

Chapter 9

'Harem Women Seem the Happiest to Me': Novel

Women, Fictions of Domesticity and National

Development in India¹

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After more than fifty years of self-rule, the old certitudes of Indian politics have crumbled. It is now recognised that democracy in India was not a bequest from the British; rather it was established after a profound historical rupture. Sunil Khilnani, writing in *The Idea of India*, claims that Indians were able to imagine new possibilities of being a nation because there were insufficient resources in their own past to construct their future (Khilnani 1997: 17-30). While the nationalist leadership established independent India on the basis of colonial institutions, the socialist leanings of the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, critically influenced the country's economic and political directions during and after the Cold War. The 'Bandung Regimes' such as India under Nehru (1947-1964), Egypt under Nasser (1954-1970), Indonesia under Sukarno (1945/49-1965), and Ghana under Nkrumah (1957-

1966) attempted to direct national development in their countries between the capitalism of the First World and the communism of the Soviet Bloc. Nehru's tenure in office is crucial because, during this time, the state stabilised and became a developmental agency which aspired to penetrate all areas of the society's life, and showed that it could be subject to democratic procedures (Khilnani 1997: 17-30).

Many scholars have analysed the importance of the national development model in the period after the Second World War. Arturo Escobar, in a specific response to Jürgen Habermas's call for the completion of the, as yet, 'unfinished project' of modernity, claims that the post-1945 development project is 'the last and failed attempt to complete the Enlightenment in Asia, Africa and Latin America' (Escobar 1995: 3-4, 9-12, 21-22, 221, 224).² Ozay Mehmet, like Escobar, also argues that 'central' to 'westernisation is the idea of economic development as 'progress' determined according to the market forces of supply and demand which emerged in the West' (Mehmet 1995: 2). The irony is that though the nation-state was grounded in western European history, after the Second World War, it also became the vehicle by which the power of 'western' industrialised countries was challenged. Mark Berger amongst others has pointed out the contradiction in the fact that the new nation-states rose in the overall context of colonialism even as nationalism emerged in the colonies as a reaction against colonialism, and Eurocentrism (Berger 2001). In this context, Akhil Gupta makes the point that the possibility of the new nations of Asia, Africa, or the Middle East transcending their Eurocentric foundations is more limited than has often been thought. Gupta emphasises that with decolonisation the 'underdevelopment' that the state-guided national development projects were supposed to address was not simply a 'structural

location in the global community of nations’, but also an important ‘form of identity in the postcolonial world’. Gupta sees the new forms of ‘global governmentality’ (embodied by a growing array of international accords, treaties, and institutions) as creating a shift that means that the notion of the ‘postcolonial’ is a ‘more appropriate modifier to forms of identity, states of being, and modes of analysis than ever before’ (Gupta 1998: 9, 11, 14; 22-4, 39-42; 338-9)).

In these debates about modernisation and appropriate methods of development, India provides a useful example of the interaction of the colonial legacy and the Cold War. It also occupies a key position in relation to the idea of national development because of its size, its democratic credentials and its support for non-alignment. After decolonisation, there were high expectations, both in India and outside, that the new government could serve as a model for developing nations by delivering material prosperity to its citizens. In the 1950s, the vision of development articulated by the Indian government, led by Nehru and the Congress Party (the organisational successor to the Indian National Congress), was not only socialist and nationalist but also technocratic and paternalistic. Sunil Khilnani (1997), for example, points out that Nehru believed that only a national state, centrally responsible for directing economic development, could safeguard India’s future progress and independence. Concurrently, this state also had to build a constitutional, non-religious regime, extend social opportunities and maintain sovereignty in the international arena. Nehru was convinced by the history of the west that an independent India could simultaneously industrialise, maintain constitutional democracy and direct economic and social redistribution. In some ways, says Khilnani, this project was closer to post-war European social democracy than Soviet practice. Nehru proposed a view of the state’s domestic

responsibilities that had parallels with Keynesian ideas in that the state had actively to create conditions for economic expansion by investment in and direction of a public sector that would function alongside private enterprise in a mixed economy, acting as a counterweight to the cyclical swings and fashions of private investment (Khilnani 1997: 76-77).

By the mid-1960s, however, it became clear that the beneficiaries from national development were the private commercial and industrial groups and bureaucratic and professional elites directly or indirectly connected to the political leadership rather than the majority of the population (Kohli 1987: 61). Under the stewardship of Nehru's successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the overall approach to national development altered significantly. Private investment in industry was encouraged, as were incentives rather than controls in development planning. There were also massive public investments in capital-intensive rural projects, such as the 'Green Revolution' in Punjab. By the time of Shastri's death in January 1966, the key elements of Nehru's conception of national development (an emphasis on public sector, heavy industries and land reform and the cooperative reorganisation of agriculture), had been almost completely marginalised (Frankel 1978: 246-247).

Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, whose populist politics further altered the program of national development from the Nehruvian vision to the idea of India as a modernising, but basically agricultural nation, succeeded Shastri. Gandhi was however unable to maintain her populist developmentalism and by the mid-1970s, there was a growing gulf between her socialist rhetoric and increasing levels of inequality and immiseration, particularly in rural areas. The failure of Mrs Gandhi's party to deliver to rural areas is

demonstrated by the parliamentary success of communist parties and several important communist-led rural insurgencies in the 1960s and early 1970s (Sen Gupta 1972). However, the failure of Mrs Gandhi's version of the national development project was directly connected to the increasingly capital-intensive character of farming which broke down the 'semi-feudal ties' that had often connected rich peasants to their poor and landless agricultural workers. This, along with an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, exacerbated social tensions in the countryside. In the 1980s, successive governments, under Mrs Gandhi (from 1979) and her son Rajiv Gandhi (from 1984) had dismantled many of the platforms of state-guided national development in India (Berger 2001).

