a social construction and this concept is very much evolving; with the changes of society changes come in the nature of so called ‘ideal’ masculinity. In other words, the nature of masculinity differs from society to society. But colonial authority used to judge Indian masculinity on the basis of the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which emerged by the late 18th and 19th centuries in the West. This concept of hegemonic masculinity “refers to the cultural dynamics by which a group claims and sustains leading position in social life.

At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than other is culturally exalted...which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (Connell 1995: 77) This hegemonic masculinity had been used by the colonial authority not to subordinate the Indian women, rather the Indian men who did not fit into the hegemonic idea of masculinity (Alam 2022: 124-127). It was certainly a political strategy of the imperialists to claim their domination over the Indian men. In British concept of hegemonic masculinity, militarism, aggression, violent resistance etc. became the integral parts of masculinity (Connell 1995: 213). Apart from it, not being aggressive and militaristic had been considered as feminine nature. Through this process of feminization, Indian men had been identified as effeminate for being weak and non-martial. In words of Sikata Banarjee, “the feminization of the Orient encompassed a disparagement of Arab and Indian men who were conquered because they were effeminate and seen as effeminate because they were conquered. Their conquered status constructed them as not muscular, not aggressive and not skilled in militarism, which were values associated with hegemonic femininity.” (Banarjee 2003: 170). Imperialists gave emphasise on the ‘Christian Manhood’ that included physical strength, martial power and high level of morality as the components of ‘ideal’ manhood. Norman Vance in his book argues that, the “manliness (Christian Manhood) may relate to physical vigour and prowess...or to patriotic and military qualities, or to the traditions of moral chivalry, or to a variety of moral qualities ranging from...general benevolence to the most awe inspiring moral rigor...” (Vance, 1985: 10). As argued by Banarjee, “this multifaceted definition of manhood partly constructed the gendered lens the British used to look at India and its male inhabitants.” (Banarjee 2003: 170). Colonial Masculinity made the notion of masculinity as a ‘cult’, and through this cult of masculinity colonial authority tried to rationalize imperial rule based on the aggressive, muscular, chivalric models of manliness (Krishnaswami 1998: 15).

This British claim of Indian effeminacy (or the Indian men as effeminate), however, posed a challenge to the Indian nationalists. By internalizing the colonial criticism, they accepted the British claim of the weakness and inabilities of Indian men to defend their motherland from the aliens (Carter 1997: 429-443). Therefore, they insisted on Indian / indigenous masculinity or manliness to be achieved by the Indian men. Even Indian nationalists emphasised on the masculinity which was based on the broader framework of colonial masculinity. Characteristics of colonial masculinity were taken as the ideal to be real man and muscular. Mrinalini Sinha, therefore, has rightly argued that the colonial masculinity placed masculinity at the centre of colonial and nationalist politics in the late 19th century India (Sinha 1995: 12). However, the marginalised masculinity, or the men whose masculinity did not fit into the new hegemonic masculinity, had been considered as deviants. Homosexuality and its related sexual acts now

started to be considered as the threat to the masculinity. The anxiety about homoeroticism had been promoted by the nationalists. In other words, the “anti-colonial nationalism replicates the attempt made by the colonisers in redeeming the nation through its purge of ‘unnatural’ and transgressive vices such as homosexuality.” (Dasgupta 2011: 664). The homophobia engulfed nationalist leaders including Mahatma Gandhi. In a letter written to *Young India* in 1929 Gandhi referred to homosexuality as ‘unnatural vice’ (Vanita 2001: 255-256). It was believed that homosexuality made the men feminine, hence, it was a threat to masculinity (Ghosh 2021: 55).

Stereotype of ‘Effeminate’ Bengali and Response of the Bengalis

However, the most popular image of Indian effeminacy was Bengali *babus* or *bhadroloks*, meaning educated upper and upper-middle class Bengali men. Lord Macaulay once said about Bengali men,

“The physical organisation of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour-bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardly breeds. Courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which...his situation are equally unfavourable. His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance” (Sen 2001: 25).

