Who are the *Bhadramahilā*?

by

Jacqueline Lee Pallardy, B. A.

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Abstract

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Jacqueline Lee Pallardy, M. A.

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Supervisor: Gail Minault

This thesis focuses on the identity of middle class Bengali Muslim women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians identify *bhadramahilā* as members of the social class *bhadralok* and also use *bhadramahilā* as an analytic category. I use several authors' work in order to show that there are two important but differing ideas about who the *bhadramahilā* were. The most common view is that *bhadramahilā* were upper caste Hindus who became the new class of English educated Bengalis via the introduction of the British education system. Others suggest that Muslims are also members of this class group, but either 1) do not include them in their studies on *bhadralok* or 2) have not proven that Muslims were in fact *bhadramahilā*. The question is, Should we consider middle class Muslim women to be *bhadramahilā?* Or, does the category *bhadramahilā* apply to Muslims? After examining women's writings and the historical, economic, and socio-cultural conditions of the period, I suggest that Muslim women were indeed among the *bhadramahilā*, and that the category is a useful analytic tool for the study of educated middle class Bengali women, both Hindu and Muslim.

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Introduction

May we call the women of the educated Muslim urban middle class *bhadramahilā*? If so, on what grounds?[1]

This paper is a discussion of the class group *bhadramahilā* and the debate surrounding Muslim identity in Bengal during the British colonial period. Sonia Nishat Amin suggests that the women she studies should be called *bhadramahilā* despite the existence of two centuries of historical literature that either explicitly excludes Muslims from the class of *bhadralok* or implicitly supports a Muslim severalty. In order to justify the position, Amin carefully searches through all the pages of Muslim women's writing in order to locate where Muslim women use the term *bhadramahilā* self-referentially. In this she is successful, and documents each instance of the term's occurrence in women's literature. Her most important source is Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. In a lecture titled *Shishu Pālan* (Child Care) delivered in 1920, Rokeya addressed the women as "*Upasthit bhadramahilāgan*."[2] Amin also writes that the word *bhadra* occurs several times "in the context of Muslim society (e.g. 210, 282, 303, 304, 449, 474, 476, 493,

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[1]Amin, "The Early Muslim *Bhadramahilā*: The Growth of Learning and Creativity," 107
[2]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*, 13

494, 546)."[3] In these pages, Rokeya compares Muslim *bhadramahilā* "to the members of the more advanced Brahmo community."[4] Besides the eleven instances of the term used by Rokeya, Amin cites Meredith Borthwick, Ibrahim Khan, Ghulam Murshid, and Najibar Rahman as people who have used the word as an analytic category to refer to Muslim Bengali women.[5]

The problem of self-identification, as far as Amin is concerned, is settled based on the instances cited above. The use of the category *bhadramahilā* as analytic tool, however, has yet to be justified. Amin writes that Borthwick, in her 1984 book *The Changing Role of Bengali Women*, "logically legitimizes"[6] the usage by saying that the model of the *bhadramahilā* was invented by Brahmo reformers who "were consciously welded into a body with a progressive image, and seen as pioneers of a new way of life to be adopted by other non-Brahmo women."[7] Amin claims to be finishing Borthwick's work when she includes Muslim women as *bhadralok*. Given the evidence against use of the term, however, it would seem that Borthwick's work on Hindu *bhadramahilā* does not automatically warrant the use of the term for Muslims. Borthwick says only that her work contains clear gaps of information. She admits that she has inadequately

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[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid., 13.
[6]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939*, 9.

[7]Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal,* 54, quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 9.*

addressed aspects of religion in her analysis, and concludes, "the Bengali Muslim *bhadramahilā* has not been mentioned and deserves a separate study."[8]

In view of the residual confusion over the issue, I shall examine Bengali written media in search of shared qualities between urban educated middle class Bengali Muslim and urban educated middle class Hindu women. Through media, I highlight commonalities that could be said to unite Hindus, Muslims, and Brahmos into a single class group, which is characterized by a shared economic position, lifestyle, and class-consciousness.[9] I focus on Bengali media and scholarship that is relevant to questions about women's education, because some of the most fundamental social formations and changes involving social identity take place in the context of education, although sometimes under broader headings such as social reform, development, or social improvement. Also, given the historical and economic context, I take it for granted that those engaging with written media are among the new, articulate middle-class. It is they who employed a variety of symbols in order to fashion a new image for themselves.

Method

I begin by discussing *bhadralok* in popular literature that has resulted in the view that *bhadralok* and *bhadramahilā* were either Hindus or Brahmos. In

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[8]Ibid., xiii.
[9]Mukherjee, "Class, Caste, and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-1838," 131.

Part II, I discuss the emergence of Muslims within the Bengali middle class by focusing on educational, governmental, and reform projects, which led to the education of Bengali Muslim women. In Parts III-V I examine the similarities between Hindu and Muslim middle class educated women of Bengal in order to defend Amin's position favoring the use of the term *bhadramahilā* in reference to Muslims. I use Mukherjee's criteria for membership in the class group, which is that the *bhadralok* occupied "a common position along some continuum of the economy, enjoyed a style of life in common, and was conscious of its existence as a class organized to further its ends."[10] The *bhadralok* are commonly understood as a "status group" in current scholarship, but such a designation does not sufficiently emphasize the economic conditions facilitating the creation of the class *bhadralok* as a part of an open society that allowed for mobility between religions and classes.[11] Amin also cites Mukherjee for this definition and thinks that educated middle-class Muslim women were an emerging group answering to this description.[12] The crux of the argument in defense of the Muslim *bhadramahilā* is proof that they actually did share a lifestyle in common with Hindu *bhadramahilā*, and that, like the *bhadra* Hindus, they were conscious of their existence as a class unified in the pursuit of a certain end. Thus, in order to

[10]Ibid.