Khilnani has argued that the Indian state was virtually unique among new states in setting itself huge developmental targets to be achieved by democratic means. For most of the fifty odd years since independence, the electoral dominance of the Congress Party and the availability of a sophisticated and extensive public bureaucracy gave the Indian economy a remarkable continuity of direction. Unlike China, India did not eschew democracy to make a revolutionary leap into industrialisation nor did its leadership and intelligentsia intentionally veer to the market as China's post-Mao leadership did. In fact, in 1991, when the end of the Cold War increased the pressure on India's still highly regulated national economy, the Indian state was pushed towards liberalisation and market-oriented economic reform by expatriate intellectuals and economists employed by international economic agencies and universities. Economists such as Jagdish Bhagwati held that India's economy had failed because of 'disappointing productivity performance' and a distrust of the market, combined with faith in central

control. This nurtured misconceived economic policies, which continued to keep the concentration of economic power out of private hands. The liberalisers argued that India had to create conditions for growth, since this was necessary for the alleviation of poverty. But still centrally at issue in the debate about economic reform was the idea of India and the kind of society liberalisation would create (Khilnani 1997: chapter 2). The 1980s saw the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the eventual (albeit unstable) formation of a government by the anti-secular nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by the late 1990s. While the dynamics of this shift are complicated, the growth of Hindu nationalism is a reaction, in part, to the failure of the state-guided national development project of the post-1947 era (Corbridge and Harris 2000: 143-172, 192-199; Vanaik 1997; Hansen: 1999).

According to Nivedita Menon, colonial policies in India resulted in a comparatively weak and unstable bourgeoisie who, nevertheless, still exercise a leadership function in India in coalition with rich farmers, the bureaucracy and the urban professional middle classes (Menon 1999: 12). However, as Sudipta Kaviraj points out, for a thoroughgoing bourgeois revolution to be effected and for industrialisation to take place, a domestic market must be built up by reducing poverty in the countryside. Since land reforms have been largely ineffective because of the influence of the landed interests in the coalition of ruling classes, the entire planning process has been an exercise in trying to promote industrialisation without radical agricultural transformation (Kaviraj 1988). Menon comments that the theory behind the first three decades of planning was that redistribution of incomes and property was necessary to create a market for goods and services. Since 1980, however, the rationale has been that development can be achieved

even in a limited market, if purchasing power is enhanced for a small elite in services, trade and manufacturing. This can be done by raising their emoluments, giving them tax exemptions and reductions and using public money to provide loans and subsidised interest rates in order to create a market for luxury goods. However, the incentives for the private sector and the slashing of government expenditure, which necessarily follow liberalisation/structural adjustments, adversely affect the poor, especially women and children (Menon 1999: 12). The conflict between rhetoric of liberalisation, the reality of immiseration and the discourses of national development have opened up a space which the forces of Hindu fundamentalism have found easy to occupy. The fictions discussed in the rest of this essay describe some of these processes.

'Women are the creators of the nation': women and nationalism

In this trajectory of ideas, from redistributive developmental practices to liberalisation, where do women stand in the imaginary of the nation? In her introduction to the book *Feminist Nationalism*, Lois West presents the dilemma of women and nationalism by asking: 'How could women be nationalists when they did not have equal rights? How could women not be nationalists when they loved their country, people and home?' (West 1997: xii). She points out that women are constituted as citizens differently from men: for example, in access to paternal property rights (Hindu women in India) or equal rights under the constitution (in the USA) to name only two. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias identify women as active transmitters and producers of national culture.

They point out that nationalism was constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989: 7). In Sylvia Walby's words, the literature on women and nation 'has engaged but little with the differential integration of women and men into the national project' (Walby 1992: 81).

According to Geraldine Heng, national liberation movements are also inadvertently the record of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains at the expense of women. Nationalist movements made common cause with women's issues because nationalism requires a certain self-representational vocabulary – a definitional apparatus to imagine and describe itself (Heng 1997: 31). Anne McClintock, remarking on the 'Janus-faced' quality of the nation first noted by Tom Nairn, describes the nation's simultaneous and paradoxical adherence to a primeval past and its turn to the future. This 'temporal anomaly within nationalism' brings together in a mutually uncomfortable but necessary alliance the elements of nostalgia and social and cultural atavism with the notions of modernity and 'progress.' The incommensurability of these two sets of terms is resolved by 'figuring the contradiction as a 'natural' division of *gender*.' Women are the 'atavistic and authentic "body" of national traditions'; they signifying nationalism's link to a deep past, its conservative principle. Men, on the other hand, stand for the modernity of nationalism which is dynamic, aggressive and revolutionary. Women, along with other traditionally marginalised groups, function as 'the living archive of the national archaic' (McClintock 1997: 137).

Partha Chatterjee, in writing about the social construction of Indian nationalism historically, has demonstrated how patriarchal nationalism was disseminated through

colonialism and how struggles over views of nationalism are inherently gendered (Chatterjee 1993: 9). Even where anticolonial nationalism was defined as oppositional to western colonialism, women were limited to the contexts of the family, although the centrality of family relations was reinterpreted and emphasised. The discourse over nationalism in India situated 'the women's question' in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state (Chatterjee 1993: 117). Particular social practices degrading to Indian women were used by colonialists as examples of the 'unworthiness' of Indian customs and traditions, which necessitated embracing the 'modernisation' of colonialism. Indian (male) nationalists reacted to this by situating women in the spiritual realm of the home, which was superior to the material realm of the world being constructed and represented by colonial interests.

Chatterjee's account is relevant to modern India, because the construction of nationalism is still very much a gendered dynamic in the arena of the family. This is an extract from an article published in a popular annual three years after India's independence. It was titled 'Santan Janani-Jatir Janani' ('The Mothers of Children are the Mothers of the Nation'):

Women are the creators of the nation. The community is created by human beings but each of these humans was once nurtured in the lap of a mother, hence who else can be the maker of the nation than women? This is certain that human resources are more valuable than wealth and the creator has left the development of this human wealth in the hands of women.