George MacMunn, another British administrator, wrote, “We do not speak of the martial races of Britain as distinct from the non-martial, nor of Germany, nor of France. But in India we speak of the martial races as a thing apart and because most of the people have neither aptitude nor physical courage...” (MacMunn 1933: 2; Banarjee 2003: 171). During the late 19th century a British journalist named G. W. Steevens narrated and ridiculed the physique of Bengali men. According to him Bengali men even could be identified by their feminine legs! He wrote, “By his legs you shall know Bengali...The Bengali’s leg is skin and bones...or else it is very fat or globular, also turning at the knees, with round things like a woman’s. The Bengali’s leg is leg of slave” (Steevens 1899: 75).

Thus, the Bengali men had been considered by the ruling authorities as the subject of ridicule for their physical weakness and ‘effeminateness’. Bengali thinkers and nationalists also acknowledged the weakness and effeteness of Bengalis. For example in an issue of *Chikitsa-Sammilanee* (Medical Assemblage), a Bengali health related periodical, it was written that, “the perception of foreigners as well as a number of indigenous intellectuals regarding the weakness and short lifespan of indigenous people is not wrong at all” (Anon. 1885: 39). In a periodical named *Chikitsak O Samalochak* (The Physician and the Critic) Shri Bankubihari

Roy, an indigenous medical practitioner, addressing the Bengalis' unmanliness wrote,

“Why the Bengali race is so hated, so degraded today? Why can't we hold back our tears when we look at Bengal today? Stand up for a moment, forget our Bengaliness for a moment, and look with the eyes of an impartial observer (to see) how degraded, ... trampled upon the Bengalis are today. It is as if millions of worms are walking on their chests in the dense of mud in a vast swamp filled with mud...The Bengalis lack courage, that's why they are in such a predicament” (Roy 1895: 313).

Rajnarayan Basu, a 19th century Bengali nationalist, in his memoir titled *Sekal Aar Ekal* (Then and Now) (1874) also discussed on the issue of gradual degradation of Bengali men's virility. He wrote, “Physical strength is deteriorating. Ask any person, and he will say that our fathers and grandfathers were very strong. Compared to those times, the people (men) of today are nothing” (Basu 1988: 31). Therefore, by the late 19th century a section of Hindu nationalists in Bengal felt the necessity to change the colonial stereotype of physical effeminacy of Bengali as 'race'. It became imperative for the Bengali elites to adopt an effective strategy to counter the colonial claim or representation of Bengali men as effeminate (Majumder 2000: 3069). Therefore, by that time the concept of *Jatiya Swastha* (national health) became popular, and the publications of various health magazines and periodicals, like *Chikitsa-Sammilanee*, *Anubikshhan*, *Swastha* etc. were started (Basu 1998: 13). By that time there was a growing awareness among the Bengali nationalists on the potentiality of Bengalis for making a national physical culture. Therefore, it can be argued that the self-image of Bengali *bhadrolaks* as effeminate helped in creation or spreading of a new culture based on physical fitness and as a result the popularity of *akhras* (gymnasiums) became high by the late 19th century Bengal (Rosselli 1980: 121-148; Basu 2014: 113). Saayan Chattopadhyay has explained that the Bengali intelligentsia in 19th century responded to the colonial claim of 'Bengali Effeminacy' in many ways, and one of which was by creating an alternative / indigenous masculinity (Chattopadhyay 2011: 274). Therefore, there was a need to re-frame the Bengali masculinity or create the alternative indigenous masculinity.

Attempts of Swami Vivekananda to Counter the Colonial Hegemonic Masculinity

Among the Bengali nationalists, who took initiatives in reframing the Bengali masculinity, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a spiritual leader, was one of the most important figures. Despite being a spiritual leader, through his teaching he wanted to make or inspire the Bengali men to be strong and fearless to encounter the colonial masculinity. He believed that weakness, effeminacy were the signs of slavery, and harmful for the progress of nation. Vivekananda said, “In spite of our greatness of the *Upanishads*...we are weak, very weak... That physical weakness is the cause of at least one third of our misery. We are lazy, we cannot work; we

cannot combine... This sort of weak brain is not able to do anything; we must strengthen it... Be Strong... you will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of *Gita*... You will understand the *Gita* better with your biceps, your muscles..." (Tathagatananda 2014: 12-13). He also said: "What we want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel, inside which dwell a mind of the same material as that of which the thunderbolt is made. (We need) Strength, manhood, warrior breeds... We have wept long enough" (Jyotirmayananda 1992: 29).