[11]See Weber, 405-425 for his understanding of the concept of a class vs. a status group and the definition of an open society vs. closed societies.
[12]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 5.

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justify the use of the term, I take it that Muslim women did refer to themselves as *bhadra,* as Amin has so diligently proven in her work. I shall attempt to demonstrate through the following chapters that the persons of the Hindu *bhadramahilā* and Muslim *bhadramahilā* did resemble one another qualitatively. An examination of Bengali written media about women's issues and women's education in particular will show that there is a longstanding and fundamental disagreement over how to refer to educated Bengalis of the 19th and 20th centuries. My conclusion is that there were in fact Muslim women fitting the description of *bhadramahilā.*

The wider aim of this thesis is to understand what the debate means for current scholarship on Muslim women in Bengal and for the study of women's education in India, which I suggest is largely over-determined by the framework of Indian nationalism and by a Hindu/Muslim partisanship. In this respect I owe my inspiration to Mahua Sarkar who recently wrote a book about Bengali Muslim women from the perspective of nationalist discourses. In it, she rightly acknowledges that Hindu-dominated nationalist discourse privileges Hindu women and "*fails to as much [as] register* Muslim women's invisibility as something that might need explaining."[13] According to Sarkar, this lacuna has occurred because the Hindu middle and upper caste and middle class are

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[13]M. Sarkar, *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal*, 7-8.

consistently conflated with the word "Indian, and worse yet, Bengali."[14] Therefore, these studies "directly contribute to the occlusion of Muslim women from the middle class."[15] In part, my aim is to defend the position that there were, in fact, Muslims living in colonial Bengal called *bhadralok* and that the occlusion of Muslim women from Hindu accounts is considerable. However, my aim is also to correct Sarkar's argument. Sarkar relies heavily on biased media published by Hindus that is decidedly anti-Muslim. Her argument fails because she focuses too much on Hindu obsession with superiority and difference from Muslims rather than on similarities and cultural exchange connecting Hindu and Muslim women together. This causes her to assume what the nationalistic Hindu dominated Bengali press wanted people to conclude: that Muslims were not *bhadralok*, and more, that they were actually invisible. In other words, she buys into the politics of nationalism that colors Bengali discourses about women and thereby obfuscates or ignores information that would lead to a more balanced and insightful picture of the condition and self-perceptions of middle class Muslim women in colonial Bengal.

Sarkar's defense for emphasizing the *differences* between the respective communities is that comparison involves an assumption that is just as dangerous as the essentialization of pre-conceived differences. For Sarkar, it means writing

[14]Ibid.
[15]Ibid.

a "herstory," in which all people's actions are interpreted "within dominant historiographic tradition in question."[16] The result of this would be

> to flatten the very difference that apparently mandated this "new" history in the first place, and to represent Muslim women as "just like," or rather "almost like," the fabled subject positions "liberal" or "feminist." As a result, what might be a rich and complex history of negotiation and resistance becomes an exercise in the service of producing sameness.[17]

While this seems reasonable, Sarkar is consequently unable to address the concerns that she herself considers most grave: the politics of inclusion and exclusion that occupy almost every strand of the discourse on identity in colonial Bengal.[18] Sarkar, like others, takes Muslim women's absence in history for granted; she assumes an essential exclusion of Muslims from Hindu literature and never really attempts to find any evidence to the contrary. She cannot, therefore, test any assumption about the history as it stands or about the process of the construction of feminine identity in Bengal. Her project is one that merely confirms the existing stereotypes lending to Hindu/Muslim communal antagonism. She contributes to the misleading image of who the *bhadramahilā* were, and how they related to one another.

This paper is proof that such a confirmation need not be forced. I take this position knowing that I underemphasize religious differences and interpolate a

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[16]Ibid., 13.
[17]Ibid.
[18]Ibid., 16.

normative discourse about women's identity in colonial Bengal. The history and literature by and about Hindus and Muslims in Bengali society anchor this decision and support the conclusion that the colonial society of Bengal was not simply closed. In particular, the Bengali society did allow for some mobility within and between classes and religious groups. The presence of a certain kind of educated middle class Muslim woman confirms this poorly understood aspect of the emerging Bengali middle class. In short, this thesis supports the idea that Muslim women's voices demand greater attention, as they indicate clearly what respectability meant for women in colonial Bengal, or who the *bhadramahilā* really were.

Part I

A Brief History of the Term

The term *bhadralok* is used in literature as early as 1823,[19] and from this beginning was regularly used to mean "respectable people." Deriving from Sanskrit, it means those who are good, excellent, of good family or education, worthy, or ritually pure.[20] The appearance of the group and the concomitant spread of material about *bhadralok* occurred in response to cultural and economic changes instigated by the new British administration in the early nineteenth century, as well as the new job opportunities created.[21] Important among these were the desire of Indians to create in Bengal a modern, commercialized economy, the destruction of indigenous industries, and the emergence of a new market for indigenous knowledge.[22] At this time, printed books, pamphlets, magazines, and journals were disseminated widely and quickly throughout Bengal and the rest of India as a result of the introduction of the printing press. As Bhattacharya puts it, print was important by virtue of its sheer availability; because printed books existed, they would be read.[23] The consequence of this development was a population in Bengal that had unprecedented access to the written word, which in turn led to a rapid rise in literacy in the region and the

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[19]T. Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal*, 36.
[20]R.S. McGregor, *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*, 758-759.
[21]Mukherjee, 117 and 124.
[22]Mukherjee, 140; M. Sarkar, 85-86.
[23]T. Bhattacharya, 152.

emergence of a class of people who made it their occupation and greatest concern to control the production and effects of media. Many people dedicated their lives to using this avenue to engineer and gain recognition for their group as the new respectable class.