The writer continues by quoting from Swami Vivekananda:

The ideal of an Indian woman is that marvellous selflessness of motherhood, the all-enduring, all forgiving mother...In Hindu thought being a mother is the ultimate aim of every woman.

She concludes with the English proverb ‘The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world’ in proof of her thesis (Devi 1950: 157).

In his recent work, *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty provides a ‘supplementary explanation’ of the valorisation of the nineteenth century Bengali terms *grihalakshmi*, ‘the housewife imagined in the divine model of Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic well-being’ and *griha*, the home. He proposes that Bengali modernity may have imagined life-worlds in ways that never aimed to replicate either the political or the domestic ideals of modern European thought (Chakrabarty 2000: 217). Chakrabarty concludes that Bengali nationalist thought on new domesticity and women’s education in the nineteenth century combined the bourgeois distinction of public and private, of domestic and national, with the idea of the male lineage and that this constituted a crucial difference between the ideology of Bengali modernity and some of the critical assumptions of patriarchal liberalism in Europe (Chakrabarty 2000: 228). Nations, therefore, are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. In postcolonial India, the cultural and gendered politics of Indian nationalism can be read through the texts of popular novels, where constructions of the ‘modern’ women in the service of the developmental state are presented for the consumption of the literate middle class. I have confined my discussion largely to the

fiction published in Bengali after 1947 by one overwhelmingly successful author, Shankar.

'Progressive/modern/intellectual': the rhetoric of modernity

Shankar is a phenomenon in the Bengali publishing industry: his novels found a resonance in the Bengali psyche that sat paradoxically with the then overt left political ambience of Bengali society. This resonance has been maintained in the profoundly altered social and political world that obtains in the educated middle-class Bengali world of the 1990s. His work created new directions in the Bengali novel by demonstrating the ways in which the rhetoric of development, modernisation and individualism permeated the discourses of Bengali society in this period. A readership survey in Eastern India in 1981 and later in 1992 found that readers of Shankar's novels scored the highest in all categories of income and age distribution for weekly magazines. Women constituted by far the largest proportion of consumers of these novels and Shankar was nominated by 82% of those surveyed as their favourite writer.³ A clear stereotype also emerged from this survey about readers' perceptions of themselves. They were overwhelmingly Hindu and categorised themselves as married, middle-class, cheerful, cine-goers, fairly to highly educated, traditional and 'staying at home'. They defined their preferences as intellectually oriented, for example towards comparatively highbrow and political films and intellectual, rather than popular novels. The analysis commented:

These readers seem to be ‘progressive/modern/intellectual’ in outlook though not in their lifestyle. Perhaps this image is dear to them.⁴

Shankar’s popularity reaches outside Bengal as well. His work has been translated into most of the major Indian languages and the renowned director Satyajit Ray has filmed two of his novels.

The family, according to Anne McClintock, offers national narratives an indispensable metaphoric figure for sanctioning national hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests (McClintock 1997: 91). In Shankar’s work, these ‘natural’ hierarchies are strengthened; the nurturing female and the work-oriented male usually represent normal relationships of family life. The therapeutic functions of these novels lie in their reconstruction of the average citizen as centrally important in the context of the institutions of modern life which otherwise appear insurmountable. Social criticism is often confined to gestures, so that there is no urgent need to dismantle established hierarchies or radically subvert the *status quo*. In the traditional symbolism of this kind of fiction, the two ends of the political spectrum move towards each other, so that the radical is tamed and the conservative liberalised. This fiction performs a crucial social function in that it manages collective social unease by embedding it into comfortably

familiar stereotypes. The burden of social problems is evaded by a radical simplification of the complex into manageable symbolic units.

The society depicted in this fiction is primarily nationalist, Hindu and middle-class. A favourite backdrop is the Indian corporate world of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, harnessed in the cause of the development of the nation but notorious for its tolerance, indeed encouragement of institutionalised corruption. This licence '*raj*' was established by Nehruvian policies of development. In this regime, licences to establish factories, produce goods or run commercial farms were sold by a huge, inefficient and corrupt government bureaucracy which openly courted bribes and 'gifts'. There is also a generational conflict present in this fiction, presaging an apprehension of living in the young nation. Young lower middle-class men, especially, engender a deep uneasiness: they represent the uncontrollable potency of masculine energy the desires of which are thwarted by the new polity. In a famous novel which was also turned into a film by Satyajit Ray, a father (Dvaipayan) muses uneasily about his unemployed son whom he feels is 'out of tune':

Nowadays young men were a worry. Who knew what thoughts entered their heads in secret or what they might do if they got involved in politics or out of anger against society [...] Dvaipayan had heard that nowadays many unemployed young men behaved like hooligans. They took all the advantages of living at home yet constantly threw tantrums. They did not wash their own clothes or even pour

themselves a glass of water, share in any of the work of the house or abide by any of the rules of the family. They had turned their homes into jungles

(Shankar 1981b: 51)

In these texts, the old order is ritually challenged by tomorrow's headlines and the discourses of modernity before being re-valorised. Part of the success of Shankar's writing appears to be that it creates the illusion of questioning by purporting to challenge convention and the established order, while tensions in social or gender matters merely validate location and class. They reassure the reader that the novel is not ignoring social issues or important matters, but the consequence usually is to reduce such matters to local colour and authentication. Complex social and economic technicalities are converted to comfortably primitive formulations of human motivations.