What Vivekananda tried was that he often placed "India as being spiritually superior to west, creating a discursive space in which to challenge colonial rule and promote Hindu nationalism" (Roy and Hammers 2014: 547-548). He also argued that "while the west was certainly scientifically and materially advanced... it was lacking in spiritualism or moral groundings", which Vivekananda considered as the most important vigour for human civilization (Roy and Hammers 2014: 548). On the other hand, he used to say that though India was far behind the material and scientific progress in comparison to west, it was more superior in case of moral ground due to 'its strong tradition of spiritualism' (Roy & Hammers 2014: 548). In words of Amiya P. Sen, "At one level, no doubt, it was a political statement, wherein claims of superiority were synonymous with claims of overall superiority. At the same time, Vivekananda genuinely believed that no material civilization could be ultimately sustained without a spiritual base and... India was indeed the heaven of spirituality" (Sen 2000: 85). In Vivekananda's concept of spiritual masculinity, the Vedantic form of Hinduism became important, and he wanted to convert the Hindu religion into a 'man-making' religion. He said, "Do even evil like a man! Be wicked if you must, on a grand scale... No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be man. It is a man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want" (Kakar 1978: 175). However, there was a contradiction in Vivekananda's rhetoric of masculinity. On the one hand, he insisted on the spiritual masculinity; on the other he tried to redefine the Hindu masculinity through the blending of western elements of masculinity such as physical strength, aggression etc. He believed that: "Hindus could not be masters of the spiritual domain unless they could overcome their effeminacy by creating physical strength and virile bodies..." (Roy and Hammers 2014: 552). It seems, therefore, that to some extent Vivekananda's ideas of manliness followed the Victorian ideal of manliness. Vivekananda accepted the Victorian concepts about what should be the 'ideal' features of a male body.

Contradictions in Bankimchandra's Idea of Masculinity

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), another early Bengali nationalist, also tried to redefine Bengali masculinity. He really wanted to break the colonial stereotype of 'Hindoo Effeminacy'. However, his concept of the Bengali masculinity was self-contradictory. Sometimes, he talked about pure indigenous masculinity based on intelligence. Sometimes,

he emphasised on physical fitness and manliness which were essential features of colonial masculinity. Bankim knew it very well that Bengalis were physically weak. For that, he tried to construct an alternative masculinity. The central themes of this new alternative masculinity were mental strength, strength of intellect (*buddhibal*) and strength of rhetoric (*bakyabal*) instead of physical power (*bahubal*). According to Bankim, ‘bahubal’ only led to the destruction of human civilization, but whatever has been achieved by the human civilization that has come through the ‘bakyabal’ and ‘buddhibal’ of the population. In his own words: “Bahubal is the strength of animal – bakyabal is the strength of human. But bakyabal does not mean merely to gibber – I am not referring to the ‘strength of speaking’ as bakyabal. I am referring to the strength of the things that are conveyed through speaking. An intellectual through his intellect engender the worldly principles – the speaker impart that through speaking. The incorporation of these two forces, I call bakyabal” (Chattopadhyay 1877: 256). Therefore, it is evident that he tried to project *bakyabal* and *buddhibal* as ideal characteristics for the alternative masculinity of the Bengalis, not the *bahubal* or physical strength. This idea of *buddhibal* as a pivotal part of Bengali masculinity continued in the 20th century. For example, in Satyajit Ray’s Bengali detective novels we can find it (Noor 2024: 259-308).

However, Bankim himself knew that physical strength or the ‘bahubal’ is necessary for every nation. He wrote, “It would be wrong to say that physical strength is not beneficial for the society. For the defence physical strength is the best. Lack of physical strength is responsible for India’s modern tragedy” (Chattopadhyay 1877: 256). He believed that effeminacy and lack of manliness were the features of the 19th century Bengali males; Bengalis were not eternally effeminate. For that in an article published in 1884 he wrote, “Everybody believes that the Bengali is forever weak, cowardly, effete, and runs away at the sight of a fist... This may seem somewhat acceptable if one discusses the Bengali character in the 19th century, but one may say that there are enough reasons behind such pathetic condition of Bengali... If somebody says that he is eternally puny, eternally craven and effete, then may thunder strike him down! It is a lie!” (Chattopadhyay 2016: 288; Chattopadhyay 1884: 274) Thus one can notice a gradual shift in Bankim’s perception of masculinity.