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that underlying almost all *bhadralok* debate about Bengali society was the question of who exactly the new Bengali elites were going to be. According to Broomfield, there was a "profound *bhadralok* uncertainty on the crucial issue,"[24] and as I shall show in what follows, the question, "who were the *bhadralok*?"[25] is vexed by equivocation. The question was whether or not the "modernized" Bengal was going to be an open or a closed society.[26] Despite being regularly referred to as an open society whose membership was not entirely ascriptive,[27] "the term *bhadralok* was frequently used in the 19th century as a synonym for high caste,"[28] and thus developed the connotation of a fundamentally closed class.[29] At one level, the term *bhadralok* took on an aura of exclusivity, an exclusivity that has been well documented by many scholars.

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[24]J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: 20th Century Bengal*, 16.
[25]See T. Bhattacharya, p. 35, for a re-statement of the question.
[26]Broomfield, 15.
[27]Broomfield, 9.
[28]Broomfield, 6.
[29]For an explanation of closed and open societies, see Max Weber, *Essays on Sociology*, p. 405.

The Hindu-ness of the *Bhadralok*

The association of the *bhadralok* with Hinduism is justified by a historical

argument supporting the claim that Hindus were the majority and the *de facto*

dominant class. Economic change at the beginning of the nineteenth century

clearly favored Hindus, and drove them into the major cities ruled by the

British.[30] Under the British revisions of revenue and property, or Permanent

Settlement, a huge amount of real estate was transferred from farmers (or *raiyats*)

to Hindu bankers and revenue officers, who became the official rentiers (or

zamindars).[31] Following this transfer of property, many of the new landed elite

moved to Calcutta in search of more employment and opportunity. In Calcutta,

the British recruited and accounted for an overwhelming majority of the upper-

caste Hindus (those who had previously worked for the Mughals, or who had the

requisite administrative skills as former interpreters, bankers and traders) into the

bureaucracy.[32] The Adam Reports note that the main occupations of the Hindus,

who clearly "gained the most ground among the European functionaries," were

"zamindars, talookdars, public officers, men of learning, money lenders, traders,

shop keepers &c. engaging in the most active pursuits of life, and coming directly

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[30]Mukherjee, 119.
[31]Mukherjee, 160-62; see also Aminur Rahim, "The Political Economy of English Education in Muslim. Bengal: 1871-1912," 309.
[32]Rafiuddin Ahmed, "The Emergence of the Bengal Muslims," 19.

and frequently under the notice of the rulers of the country."[33] *Pykars*, *dallals*, *gomasthas*, *minshis*, *banyans*, and *dewans* comprised the bulk of retainers and recruits.[34] The recruits who comprised the new middle class were skilled workers—scribes and record keepers—who were necessarily literate.

Secondary literature commonly notes that the *bhadralok* were heavily influenced by the introduction of new social, cultural, and legal ideas that were brought to India by Christian missionaries and British officials. Particularly, the class of *abhijat bhadralok* (upper-class, respectable people) were interested in science and ways to modernize their society.[35] The English exerted a certain amount of pressure encouraging Indians to change, or become "modern." There were several sources of such pressure, including those internal to the indigenous culture. But a great deal of Orientalist literature regarded Indian culture as barbaric and in need of foreign rule. The British even published decrees announcing prizes for the "natives" to produce literature that would lead to social improvement. They wanted material particularly suitable for the instruction of women in Indian society.[36] David Kopf points out that many of the *bhadralok* were known for their leading role in developing and implementing a model of

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[33]DiBona, Joseph, ed., *One Teacher, One School: The Adam Report on Indigenous Education in 19th Century India*, 50.
[34]Mukherjee, 124; see also B.B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times*, 393 for a similar geneology.
[35]Mukherjee, 131-140.
[36]Beginning in 1844 Lord Hardinge instructed the Education Council to prepare returns for meritorious students; see T. Bhattacharya, 184.

female education based on the ideas brought to Bengal by English missionaries,

educationists, and administrators, but that it was greatly modified by the

patriarchal norms of traditional Hindu society. As a result, the reform-minded

Bengali Indians, says Kopf, "were moving towards certain common standards of

behavior and cultural norms."[37] Importantly, the new class thought that education

was the route to establishing such norms. "The school is the one gate to the

society of the *bhadralok,*"[38] stated the Bengali *Report*. It is now a platitude to say

that education defines *bhadralok* status.[39]

The upper-caste Hindu-ness of the *bhadralok* (and hence *bhadramahilā*) is

emphasized by almost every influential author on middle class Bengali Indians

writing in the twentieth century. Examples include Misra, who in 1961 wrote

that:

> *bhadralok* (respectable people) had been a peaceful people, for they had
> benefitted most from the early expansion of education and limited
> opportunity for employment. The *bhadralok* consisted of Brahmans,
> Kaysthas, and Vaidyas, three of the higher castes of Bengal. From the
> peculiar land system known as patni tenure they were more interwoven
> with the landed classes than the English-educated Indians of the other
> provinces.[40]