'The best watch in Switzerland': technology, commodity and desire

The predominant language of the texts is that of upward mobility, which the citizens of the new nation consider a most desirable attribute. Women are guardians of a system of values produced by the acquisition of appropriate commodities. Sections of these novels resemble self-help manuals which give the predominantly female readers a glimpse of

high society etiquette and mores. Thus if the boss comes to dinner, the hostess must dress particularly carefully because her appearance and clothing signify her place in the social and company hierarchy. She must not look too dressed-up, or too casual; she must also give the impression that she has personally supervised the dinner preparations. Her make-up must be toned down and the *sari* should have the simplicity of expensive *haute couture*.

[...] the *sari* should be simple but the guests must realize that the price of the *sari* is not simple at all. The impression I want to create is that I was in the kitchen all the time, and only came out and freshened up when the guests arrived. After all, does a hostess have time to think of her own appearance when she is preparing to receive guests?

(Shankar 1981b: 63)

In this new era, the middle classes understand that they are not judged by their intrinsic moral worth, but by their possessions and these private relationships cover a profound recognition and acceptance of the public verdict. Their social position is relative and lacks legitimacy, because their acquired situation can never have this intrinsic value. It is this thwarted legitimacy (in relation to cultural, political and professional life) which makes the middle class invest in the private universe, in private property and the accumulation of objects with a dedication that masks the fact that true social recognition has escaped them (Bowly 1985 and Baudrillard 1981). Thus, it is the wife of a senior officer in a foreign-owned company who insists that he should take a flask to office, as

befits his position. She demonstrates to her husband the office hierarchies even in such a seemingly simple action as drinking water:

Shyamalendu examined the situation carefully and realised that one's position in the office could be deduced from one's arrangements for drinking water. He did not know how the people in the lowest positions – i.e. the bearers drank water. In all these years of service he had never actually seen a bearer drink water. He had heard that a glass or two were hidden behind the filing cabinets and used by whoever required them. Then the clerks. Each of them had on their tables a glass with a number in red on the bottom. [...] The glasses of the senior clerks were larger than those of the junior clerks. Then came the local [...] Indian assistants. Their glasses were not so large but fine and etched with beautiful flowers and accompanied by two colourful enamelled lids. Above them were the junior officers. They had red containers on their tables for their glasses and had to remove the concave lid to drink water. The covers used by the senior officers had fine needlepoint on them. But for the managers, office water was completely unpalatable. They had to have flasks. And the directors had two flasks. One contained cold water and only God knew what was in the other.

(Shankar 1981c: 12-13)

The constitution of the upwardly mobile self as social subject depends on the acquisition of appropriate objects to project the desired image via the nuances of codes in dress and possessions. These consumer citizens are, according to Baudrillard, not so much possessors of, as possessed by commodities; they put on their identities at the same time as their clothes (Baudrillard 1981). Their possessions must have pedigrees that guarantee them as successful citizens of the new nation. Thus, scenes and characters in these novels are constantly described in terms of objects and are brand saturated:

‘Take it, you won’t get this cigarette here,’ Poppy Bishowas said softly, ‘can’t stand anything but imported. I’d rather not smoke for a day or two than smoke those Indian weeds [...] I’m worried about my stock of cigarettes. I only have one carton of Dunhill International in stock and how long will that last? A pilot from a foreign airline regularly brings me these as gifts but he hasn’t turned up for some time. Other customers sometimes bring cigarettes as gifts but they are either Rothman’s or Benson and Hedges. I hate those brands.’

(Shankar 1990: 281; 310-311)

The upwardly mobile bourgeois family is obsessed not merely by possession, but by the need to underline what it possesses two or three times. In another novel, the apartment of the protagonist is described in loving and intricate detail by his wife. We learn that the covered area is 2780 square feet, that there are two bedrooms, a guest room, a study,

a dining room, a kitchen, a pantry, a covered verandah and a boxroom; that there is a parking space outside as well as the servants' quarters (120 square feet), that the electric wiring is concealed, and that the master bedroom has 'his' and 'her' bathrooms with genuine bathtubs. The woman enumerates the internal features of the apartment, with tangential references to the company directors' perks, as if she were a real estate agent: the wall-to-wall carpet with its Dunlop underlay is from Mirzapur (the directors of the company, however, get genuine Persian Bokhara carpet), her husband can replace his curtains only once a year (the directors may change them at any time), only one bedroom is air-conditioned (the directors have air-conditioning in the entire house). It is irrelevant in this context that, in the climate of Calcutta, wall-to-wall carpeting is downright uncomfortable, nor is it relaxing to lie in a warm bath. The bourgeois taste imported from the west is conceived of as superior; the wife complains that the colour of the 'piano' switches do not match the 'plastic emulsion' paint on the walls and have to be changed (Shankar 1990: 33-34).

The novels also show a fascination with new technology and gadgetry which is intrinsically linked to the trope of development. Alien configurations are digested and reduced to familiarity for the easier consumption of the readers. The value of time, the novel idea of counting calories: these buzz-words of modernity are thus domesticated and put into circulation. For example, Shankar might describe his protagonist's watch over forty pages, in close, almost loving, detail:

The quartz watch on my left hand reads thirty-five minutes, twelve seconds past eleven. Time is most valuable in business and industry so I use the best watch in the world, so that not even one second is wasted. With the best watch in Switzerland buckled to my wrist, I am ready to profitably use every minute of every day, but the sisters and brothers of my motherland insist on making every person in this country indifferent to time [...] My watch has many ways to keep time under control – one of them is an alarm. Once it is set, this companion will alert me every five minutes [...] When I wanted to sleep in this morning, this foreign watch started to make its beeping sound [...] My quartz watch is a special computer. It can tell me when I have consumed my extra calories by exercise [...] The quartz watch on my wrist is reminding me that it is time for my medicine. All the various chores of my day are programmed into my watch – this mechanical wife reminds me dutifully of them [...] I am late in taking my tablet and look at my watch. It has honey in its breast and is as shy as a Bengali bride. It won't talk but after exactly five minutes it will call me softly without annoying anyone else. I've swallowed the tablet with some cold water and informed my life's companion. It won't annoy me any more.