Bankim was aware about the colonial claim of ‘Effeminate Hindoos’. He wrote that “Europeans often term Indians as ‘Effeminate Hindoos’. This is a humiliation of India indeed” (Chattopadhyay 1872: 9). Therefore, it was necessary for Bankim to counter the colonial claim by giving much focus on few ancient Indian heroic characters and keeping in mind this purpose, he wrote literary pieces like *Krishnacharitra* (1886). In these texts he tried to glorify the indigenous masculinity which was completely his political move. In the *Krishnacharitra* Bankim projected Lord Krishna as an ideal man, a brave, disciplined hero. He rejected the descriptions of Krishna given by the Vaishnava theologians and Puranas (Chattopadhyay

1886). In this regard Sudipta Kaviraj has argued, “Bankim’s Krishna is the Almighty’s latest hermeneutic form, quite different from this god’s commonly known figure in Vidyapati, Chandidas, Chaitanya, Jayadeva or Puranas” (Kaviraj 1995: 75). From the Vaishnava texts the character of Krishna can be identified as a lover and an erotic figure. But Bankim rejected that kind of figure of Krishna. Kaviraj has argued in this matter, “Eventually, Bankim’s Krishna would be very different from Krishna figure available through the Vaishnava cults of Bengal in which this principle of sexuality predominates - a Krishna too familiar, too folkish for his liking, too obviously invested, though lovingly, with the frailties of a mundane eroticism, a tradition in which eroticism had lost its original metaphorical quality” (Kaviraj 1995: 77-78). Bankim ignored the *Radhatattva* (theory of Radha) of the *Goudiya Vaishnavism* and the love affair of Krishna with Radha. Kaviraj has shown that, “Bankim mistrusts still mere the tension and instability in the figure of Radha whose metaphorical quality can dissolve suddenly into an un-metaphorical and unmediated riot of sensuality” (Kaviraj 1995: 78). Bankim probably believed that in the Vaishnava texts the character of Krishna was not freed from the effeminacy, gender-sexual fluidity and sensuality. *Radhabhava*¹ of the Vaishnavism was considered as danger to masculinity. Even Swami Vivekananda was very critical and suspicious towards Vaishnavism. Once he told one of his friends that, “Through the preaching of that love broadcast, the nation has become effeminate - a race of women! The whole of Orissa (a neighbouring state of West Bengal) has been turned into a land of coward and Bengal...has almost lost all sense of manliness” due to the Vaishnavism (Sil 1997: 117). However, Bankim selected the character of Krishna from *Mahabharata* where Krishna has been portrayed as quite a muscular figure. Bankim did not want the lover-some, feminine figure of Krishna, rather wanted a brave, muscular Krishna. Bankim in *Anandamath* also endorsed masculinity and nationalistic spirits through the different characters of the novel (Chakraborty, 2006).

Ultimate Triumph of Hegemonic Masculinity

It can be seen that both Vivekananda and Bankim gave much emphasis on masculinity. Despite their efforts to create an indigenous mode of masculinity, they were unable to get rid of the influence or hangover of the colonial masculinity. In their so called indigenous model of masculinity to a visible influence of colonial masculinity can be noticed. By giving so much importance on the physical health, manliness and masculinity they somehow ignored the pre-existing elements of gender-sexual fluidity as the integral part of Indian culture. Here Ashis Nandy’s remark is very important. He says that in the pre-colonial Indian (including Bengal) society fluid identities were prevalent where the features of bisexuality and androgyny could be found. But it was the modern concept of masculinity based on the Western discourse on sexuality (and gender too) which changed the perception of Indians (Nandy 1983: 163). Now

few features like masculinity, physical strength, manliness and certain codes of behaviour became the signs of 'ideal' man. This argument is very true as it can be seen that Bengal was never a land of hyper masculinity. In form of so called effeminate and androgenic features to be found in the prominent male figures of pre-colonial Bengal. For example, in Sri Chaitanyadeva a visible 'effeminacy' could be found. In the theology of the *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, the indications towards androgyny can be found (Ghosh 2021: 116-123). But, after the so-called modernization through the British, Bengali middle-class intellectuals started to see these identities in a different way. Bengali intellectuals adopted a concept of hegemonic masculinity (based on the broader framework of colonial masculinity); and the people whose masculinity did not fit under this hegemonic masculinity had been labelled as outcast. Interestingly, certain normative and non-normative patterns of morality and behaviour of ideal man came into existence by that time. And from this point, the homophobia and transphobia were probably got intensified.