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[37]David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, 128
[38]Bengali *Report* (1928), quoted in Broomfield,
[39]See T. Bhattacharya for an explanation how and why literacy and education became the primary signifiers
of the *bhadralok*.
[40] Misra, 393

Misra notes that the group consisted of people who benefitted from British expansion in India, and that high-caste Hindus were the primary beneficiaries. He confirms the assertion (mentioned above) that changes in land distribution increased Hindu advancement in the region, but also notes that the group of people was "peaceful" as a result. Broomfield, writing several years later (1968), noted:

> [T]he basic and most rigidly maintained distinction between *bhadra* and *abhadra*, between high and low, the respectable and the others, was the bhadralok's abstention from manual labor and their belief in the inferiority of manual occupations. This stigma attaching to physical labor was a long-enduring proscription of the three upper castes of Bengali Hindu society, Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha, from which so many of the Bhadralok were drawn that the term bhadralok was frequently used in the 19th century as a synonym for high caste.[41]

Broomfield is careful to remark that the group of people called *bhadralok* "as a whole regarded itself as 'landed.'"[42] He nevertheless generalizes from there to attach to the group a high-caste Hindu distinction, based on the idea that it was of the nature of the high-caste to abstain from physical labor. His thinking leads the reader to believe that the group was actually something like a new Hindu caste based on a shared interest in obtaining land rents.

This emphasis changed slightly with the publication in 1970 of Mukherjee's widely read essay, "Class, Caste, and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-1838," which underscores

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[41] Broomfield, 6.
[42] Ibid.

the internal complexity of the *bhadralok* class. He admits that Muslims, despite being a

marginal presence, were among the *bhadralok* class and were called the "Mughal

merchants."[43] The Muslims, he says, "failed to produce an administrative or commercial

middle class" in the beginning of the nineteenth century,

> not because they were averse to English education, or because they were
> dispossessed by as a community by the new administration (it only
> dispossessed a section of that community), not because the English
> deliberately discouraged the introduction of English education among
> them, but because the vast majority of Muslims had neither the inclination
> nor the skill required for the type of administrative posts open to the
> Indians.[44]

Mukherjee implies that Muslims could be considered a part of the respectable class, but

Muslims with the necessary skills were few in number.

Mukherjee classifies the political idioms of the *bhadralok* into two categories, the

"moderns" and the "traditionalists," categories that accurately reflect the ideological

trends of the *bhadralok*.[45] On the one hand were those who emphasized the exclusive

nature of the group as Hindu (not Western, progressive, Muslim, Christian, etc); on the

other, those who advocated reform for Bengali society via "agitation through the press,

public meetings, and petitions to settle public issues."[46] These latter Indians "were

concerned with English education, *sati*, the right of Indians to sit as jurors, the defense of

private property, and the demand for a better position for Indians in the British India

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[43]Mukherjee, 129.
[44]Ibid., 129.
[45]Ibid., 115.
[46]Ibid.

administration."[47] The traditionalists formed associations based on pre-existing social

institutions such as marriage, ritual purity, and inheritance.[48] Within this categorization,

some of the confusion about the identity of the *bhadralok* may be put to rest, particularly

for the case of the Muslims, some of whom fit the description of Mukherjee's modern,

urban Indian.

It is also important to see that while the distinction between the traditionalists and

modernists is useful and correct, the two idioms in which the *bhadralok* operated were

not mutually exclusive. Mukherjee stresses that the highly conservative *bhadralok* were

most active in politics, especially educational politics, and took interest in modernization

of the sciences and in a modern, capitalist economy.[49] Thus, a person could (and people

did) declare that membership in *bhadralok* was based on hereditary association of an

essentially caste-based Hindu-ness, while at the same time participate in public debates

that involved and even required interaction with people outside their prescribed caste-

based group identity. Examples of this phenomenon abound, and infighting within the

bhadra community was common.[50] Debates often centered on the question of acceptance

of *chotolok* (small, classless, or unrespectable people) into their distinctly *bhadra* social

institutions. In fact, this debate characterizes much of the *bhadra* public persona and is

well recorded in written media of the period. From 1830 onward, the Hindu *bhadralok*

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[47]Ibid.
[48]Mukherjee, 116.
[49]Ibid., 146.
[50]See Kopf, chapters 2 and 3 for a detailed analysis.

commanded many of the Bengali, Persian, Nagari, and English schools, as well as print newspapers and journals.[51]

David Kopf has made important contributions to the subject and is widely read. However, Kopf's book on the Brahmo Samaj, for all practical purposes, equates the Brahmo Samaj and its members with the new middle class in colonial Bengal. He claims that the British Orientalists linked the regional elite with the "dynamic civilization of Europe, and contributed to the formation of a new Indian Middle class."[52] His book is a history of the Brahmo Samaj, changing ideas, self-image, and the history of their various socio-political exploits in British India. His intent was certainly not to present Brahmos or the *bhadra* people as a closed group or as necessarily Hindu. The presentation is nevertheless striking and continues to influence writings on middle class identity in Bengal.