(Shankar 1983a: 7-40 passim)

Here the watch replaces the faithless wife in the novel and fulfils the traditional role of pious and submissive woman. It is more real than most of the other characters in the novel and points to the ideological uneasiness that permeates this sort of fiction.

'The average of Laksmi, Sarasvati and Annapurna': the transaction of education

Shankar's overt views on the subject of women are those of a liberal middle-class Bengali man influenced by the ideals of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. On the one hand, he acknowledges the very real oppression faced by most women:

If we cannot bring women into the forefront of our society and give them their due responsibility and a major part to play in the community, this country will never progress. In my opinion we are moving backwards because women are regressing.⁵

On the other hand, however, Shankar, like most men of his class and generation, and indeed like the male protagonists of his novels, finds it hard to conceive of autonomous women. Paradoxically, he ascribes to women much of the blame for their current situation. They have not been able to fulfil the spiritual roles demanded of them in the new nation because they possess all the 'backward' traits of the nation: slavery, self-

hatred, lack of self-confidence; they choose financial security over principle and mistake superficial things such as western clothing or proficiency in English with true emancipation. Liberation is impossible until women stop oppressing each other:

Men are definitely primarily responsible for the condition of women but women must bear part of the responsibility too. It is a fact of history in all civilised countries that those who fall behind are always partly responsible for their state; indeed their oppressed condition is one of the prime symptoms of their regression.⁶

Shankar reiterates these themes in many of his novels:

Women are the worst enemies of other unfortunate women [...] They are most pleased when other women are in trouble... [My father went to jail ...] because my future mother-in-law put pressure on him for more money [...] She was not willing to compromise even infinitesimally on cash, ornaments or other parts of the dowry.

(Shankar 1990: 235)

The new nation does not have enough legitimacy to stop these practices by moral exhortation; men (and women) have to be convinced of the *utility* of such measures.

It is difficult to convince people to give away or to sacrifice something [dowry] but they may listen if you say that a sacrifice today will lead to a gain tomorrow.⁷

Expectations of women are clear in Shankar's novels. A woman's interests are congruent with those of her husband and children. In serving them, she serves herself. Emancipated and educated (hence westernised) women, especially, must maintain this role and representation of themselves to be sympathetic to the reading public. They may go out to work, but their prime responsibility is to their home and family and they must cut their domestic coat according to their husband's cloth. If a woman acts outside these norms by infidelity or lack of domesticity or piety, she cannot be redeemed unless she repents and recuperates her previous roles.

In the 1950s and '60s, middle-class women responded to the increasing demands on them by reconstituting and supporting one another through social networks formed from their families and local communities. But with the increasing break-up of the joint family structure, the greater job mobility of both men and women, the rising cost of living and the almost insoluble problems of transport and pollution in Calcutta, these communities have become more difficult to maintain. The contemporary readers of this literature, be they housewife or wage-earner, are increasingly isolated. It is probable that this act of reading constitutes a collective fantasy where the right behaviour and well played role invariably leads to happiness, and straying from the clearly defined representation of womanhood spells disaster. These women are telling themselves the

story of a nation whose central vision is one of surrender to the dominant pre-independence ideology, where women and the feminine anchored the nationalist imaginary. Passivity is at the heart of this experience, in the sense that submissiveness to the female ideal produces the balance, harmony and order which are the final goals of each narrative. For example, Abhik Roy, writing in 1998, describes how domesticity was the dominant ideological theme in television commercials in the 1990s, where the Indian woman is shown as a subservient home-bound wife, happily engaged in domestic chores, whose role is ‘crowned’ by the advertised product (Roy 1998: 117-134). The act of reading allows readers to experience the sense of having been reconstituted affectively, if only vicariously.

In this process, reading becomes a transaction. ‘Reading for instruction’ is a primary justification in a society where modernisation and development have made information a highly valued commodity. Most of the female readers are mothers whose children must pass examinations and attend interviews from the ages of four or five to get admission to elite ‘English-medium’ or ‘convent’ schools, to ensure them a fighting chance of entering the highly coveted professions of medicine, engineering, computing or management. They must not only do extremely well in their school-leaving examinations, but also pass difficult competitive tests. Even poorly paid government clerical jobs require English language and general knowledge tests, the latter of which often resemble trivial pursuit games rather than relevant exercises of intelligence. Mothers are usually the after-school tutors of their children; it is not uncommon for children as young as six or seven to require four or five hours of study every evening, to

complete their homework and keep up with their studies. The privileging of English-language education and the economic imperative for educated unemployed people to find jobs has created a situation where it is mandatory for the middle-class Bengali, traditionally employed in the service sector of the economy, to have a university degree, speak fluent English and possess encyclopaedic general knowledge. The latter qualities represent the capital and passport required for entry into the realm of success depicted in these fictions, the world of plum jobs in foreign companies, banks or the civil service. From these books, women 'learn' English words and expressions which indicate westernised sophistication as well as historical facts and social and economic data mainly about Europe and America. Shankar is renowned for his 'research' and his novels contain many informative anecdotes, for example how Henry VIII invented the menu and the conduct of whimsical hotel guests in regard to bath water or matching bedlinen (Shankar 1983b: 30-40). It is not surprising, therefore, that the main response to the question 'Why do you read these novels?' was *Pore anek kichu jana jay*, i.e. 'One can learn a lot of things by reading (these books)' (Mukhopadhyay 1981: 2).