Penetration of Hegemonic Masculinity into the Colonial Bengali Theatre

A visible arena for the penetration of the western gender concepts (e.g., hegemonic masculinity), transphobia and homophobia was the Bengali stage or theatre world in the second half of the 19th century. However, before that time, situation was different. In the Bengali *jatra* or *jatrapala* (folk form of theatre in Bengal) and theatre, for a long time, male actors, as female impersonators played female characters with feminine attire and make-ups. Female impersonators had certainly great demands in *jatra* and theatre due to the shortage of female actors on stage at that time. It was until the second half of the 19th century, more specifically 1870s, the tradition of female impersonation was continued almost uninterruptedly on stage in Bengal (Bhattacharya 2003: 192; Singh 2012: 193). As the traditional Bengali culture did not have rigid gender norms before the mid-19th century, although there were male and female gender ideas, male 'actresses' in Bengali theatrical practices were respected as artists by the society. For example, one of the pioneer female impersonators of Bengali *jatra* tradition was Sri Chaitanyadeva himself, who played a female character in the *jatrapala* named *Rukmini Haran* (Abduction of Rukmini), staged at the house of his follower named, Chandrakeshar in Nabadwip (Mandal 1999: 5-6; Ghosh 1994: 165). It is important to mention that before the second or third decade of 19th century, there was no existence of theatre in modern sense in Bengal. Instead *jatra* was prevalent and popular as well. In the initial times of the 19th century *jatra* was very much consumed by the public (Bandyopadhyay 1934: 7).

However, by the second or third decades of 19th century *jatra* started to be labeled as *chotoloker sanskriti* (low culture or culture of lower class) by a section of *bhadraloks* of the then city of Calcutta. With the propagation of Western education and Western thought

they found obscenity in *jatra* or other traditional Bengali folk theatrical performances and practices (Banerjee 2008). They started to form theatre groups on European model. From the 1830s to 1860s many amateur theatre groups (*sakher theatre*) were formed in Calcutta with the patronage of Calcutta based *babus* or *bhadralok* class (Bandyopadhyay 1934). Similar to *jatras*, in theatre also female actors were unavailable and therefore female roles were played by the female impersonators or male ‘actress’ (Bhattacharya 2003: 192; Singh 2012: 193-195; Bandyopadhyay 2018).

Before 19th century, it was very common for both men and women to wear and act in opposite gender costumes or cross-dressing in the theatres of different major European cities also. Even in the performances of William Shakespeare’s plays extensive usage of transvestism or cross-dressing was very usual thing (Garber 1992). However, later on, in the context of new gender norms and Victorian morality of the 19th century, the cross-dressing of men (drag queens) as well as the female impersonation and any kind of effeminacy of men became both extremely ridiculous and a matter of fear/anxiety in society (Reade 1970: 251). As a result, male transvestism and female impersonation became a punishable offence under legal discourse. A notable example of the use of western regulatory power on cross-dressing is the 1871 trial of Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park in England. The two were arrested for wearing female costumes in public, and the media coverage surrounding their trial further fueled the fear of losing masculinity, homophobia and transphobia that had developed in contemporary society. The case was covered extensively on the front pages of almost all the leading London based newspapers of the time, including *The Times*. Not only did Boulton and Park become notorious transvestites, but cross-dressing by males gave rise to a wider social fear and anxiety (Weeks 1981: 108-117). With the fear of cross-dressing homophobia and possibility of male prostitution were related, which were seen as major problem by the established standards of British morality (Upchurch 2000: 127-157).

The penetration of such Western mentality, thoughts and new social values into Bengal through colonization brought about a sudden blow to the female impersonators or *beneputuls* of the indigenous stage. Probably being influenced by the concept of western notion of drag queens, persons associated with the Bengali theatre during the first-half of 19th century endorsed the female impersonation. But, when in the West, the drag queens or female impersonators started to be hated by the society, the discouragement towards the female impersonation in Bengali theatre also started by the second half of 19th century. The exodus of female impersonators from both the *jatra* and theatre began in the 1860s and 1870s, but the extent of this exodus was more visible in theatre than in *jatra* since theatre was part of the *bhadralok*’s culture, not *jatra*, and it was that *bhadraloks* who were more influenced by all forms of western thoughts. In this context, about this influence of western thoughts Lata Singh argues “(f)emale