Swapna M. Banerjee's work has also been useful for understanding the formation of the Hindu middle class culture of nineteenth century Bengal. She explains how the 'respectable/gentleman/gentlewoman' (*bhadralok/bhadramahilā*) identity arose simultaneously with the construction of the urban lower class, the *chotolok*. She stresses that the development and livelihood of the *bhadralok* depended greatly on oppositional rhetoric that ascribed negative attributes to *chotolok,* rendering the latter the natural,

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[51]Mukherjee, 144.
[52]Kopf, 42.

subordinate "other."[53] S. M. Banerjee is careful to consider Muslims as others in

view of their capacity as domestic workers as *chotolok*. The *bhadralok*, she

claims, "located themselves 'below the aristocracy of the dewans and banians[54]

but above the lesser folk'—the working class from countryside and town who

mostly belonged to lower castes or Muslim religion."[55] Her analysis is also partly

based on the linguistic character of the *bhadralok* population. The Bengali

language of the *bhadralok* became increasingly Anglicized and Sanskritized. It

"evolved a highly stylized form which was divorced from the experiences of the

masses, consisting of peasants, artisans, workers, and urban poor, the majority of

whom were Muslims and low castes."[56]

     According to Sumanta Banerjee's "Marginalization of Women's Popular

Culture in 19th Century Bengal" Vaishnavas, singers about Vishnu and his

incarnation (Krishna), were also considered *chotolok* by many of the *bhadralok*.

The sensuality and eroticism in the songs about Krishna and Radha represented a

set of mores fundamentally antagonistic to those of the *bhadralok*. Banerjee

recounts how the *bhadralok* debated whether members of this *chotolok* group

should be allowed to attend the *bhadralok* schools or teach their children. He

quotes several *bhadralok*-run papers that made it one of their primary goals to

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[53]S.M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articualting Middle Class Identity in Colonial Bengal*, 3.
[54]Mukherjee labels *banyans* "*abhijat bhadralok.*"
[55]S.M. Banerjee, 5.
[56]Ibid., 7.

draw boundaries between the *bhadralok* and everyone else. The *bhadra/choto*

division was articulated through the press, and it was also manifest in the

organization of Bengali schools:

> There is a normal school in Dhaka; but the majority of the trainees are
> Vaishnavites. We are not insulting them, but let us remember that people
> have no respect for Vaishnavite women…if they therefore do not send
> their daughters to be taught by such Vaishnavite women, we should not be
> surprised. Women of this type cannot educate girls who are expected to
> grow up to embellish their homes, provide happiness to their husbands and
> become ideals for the children.[57]

Hindu *bhadramahilā* had problems with actresses in the *bhadralok* theatres

because they "posed a constant threat to the *bhadralok* confidence about their own

wives and daughters."[58] Actresses were some of few literate women accustomed

to publicity in Bengal during the rise of female education in the mid nineteenth

century, and were thus options as teachers for daughters in need of instruction

from women. **(**It was considered inappropriate for respectable women to break

purdah and appear in public before men.) The *bhadramahilā* expressed great

anxiety over allowing such people to enter their social circles**.**

Tithi Bhattacharya's work *The Sentinels of Culture,* also tells how

explicitly exclusive some influential *bhadralok* were, particularly with respect to

their views about education. Extreme examples are the enrollment policies of the

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[57]*Somaprakash*, c. 1866, quoted in S. Banerjee, "The Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in 19th
Century Bengal," 154.
[58]S. Banerjee, 156.

Hindu College and the Sanskrit College in Calcutta. By 1853, the discriminatory policy of the major schools and universities in the province was acknowledged, as was the huge deficit of funds and education for the lower castes, classes, and poor. The issue was first brought to the attention of the Education Council in connection to the possibility of Muslim education within these institutions, but quickly became serious when several students left the Hindu College on account of the admittance of a son of a prostitute.[59] In 1854, the Government officially ended support to schools that maintained undemocratic acceptance policies. The leaders of the Hindu College and the Sanskrit college were shocked by the suggestion of an open policy, and the reactions to this new policy were indicative of the leaders' unwillingness to adjust to its introduction. Once the Hindu College was renamed the Presidency College, several important *bhadralok* leaders resigned from the administration, including the Maharaja of Burdwan and Kumar Tagore.[60] The result of the open policy was a rise in the cost of tuition from Rs. 5 to Rs. 10, which prohibited the poor from accepting admission. Finally, to ensure the Hindu-ness of the premier educational institutions, the scholarships designated for those unable to afford tuition were given to students in the junior

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[59]T. Bhattacharya, 176.
[60]T. Bhattacharya, 177.

department of the College or to the Hindu School, ensuring that the money went only to respectable Hindu students.[61]

Defending the Status Quo

What becomes clear from Hindu *bhadralok* discourse about education, and particularly, whether or not the community should consider its doors open to members of other social groups, is the contradiction underlining *bhadra* identity. T. Bhattacharya succinctly states that

> [w]hile the discourse on education or *shiksha* persistently separated it from wealth and material concerns, and emphasized democracy and opportunity, in actuality it was very much dependent on the individual's class background or gender as the case may be.[62]

Many *bhadralok* maintained a façade of modern, democratic politics that was ideologically and officially (i.e., when it was in their best interest, or before the British) an open network of associations based on shared codes of behavior and sentiments. However, an examination of the *bhadralok's* private (domestic) and public (professional) lives reveals quite the opposite. Many Hindu *bhadralok* viciously supported a closed policy of membership to their community via the support of institutions, such as schools, which drew clear boundaries between Muslims and Hindus, lower and upper class. The Hindu *bhadralok* thereby remained separate from those whom they considered low-class people. They

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[61]T. Bhattacharya, 178.
[62]Ibid., 184.

were "totally opposed to granting education to the lower orders due to the fact that higher education would render them too proud to follow their traditional professions."[63]   In short, the *bhadralok* defended the status quo.