Reading is thus transformed into an activity where an exchange takes place, where something is acquired. This defines this activity retroactively in developmental terms as goal-directed work. Hence, it replicates the current Bengali middle-class belief that education is closely connected with success and status. In this context, Shankar is part of a long tradition. Dipesh Chakrabarty has described how education in nineteenth-century Bengal was considered part of a woman's charm, beauty and pleasantness, while lack of education (as well as too much of it) was supposed to render women

quarrelsome (Chakrabarty 2000: 225). Also, in postcolonial India, a desirable woman is one who can function fluently in English, in the public sphere, but in the domestic world, must retain the values of submissiveness, piety and domesticity that are the hallmarks of the ideal Bengali woman. From the 1950s onwards, stories by many popular writers presented ideal women as highly educated as well as perfect housewives. For example, one such woman is described by a popular writer of the period as not only having a university degree but ‘also a diploma in interior decoration [...] She’s a graduate, good-looking, she’s certain to get a salary of two hundred and fifty (*rupees*).’ (Nandi 1950: 142-143)

In these stories, the desirable male protagonist is equally stereotyped. He is modern, personable, tall and either in the possession of a good job or family money. The desirable groom Khagen in Parasuram’s story ‘Ratantikumar’ is

personable, well-dressed, obviously wealthy, drives his own car. He was twenty-five or twenty-six years old and working in his father’s silver and coal mines. A groom of such beauty, accomplishments, education and money was rare.

(Parasuram 1952: 20)

The perfect woman for such a groom has to be a composite of physical, mental and domestic virtues. She must be self-effacing and submissive, an efficient manager of the household, a good mother, educated and accomplished. In the same story, the requirements for such a woman are spelt out in the description of Jayanti. Not only is she an expert cook, but she is beautiful enough not to need make-up and modest to boot:

[Jayanti] has passed her M.A. examination [... She] is going to get a job soon. If you calculate an average of Laksmi, Sarasvati and Annapurna, you would get [Jayanti].

(Parasuram 1952: 23)

Chakrabarty points out that, in the nineteenth century, Laksmi came to stand for all that was beautiful, harmonious and feminine in the Bengali home (Chakrabarty 2000: 227). Ironically, this is still the perfect woman in the new nation: the average of Laksmi, the goddess of wealth, beauty and domestic gifts; Sarasvati, the goddess of music and learning; and Annapurna, the goddess of plenty. Both Jayanti and Khagen bring their own capital to this marital bargain. He has all the important attributes of the public sphere, connections and money. She has the essential requirements of the private and domestic sphere, beauty and accomplishment. There is an interesting parallel here with the goddess of the women's wing of the fundamentalist Hindu organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Their goddess, Ashtabhuja, is a composite of

Sarasvati and Lakshmi but Annapurna has been replaced by Mahakali, denoting female power and protection (Bacchetta 1999).

It is important that women subscribe to this psychology of security, otherwise the basis for their sexual and social contract will disappear. If a husband cannot provide these objects of security, then the duty and devotion of the wife is enjoined by tradition and religion regardless of the man's character, ability or conduct. In a story by another writer, Anuradha, who has been 'guilty' of a pre-marital relationship, redeems herself by becoming a superwoman, caring for a bedridden husband, holding down three jobs as well as keeping the domestic fires burning. Her husband says:

'[She is] an ideal wife [...] Four years I haven't earned a cent and the whole burden is on her.' [...] Anuradha said, 'What's so difficult about all this? The job is from ten to five. I teach a girl sewing for one hour in the morning and teach music for two hours in the evening.'

(Chaudhuri 1950: 133)

Women have to resort to nurturance to keep men emotionally in their unique place and also to reify and replicate their own journey to female identity as constructed within the patriarchal culture of the nation. This literature ratifies the inevitability of the

institutional structure which defines women's needs as identical to those of their husband's and family's and sees fulfilment in their satisfaction. For female readers, this literature is therefore a 'kind of sentimental education', a 'culture's ethos when spelt out in a collective text' (Geertz1973: 449).

'Harem women seem happiest to me': the necessity of success

Shankar's fiction expresses immense disdain for weak or unwaged men; wives of such men, compelled into the male role of bread-winner, are either overtly independent, promiscuous and disrespectful of their husbands; or models of the suffering, patient and ever-dutiful wife. This, too, continues the national tropes of the bread-winning man and the domestic woman. Stories by other writers also echo this theme. A woman who cannot marry because her mother and two younger brothers depend on her earnings, says bitterly:

Harem women seem happiest to me [...] What I really want is for a man to hold me always, to look after me, and fulfil my every need and desire so that I never have to leave the harem and go outside.

(Nandi 1950: 142-143)

A woman who is more successful than her husband or boyfriend dooms the relationship to failure, because their worldly success displaces the man from the centre of the world. This dilemma is explored in one of Shankar's most successful novels, *Jana Aranya*:

Tapati was renowned as a good scholar while Somnath was just ordinary. Tapati obtained good marks while Somnath just managed not to fail. Tapati could write and speak beautiful English. Somnath couldn't cope with English at all [...] After this Somnath could not keep pace with his girl-friend [...] Tapati put a first-class M.A. degree into her vanity bag with great ease. Somnath tried and failed to get dozens of jobs in two and a half years but Tapati Ray was a research scholar. Somnath's dream of becoming a poet had withered a long time ago. His employment exchange number was 210017.

(Shankar 1981b: 101)

The theme of male fear of failure and poverty promotes individuation and actualisation of self through acquisition not of inherited wealth or status, but the new and individualistic accoutrements of modernity. In these writings, the men hunger for specifically economic success, not through the old methods of government service but in the overtly masculine and modern arena of business. The aggressive nature of this world is thoroughly masked under the female characters' extreme economic innocence. Economically passive, the female protagonist lacks options other than marriage or

motherhood. Women who buck the system pay with interest for the dissonance they create. In these novels, both by Shankar and other writers, the *sine qua non* of happiness is the material success of the male protagonist. These are basic attributes of his masculinity, without which he cannot control the females in his life. Other stories in the period just after independence reiterate these themes. A man of lower status cannot trust his wife to love him for himself alone:

I have neither education nor intelligence, nor the ability to earn money, no virtues at all. How can I tie you to me? That is why I am scared all the time.