impersonation was gradually found to be 'unreal'. Society, which had seen and appreciated males enacting the roles of females, noticed sharply the shortcomings of the male enactment when they were exposed to Western...thoughts." (Singh 2012: 194) During the period of changing socio-psychological attitudes in the second half of 19th century, various transformations took place in the world of theatre in Bengal. Under the influence of European Proscenium theatre, changes were made in all aspects of Bengali theatre, including stage construction, lighting, acting techniques etc. (Chatterjee 2007: 178). Female impersonators, who until the mid-19th century were admired by audience for their acting skills and excellence of the craft, suddenly became conspicuous and undesirable to a section of society. An example of this trend can be found in the writing of Bankimchandra. In his novel titled *Bishabriksha* (1873) Bankim satirizes the artificial femininity of a man named Debendra by writing, "Suddenly that thick tuft of hair fell from the head, it was just a wig. The breasts fell from the chest, which were made by clothes" (Chattopadhyay 1873: 39). During the first half of 19th century *Krishna-Jatra*² was very popular in Bengal where the young effeminate boys used to play the female roles. But by the second half of 19th century these female impersonators of *Krishna-Jatra* had been started to be criticized and ridiculed. In an article published in *Calcutta Review* in 1851 such kind of criticism regarding it can be found:

"In the representation of Krishna-jatras, boys arrayed in the habits of Sakhies and Gopinis (milk-maids) cut the principal figures on the stage. It would require the pencil of a master-painter to portray these fairies of the Bengali stage. Their sooty complexion, their coal black cheeks, their haggard eyes, their long extended arms, their gaping mouths and their puerile attire excite disgust. Their external deformity is rivalled by their discordant voices, for the screechings of the night-owls, the howlings of the jackals and the barking of the dogs that bay the moon are harmony itself compared with their horrid yells. Their dances are in strict accordance with the other accessories. In the evolutions of the hands and feet dignified with the name of dancing, they imitate all posture and gestures calculated to soil the mind and pollute the fancy" (Das Gupta, 1923: 136-137).

It is not very difficult to understand that this mocking laughter on female impersonators was a product of Western sensibility. Not only did the idea of a strict binary gender of male and female emerge through the 19th century western discourse, but the gender performing roles of men and women were also defined under the discourse of hegemonic masculinity. And all entities, behaviours and even representations outside of that entrenched framework and concept suddenly became the objects of criticism and laughter.

Therefore, the need of introduction of *abhinetree* (female actor) into the theatre was felt by a section of *bhadraloks* associated with theatre. In this respect, Michael Madhusudan Dutt

and Girish Ghosh played most crucial role in bringing female actors in theatre (Chatterjee 2007: 175-187). As the *bhadramahilas* or women from respectable families could not come to act in public theatre, initially women 'prostitutes' (sex workers) were employed as female actors (Bhattacharya 2003: 224-235; Singh 2012: 196-197). Few scholars like Radha Kumar claimed that introduction of 'fallen' women into theatre was associated with the social reforms, more specifically the reform agenda of *bhadraloks* to 'rehabilitate' and enhance the social status of the prostitutes (Kumar 1993: 36). In reality, under the patriarchal structure, the position of these women always remained dependent on the whims or desires of upper-class men, and no proper measures were taken to raise the social status and self-esteem of these women. They remained to the level of 'fallen' or public women in the perception of society. As a result, even talented female actors like Binodini Dasi who came from the world of prostitution were simultaneously being crushed under the pressure of both the larger social system and men associated with the stage, which exposed the hypocrisy of the *bhadralok* class's ideal of humanitarian reform (Singh 2012: 205-213; Chatterjee 2007: 199-212).