The history discussed is, however, based on writings about a small section of Hindu society, most of them converts to *Brahmoism* from Hinduism in the mid-nineteenth century. Most authors acknowledge the socio-economic diversity of the *bhadralok* community. For example, many of the authors mentioned above suggest that the *bhadralok* differed from one another greatly in terms of their ideas about how to "progress" as modern Bengalis. Most notable for their careful rendering of the diverse and therefore open nature of the *bhadralok* are Broomfield, Kopf, and Mukherjee. The mention of Muslims in the aforementioned authors' works has amounted to mere lip service, however, and does not provide insight into the question of Muslim middle class women's identities. Thus M. Sarkar is correct to say that these works and numerous less nuanced works on the subject either intentionally or unintentionally omit information about Muslims. The result has been that scholarly work has indirectly "occluded" Muslim women from the history of Bengal. Examples contributing to this erasure of Muslim women in particular include Ghulam

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[63]T. Bhattacharya, 183.

Murshid's *Reluctant Debutante*,[64] Manisha Roy's *Bengali Women*, Malvika

Karlekar's *Voices from Within*, and the books by Judith Walsh: *Domesticity in

Colonial India, Growing Up in British India*, and *How to Be the Goddess of Your

Home*. The trend is thus reflected in English historical writings about women in

nineteenth-century Bengal, particularly on the concept of the class group called

bhadramahilā.

In the next section, I aim to show that middle and upper class Muslims

occupied a similar socio-economic position as the Hindus at the turn of the

century. They paralleled the Hindus in terms of their historical situation as a

rising literate middle class, and competed with Hindus for this class position.

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[64]G. Murshid actually used Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's writings in his bibliography, which accounts for
his inclusion of Muslims as *bhadramahilā*, however he does not discuss Hossain or other Muslims in his
book.

Part II

History Revisited

In this section I focus on how the Muslims followed a pattern of economic growth and social awareness similar to the Hindu middle class. The primary sources will include works about the formation of the Bengali education system as it pertains to Muslims, and the government's role in creating this system. In the remaining sections, I will return to the question of Muslim *bhadralok* and *bhadramhila,* and set this question against the background of other debates about Bengali Muslim identity. I also examine the intellectual background that has influenced the construction of educated middle class women's identities and the various ways in which Hindu and Muslim *bhadramahilā* expressed themselves as the new respectable class of Bengalis. In the final section I explain how language politics both complicates and reinforces the claim that middle class Bengali Muslim women, by virtue of their forms of self-expression, were *bhadramahilā*.

The Historical Background

In an important event in 1765, Shah Alam transferred *Dewani* (the right to collect revenue) to the East India Company. This left the former Muslim leaders of Mughal heritage in a position of political advantage over any other social group in India. The contract stated that Persian would remain the official language of the courts and the administration, and that Muslim Law (a new form of *Shariat*)

would continue as the official rule of the judiciary.[65]   Soon after, Warren

Hastings established the Calcutta Madrasah in order train officials in Muslim Law

to work for the East India Company.[66] Hastings considered it expedient to place

powers associated with policing and the Court of Justice in the hands of Muslim

officials, many of whom were previously employed under the *Bengal Nawab*

(Mughal governor). The Calcutta Madrasah, he explained, should cultivate that

"species of erudition" in the Arabic and Persian languages capable of

administering such a "complicated system of laws."[67] According to M. Azizul

Huque, the Madrasah was the first Muslim educational institution started by the

British, and "for a period of about a century, the progress of Moslem education in

this Presidency is bound up with the history of this institution."[68]

In 1835, however, an English education system was implemented, which

meant that government funding would go almost exclusively to training Bengalis

to speak English. Then, in 1837, Persian was abolished as the language of

Judicial and Revenue Proceedings,[69] rendering obsolete the purpose of the

Calcutta Madrasah. For years after this pivotal change, the Calcutta Madrasah

wavered between a traditional Islamic syllabus that included the study of *Hadith*

and *Tafsir* on the one hand, and on the other hand, a secular course of study that

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[65]Ibrahimy, *Reports on Islamic Education and Madrasah Education in Bengal (1917),* v. IV 34.
[66]Ibid.
[67]Ibid., 34-35.
[68]Huque, *History and Problems of Moslem Education in Bengal (1917)*, 6.
[69]Ibrahimy, *Reports on Islamic Education and Madrasah Education in Bengal (1917)*, v. III, 32.

would have included English among the sciences. The school did not ever teach

Bengali, the vernacular; neither did it include subjects such as history and

geography in the curriculum.[70]

Both Huque and Ibrahimy focus on the inconsistency with which the

British administration treated Muslim Indians, and they cite many instances where

official policy clearly favored liberal Hindu education.[71] "The Bengal Education

Department," states Huque, "may be said to be a Hindu Institution."[72] In 1811,

Lord Minto wrote an official statement expressing concern about the decline of

oriental learning. He considered public schooling a great government

responsibility, and made extensive plans for Hindu and Muslim education. Under

Lord Minto, however, the revenue for education was spent entirely on English and

Sanskrit education (and this despite cries of protest from members of the Hindu

and Muslim communities, such as Ram Mohan Roy, about the impracticality of

Sanskrit learning).[73] According to most accounts, and for the above reasons,

Muslims "fell behind" the Hindus. During the time, only two junior scholars

graduated from the Madrasah, Abdul Lateef and Waheedoon Nubee (at a cost of

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[70]Ibrahimy, v. IV, 38.
[71]See also Rafiuddin Ahmed for a similar opinion of British treatment of Muslims, 18-20.
[72]Huque, 36.
[73]Huque, 16.