(Mitra 1952: 207)

Women must therefore guard themselves against romantic appeal, or 'affect' if there is no 'interest', i.e. economic stability. Happiness is assured if interest and affect meet in a male character. But if those two qualities are distributed between different men, then tragedy is the inevitable consequence (Bowlby 1985).

Much of the success of Shankar's novels is based on the complicity of his readers in accepting unquestioningly the view of themselves presented in his works. Women, who are the main consumers of these novels, appear as consumers *within* the novels and also as objects of consumption, who co-operate whole-heartedly in the process. They are the

ones who painstakingly guard their husbands' status and throw themselves wholeheartedly into consuming the code: whether enumerating the hierarchy of drinking water or justifying their choice of *sari*. If a woman is willing to forego status, the man himself repudiates her because he knows that this is what she *should* want. In *Jana Aranya*, Tapati wants to marry Somnath, but he refuses:

Tapati asked, 'Then I don't have any rights? I can't decide who I love? Can't women love other things about men except jobs?' Somnath answered in a quiet yet sad voice, 'If I take what you are offering then no one will forgive me, Tapati. People will think that this unemployed layabout knowingly spoilt the life of an educated, beautiful and innocent girl [...] A man who has neither a job nor any earnings is not considered human in this society [...] a man is responsible for supporting his wife – this has been a tradition for thousands of years.'

(Shankar 1981b: 103; 123-124)

This dichotomy in the portrayal of women is emblematic of their paradoxical position in society as commodities and consumers in one.

In the modern Indian nation, sexual inequality is an inescapable fact of Indian life and traditional gender roles, values and expectations still predominate. However, despite the strength of social norms relating to women's roles, within the middle-class that is the

subject of Shankar's work, there have been seminal changes in attitudes since independence. Women have entered areas of social life traditionally dominated by men such as higher education, the work force and politics. Urban women's groups have been active since the 1970s in raising the consciousness of women and demarcating their oppression as a major social problem (for example, by the movement against dowry). The ferment over the debate on traditional gender issues is then a theme which should manifest itself in popular literature, especially where authors assert themselves as concerned by injustice or oppression. Shankar seems conscious of this, quoting an extract from an ancient Hindu text in the epigraph of *Bittabasana*: 'There is nothing unachievable for a woman in the three worlds – they can create fire from water and water out of fire' (Shankar 1983a: 7).

In spite of these proclamations, Shankar's novels reflect and reinforce traditional social and gender norms, while alternatives are presented as non-existent or negative. The family and husband still form the central focus of a woman's life. Higher education and work experience are seen as appropriate insofar as they increase her eligibility for marriage. Women personify the feminine qualities of the nation, inert, backward-looking and traditional. In the new regime, they sometimes hamper idealistic men from their regimen of duties which have ramifications far removed from the domestic sphere. This masculine work is always of national importance, i.e. essential in building the nation (Shankar 1981a and 1966).

'She did not want this sort of liberation': the ambiguity of liberation

When liberated women appear in these fictions, they have 'westernised' themselves to the point that they have repudiated their spiritual and inward role in the development of the nation. The typical corporate wife's passion in life is the advancement of her husband's career and in presenting the right impression to the world. She is described as taking snuff, smoking and calling her husband by his first name. 'Actually', says Shankar, 'their culture is totally different. It has been imported from England and America, but has come here without being unpacked.' (Shankar 1981c: 87) This is the *mukhara* or shrew that Chakrabarty describes, the woman who is Alaksmi, the antithesis of Laksmi (Chakrabarty 2000: 226-7).

However, the role that the wife of a commercial executive in the corporate world is expected to play is different from traditional expectations only in the details:

In many offices before someone is hired in a high post, the wife of the applicant is interviewed as well [...] We too should receive a salary. The company puts its tired and irritable executives in our hands in the evening after working them to death all day and wringing all the juice out of them. We have to rejuvenate them for work the next day. We do this for the company.

(Shankar 1981c: 110)

A central theme running through the novels is that the roles of wife and mother are completely satisfying in themselves and leave little room for the achievement of other personal goals. Liberated women characters created by Shankar seldom work out of interest or a sense of vocation. Career women are usually depicted as caricatures: they need supervision and encouragement from charismatic, inspirational and selfless male superiors. Where attempts are made to offer options other than marriage to women, the logic of both language and theme implies that such women cannot be emancipated or fulfilled in current Indian society. This is an acceptable description of (western) women's liberation from a career woman, who has experienced sexual harassment at work:

Women's liberation was a dirty word in the West. This class of whimsical women refused to take their husbands' names after marriage or be called Miss or Mrs, they wore no make-up or even brassieres – all in the name of freedom. [She] definitely did not want this sort of freedom.

(Shankar 1983c: 103)

Ironically, for such women, the solution is to go overseas, where they can be truly liberated:

If I become the wife of a teacher, then I shall starve. It's better to stand on one's own feet and escape abroad. As a woman, my slogan is 'Liberty, equality, fraternity'.

(Shankar 1981c: 117)

Shankar's liberated heroines have to 'go west' to be truly emancipated.⁸ Another key word in this statement of emancipation is 'wife'; all women know that marriage is inevitable, indeed desirable. Regardless of career success, women are not fulfilled until they are married: 'There is no reason not to marry just because one is an [civil service] officer.' (Shankar 1981c: 117)

Even valid criticisms of traditional gender roles are subverted because they are usually articulated by excessively modern and aggressive women, for example an unmarried, cigarette-smoking, motor-bicycle riding teacher:

Physics, chemistry, history, economics, whatever you teach Bengali women, they will eventually spend their lives in the mess of the

kitchen, only interested in laundry detergent, baby food, and talcum powder. When I see my ex-students, it doesn't seem at all credible to me that I ever taught them anthropology.