Actual reason of bringing the 'fallen' women into stage by the *bhadraloks* was the colonial modernity which they internalized from their colonial masters. Internalizing the idea of hegemonic masculinity, Western strict gender norms, homophobia and transphobia in the name of modernity, members of *bhadralok* class like Michael Madhusudan suddenly felt that 'clean-shaved' men could not be played the role of the romantic heroines (Das Gupta 1938: 68-69). Behind the reasons of Madhusudan's this step, his idea of masculinity was significant. Actually "(t)he whole issue of masculinity and effeminacy also came into the nationalist discourse. Female impersonators appeared to threaten the construction of masculinity; bringing it into the limelight seemed to reinvigorate stereotypes of weakness and inferiority among the male population, a bitter legacy of colonial domination" (Singh 2012: 195). In response to British contempt for Indian morality and society, as well as the consequent portrayal of Indian male as effeminate, Indian nationalist cum reformers by the second half of 19th century tried to redefine Indian femininity and womanhood in the framework of 'Vedic purity' and re-imagined a combative as well as confrontational masculinity of Indian men (Chakravarty 1989: 27-87). From this obsession with masculinity, Girish Ghosh once commented that the repeated imitation of effeminacy by the male actors in stage would result into the permanent effeminacy to them:

"When boys are hired to act (female roles), it not only results in poor performance but also permanently damages the boys which is beyond recovery. By repeated act of effeminacy as female impersonators from early ages they developed a type of effeminacy that lasts the remainder of their lives" (Dutta, 1996: 160).

In elsewhere Ghosh commented almost the same. In his words,

“For the rest of their lives, the boys who portray (female) characters must live as women in male bodies. We can clearly demonstrate this, but we prefer not to disclose people who have maintained their effeminateness in old age by playing female roles during childhoods. It is clear that the habits acquired in childhood are different to discontinue” (Ghosh, 1972: 823).

Ghosh’s comment that repeated performances of female roles by male actors can be resulted into the permanent effeminacy to the male actors reminds us queer theorist Judith Butler’s theoretical notion of performance of gender which emphasizes that gender could be performed and is fluid; through the repeated performances we create gender identities (Butler 1990: 191).

Being obsessed with colonial hegemonic masculinity, the *bhadraloks*, around 1860s, found anxiety and danger in any kind of cross-dressing by men. For example, when Shibnath Shastri took charge of a rural school at Harinavi, near to Calcutta, in 1870s, he saw that some of the school’s teachers were participating in the local village *jatrapalas* dressed as women, and he strongly opposed it. Even he issued a circular to stop the teachers from performing as women in *jatras* (Shastri 1952: 121). Even from a writing of Bipinbihari Gupta (1916), it is known that Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar once expelled a student from school for taking part in an amateur theatre group as female impersonator (Gupta 1989: 254).

Same-sex representation or cross-dressing male’s romance with other male actors in public stage generated homophobia also. This homophobia originated from the notion of hegemonic masculinity indeed. Therefore, homophobia was one of the reasons to bring the women actors and banishing the female impersonators from the theatre. Thus *bhadralok* class tried to pacify their anxiety regarding homophobia. In this context Sudipto Chatterjee wrote:

“Casting women in female roles served another important function: it nullified the homophobic anxiety of having boys pass for women, thereby heterosexualizing the stage and escaping the unspeakable horrors of homoerotic desire(s). The objection against male transvestism on the Bengali stage was thus pinioned on the heterosexual male’s abject fear of male homosexuality” (Chatterjee 2007: 182).

Lata Singh also argued for the same. According to her, due to the fear of homoeroticism, employing prostitutes in female roles was considered as better option than the continuation of female impersonation (Singh 2012: 196).

Conclusion

Thus, it is evident how the idea of hegemonic masculinity was no longer limited to nationalism in colonial Bengal, rather transcended the boundaries of nationalism and began to influence

even the theatre. Since theatre is part of larger society, it was practically impossible for it to remain free from the inevitable influence of hegemonic masculinity which was badly engulfed the society. Hegemonic masculinity was internalised first by the nationalists and through them the idea had spread into different sphere of society. However, hegemonic masculinity not only created the image of 'ideal' masculine man, but also constructed the image of 'ideal' woman. The idea became entrenched that tenderness was a characteristic of women, and tenderness and softness could never be expressed in the character of men. The hegemonic masculinity was able to establish the belief in the society that feminine men were dangerous. Another contribution of hegemonic masculinity was the promotion of homophobia and transphobia, as it successfully attempted to link male femininity with the male homosexuality. For these phobias, therefore, even the cross-dressing of male actors or female impersonation in theatre had become the subject of panic and disgust.

Endnotes

1. Taking the tone of Radha by the devotees, irrespective of genders, during the devotion to God Krishna.
2. The theatrical acts in which the Lord Krishna's life and greatness were portrayed through performances.

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