over Rs. 100,000).[74]

Fortunately for many Muslims, the British were becoming increasingly aware of the need to establish new loyalties, as the radical peasants of rural Bengal and the increasingly nationalistic Hindu *bhadralok* directly threatened the peace of British rule.[75] In 1854, the government initiated efforts to secularize schools (except Christian schools, which were excused from the secular requirement). The effects of this policy were negligible, and it was not until 1871, when the Resolution on Muslim Education was passed, that modern-minded middle-class Muslims were given opportunity, in the form of quotas and incentives, to attend formal government schools.[76] Muslims were recruited into these schools from aristocratic families, but also from rural gentry and the new landed farming class.[77]

A series of conferences were held in order to remedy the inequality of education in Bengal, and government administrators pointed to madrasah education and the treatment of women in Islam as the primary reasons for the "backwardness" and "degradation" of Islamic society. In the Earle Conference of 1907-1908, Archdale Earle, the Director of Public Instruction, suggested that the

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[74]Huque, 18.
[75]Jones, *The New Cambridge History of India,* Vol. III.1, 23.
[76]T. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871-1977*, 61-64.

[77]R. Ahmed, 20

madrasahs begin to incorporate English into the system in order to become recognized within the official English Education System. Despite being a government-initiated project, the Calcutta Madrasah remained outside the purview of the official University system on account of its syllabus. As a result, no graduates from the Madrasah were recruited into government service. Earle also recommended that the Madrasah include literature, law, and logic in the curriculum.[78] If these subjects were included, the students could take Title Examinations to enter the University system. This exam would reflect the purpose and content of the Sanskrit Title Examination, which students at the Sanskrit College, Fort William, and Hindu College had been taking for years.

Following this conference, the Madrasah Committee held meetings up through 1913, in which the Government pressed the need to reform the Madrasah, as it was currently "ill-suited for government requirements."[79] Despite the unanimous desire of liberal Muslims to enact reform,[80] as was expressed throughout the Earle conferences, little was done to actually change the existing institutions that were found to be poorly adapted to changing times. This was due in part to "the disingenuous conduct" of administrators who mismanaged the

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[78]Ibrahimy, v. IV, 39.
[79]Ibid.
[80]Ibid., 50-51.

Calcutta Madrasah and thereby contributed to its failure.[81] Many opposed liberal reform of madrasah education in general, and fought to maintain the Islamic character of the schools despite demands from within the community and the government to secularize the institutions. Members of the urban elite disagreed about what languages to fund and to teach in the schools. A bitter rivalry developed in the Calcutta Madrasah between the Arabic and the Anglo-Persian departments. The British Indian government was convinced that the Arabic department, and hence the entire madrasah system, was breeding discontent among Muslims, the effects of which were palpable and in some cases involved violence in the countryside. The communities of Muslims living in the rural areas and in the countryside held a wide range of differing opinions about educational reform (and a broad range of other subjects). Conflict escalated into a debate over claims to authentic Islam, and intensified further after a series of economic changes swept the country at the turn of the century.   The madrasah system, while remaining somewhat intact, lost most of its government support.

The situation began to turn around for Muslims at the end of the nineteenth century, which was marked by a series of economic changes that influenced population growth in the rural regions, and that led to increased migration to the cities. R. Ahmed attributes the economic boom to a rise in the

[81]Sanial, "History of the Calcutta Madrassa," 104

price of rice and jute.[82] This change also influenced a drastic surge in population

that augmented a process of subinfeudation, which in turn led to the loss of many

of the rentiers' (who were high-caste Hindus) landholdings. One major effect of

these changes was the rise of new social classes among Muslims. The remaining

inequality among the masses also fueled tensions, and groups of highly motivated

peasants became upwardly mobile and moved into cities or other more densely

populated areas as a result.[83] This was marked by participation of Tariqi-i-

Muhammadiya, Sadiqi, Faraizis and other organized Muslim peasant groups in

opposition to the Permanent Settlement Act, the indigo trade, and lack of access

to education and property rights.[84] The Bengali Faraizis and the Tariqa-i-

Muhammadiya proposed "Islamic revival" that was characterized by conformity

with an Arab form of Islam.[85] The Faraizi leaders engaged in vociferous social

and political projects, and from the 1830's through the early part of the twentieth

century, they directly challenged the Hindu landlords and politicians. Their

leaders preached in Bengali, however, and as a result were able to attract large

numbers of followers. Under Dudu Miyan, the group fought local landlords for

rights to rented properties by declaring that taxes on land were "both illegal and

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[82]Eaton, "Who Are the Bengal Muslims? Conversion and Islamization in Bengal," 20.
[83]T. Murshid, 44.
[84]T. Murshid, 50-54.