(Shankar 1983d: 24)

Since women are accorded the role of guardians of moral values, it is easy in this context to accede to the notion that the nation has lost its moral bearings. In an article on Hindu nationalism, Amrita Basu quotes from a 1991 speech by Sadhvi Rithambara, a female Hindu nationalist:

Things have deteriorated to the point that everything is now bought and sold, minds, bodies, religion, and even the honor of our elders, sisters, mothers and sons [...] We cannot auction our nation's honor in the market of party politics.

(Basu 1999: 113)

Paola Bacchetta has described how ideas, commodities and lifestyle models from other regions and beyond India's borders cause the members of the RSS's women's organisation to 'adjust' their notions of the gender binary and gender complementarity to allow for new forms of agency (Bacchetta 1999). But the pronouncements of the leaders of this and similar organisations echo the sentiments expressed in Shankar's

novels. In 1991, the president of the national women's organisation of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party said:

For Indian women, liberation means liberation from atrocities. It doesn't mean that women should be relieved of their duties as wives and mothers. Women should stop demanding their rights all the time and think instead in terms of their responsibilities to the family.

Another office-bearer of the same organisation added: 'We want to encourage our members not to think in terms of individual rights but in terms of responsibility to the nation.' (Basu 1999: 117)

The parable of the modern nation reaches its culmination in the portrayal of the heroine of *Bittabasana* ('A Lust for Wealth'), Shankar's most complex novel in this period. Shakuntala is estranged from her first husband, Banabehari, because he cannot afford to send his terminally sick son overseas for treatment. Masculinity is identified with the ability to access expensive western technologies:

You are a good-for-nothing [...] those who can't make a living are eunuchs [...] It's not enough to have physical capabilities – those who can't arrange their children's medical treatment should not be greedy for fatherhood.

(Shankar 1983a: 80-92)

Banabehari becomes obsessed with acquiring wealth and orchestrates his wife's relationship with a rich businessman, who gives him the capital to establish his own business. Shakuntala's decision to leave Banabehari, her first husband, which might be seen as an act of independence, actually requires his active connivance. Later, when her second husband dies, Banabehari says:

Shakuntala – my wife – is a widow. You might say the term is wrong, it should be ex-wife or previous wife. But mark this: once a wife, always a wife in spite of all the legalities of the land.

(Shankar 1983a: 132)

Shakuntala becomes a successful entrepreneur by re-enacting the conventional gender roles within the public arena. For example, she rejuvenates her ailing company by cleaning its offices and decorating it with flowers (Shankar 1983a: 141). She wears the white clothes mandatory for Bengali widows at corporate meetings and functions and observes the appropriate rituals including vegetarianism (Shankar 1983a: 149; 171; 185). And finally, when her company is in danger of a takeover, her first husband acts as the white knight by acquiring the shares she needs and giving them to her.

Conclusion

If economic liberalisation had delivered, a large proportion of the post-independence Indian population could have availed themselves of the opportunities to make money and enjoy the fruits of consumer capitalism. However, while capitalism has made inroads into the economy and undermined traditional social relationships and social and economic controls, the transition has been partial, slow and incomplete. In this intensely competitive environment, the retreat of the old secular ideologies and the Nehruvian vision of development have enabled the proponents of both economic liberalisation and Hindu fundamentalism.

In the world of writers like Shankar, the path of Nehruvian development is a double sign. It represents the corruption of the licence *raj* as well as the desirable lifestyle and possessions of the educated elites. The more the nation modernises, the more corrupt and desirable it becomes. All the noble social goals of the Nehru era, education, women's emancipation, progress become transactional – things to be exchanged for wealth, western technology and status. There is no room for integrity here; integrity is possible either in the past or in the west. This topography indicates however the space where right-wing ideologies can flourish; the tropes of the future represented by market liberalisation to assist the new world of commodity, technology and desire coupled with the tropes of the past in the retrieval of traditional ideas of femininity.

These fictions tell the story of the 'deferral' of western modernity in the imaginary of the postcolonial nation. This flawed representation of the modern nation also embodies its tragedy. The narrative of the Nehruvian model of development imagines a nation whose progressive trajectory is mired in corruption and uncertainty. It cannot keep its promise to its citizens to provide them with either the necessities of life or the desired symbols of modernity. With the breakdown of the old values that provided safety nets for the less able, entry into this new world and access to its lifestyle is possible only through corruption and betrayal. The arena of politics and culture where creative autonomy and change is possible is left for other chroniclers, another kind of fiction. Authors, such as Kabita Singha and Mahasvetha Devi, whose writing is now known in the English-speaking world outside India through the work of critics such as Gayatri Spivak, have created women who are autonomous beings with agency even in the most profoundly oppressive systems. These women can in fact create fire out of water.

¹ Sections of this article were published in *Third World Quarterly: Journal of Emerging Areas*, December 2001.

² In a famous essay in the early 1980s, Habermas argued that 'instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs' of the past 'which have tried to negate modernity' (Habermas 1985: 3-4, 13-14). See also (Habermas 1991: 344-5 and Harvey 1989: 12-14).

³ Operations Research Group, 'National Readership Survey (East Zone)', commissioned by the Indian Society of Advertisers Ltd. and the Advertising Agencies Association of India, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 16-21 and Appendices 5 and 7.

⁴ Mode Research Group, 'Report on a Study of Reader Satisfaction of Bengali novels', Calcutta, 11th June, 1982.

⁵ From one of my interviews with Shankar, conducted in Calcutta in the period 1982 – 1985.

⁶ Interview with Shankar.

⁷ Interview with Shankar.

⁸ See for example, Tutul in *Seemabaddha* and Paromita in *Nagar Nandini*.