[85] R. Ahmed, 15.

immoral."[86] Having been arrested for creating disturbances in the region, Dudu

Miyan was tried in the High Court, but he had popular support and attracted the

sympathies of the British government. He won his trial for the Faraizis against

the *zamindars* in 1847. The Faraizis gained public recognition through the trial,

and his disciples (such as Naya Miyan) continued to use the British political and

legal system to obtain more rights for peasants.[87]

A more accurate appraisal of the historical political situation is thus not

that the British were intentionally anti-Muslim or pro-Hindu in their

administration, especially since the majority of Muslims lived in rural areas of

Bengal and were not in contact with the British. The reality was that the British

worked according to certain (mistaken) suppositions about Islam as a monolithic

community in India; they were therefore not prepared to accommodate a group of

people divided over the means to "progress." In reality, there were many

"authentic" versions of Islam and Hinduism vying for popularity and currency

within the British political and educational system.   The British simply did not

concern themselves with rural populations until they had to do so in response to

political unrest. According to Rafiuddin Ahmed,

> [w]hen the British conquered Bengal in the eighteenth century, they
> encountered a Muslim population almost entirely rural in background, and
> not much different from their fellow Hindu neighbors in dress, manners,

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[86]Jones, 20-21.
[87]Jones, 22.

names, occupations, rituals, and practices. What they missed, however, was the growing sensitivity of the relatively articulate sections of the Muslim society, even in rural areas, toward a particular version of Islam. British rule did not hurt the Muslim peasantry of Bengal any more than it did the Hindu, but the rule created amongst the Muslims a sense of deprivation that was uncommon to the Hindus.[88]

The "particular version of Islam" Ahmed refers to above is probably the Wahabi or the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah launched by the Islamic leader Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and his pupil Titu Mir, which spread through rural Bengal in the late nineteenth century and promoted distinctive styles of dress and speech (decidedly un-Bengali and un-western) as the hallmarks of religious identification.[89] Rafiuddin Ahmed suggests that it was not until after the late 1860s, or after information about this group and the "Wahabi trials" were popularized, that Bengalis were able to form institutional ties and articulate a sense of emotional attachment to something called the Islamic World beyond the disparate Bengali rural and semi-urban communities.[90] In other words, an explicitly anti-colonial identity called "Bengali Muslim" did not even begin to emerge in Bengal until the late nineteenth century.

After these uprisings had subsided (early twentieth century), similar Islamic transitional movements were led by upper-class Muslims, the *'ulama* and the *ashrāf,* who, like the militant movements emerging from the countryside,

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[88]R. Ahmed, 14-15.

[89]Jones, 22-23.
[90]R. Ahmed, 5.

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emphasized to varying degrees an Islamic revival through drastic social reforms.[91]

These elite Muslim groups in Bengal were the literate, articulate class of Muslim

Bengalis —a class more accommodating toward modern, liberal (British) needs

and sensibilities. It is thus not surprising that, despite the failure of official

government policy to benefit Bengali Muslims, education (including English

education) among Muslims was on the rise at the turn of the century.[92]

Muslim families in favor of higher education wanted their sons to attend

either the newly formed elite Presidency College, Aligarh University, or a school

in London in order to obtain the best careers. At the turn of the century, these

institutions once again opened the door for Muslims to higher-paying jobs and

political networks. For example, Fazlul Huq was able to attend Presidency

College despite having no great family connections or claims to large properties.

Based on merit alone he and several other Muslims became significantly active in

post-1905 partition politics and served as an example of moderate politics

directed almost entirely at the British government.[93] Also during this time,

Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrasah spearheaded campaigns in favor

of girls' education. General support of "western" education grew as well, which

led to the realization of educational opportunities and schools for women all over

[91]Jones, 57.
[92]Ibrahimy, v. III, 41.

[93]Broomfield, 63-65.

Bengal.

A few extremely dedicated women set up the first schools for Muslim women in Bengal, but a lack of support from the male half of the Muslim community contributed to the early demise of the schools. In 1824, a Christian missionary, Mrs. Charles Leonard, opened a Christian girls school in Dhaka, but it failed upon her death. Amin notes that Dhaka was a culturally rich area where many wealthy *zamindars* began small projects for Muslim girls education, but these never grew to the status of government recognized institutions.[94] Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani began a school for Muslim girls in 1872 in Comilla, but Faizunnessa never entered the school in person, and no Muslim girls attended the school for almost 30 years after its foundation.[95] The reason was that *sharif* Muslim families would not allow their girls to break *purdah*. The Muslim girls among the *sharif* families "could not go on foot to school with the 'ayah', and had to go in a closed carriage and wear the *burqua*."[96] In 1929, of the three hundred students at Faizunnessa, records indicate that only two were Muslim.[97] In 1897, the Muslim Girl's Madrasah was founded in Calcutta by Lady McKenzie, but it does not seem to have enrolled many students either.[98]

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[94]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 148.
[95]Ibid., 183 and 216.
[96]Ibid., 161.
[97]Ibid.
[98]Ibid., 147

In 1878 the Government formally opened and funded the Eden School in Lakshmibazar, Dhaka. It was one of few schools that Muslim women attended which would survive the political unrest that characterized the period. It was initially set up by Dhaka Brahmos, led by Nabakanta and Brajasundar Mitra, but the Brahmos handed it over to the government within a few months. In 1880, of the153 students at the Eden School, only one was Muslim. By 1911, however, the number of Muslim pupils rose to 25.[99] Between the years 1907 and 1912, twenty-four English secondary schools existed for girls in Bengal.[100] In 1911, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein founded the Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls, which Amin describes as "a cosmopolitan school for girls of her community."[101] Finally, in 1939, a school of higher education for Muslim women, the Lady Brabourne College, was founded. The Brabourne College was set up in response to demand for education coming from Muslim women.[102] The school accepted non-Muslim students, but it maintained hostels and scholarships designated solely for Muslim students.[103]

Social Implications

Many scholars agree that the government resolutions and institutional changes supporting a specifically Muslim education were not acts of democratic-

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[99]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 152.
[100]Ibid.
[101]Ibid., 156.
[102]Amin, "The Early Muslim *Bhadramahilā*," 147.
[103]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 168-169.

based generosity on the part of the British. Rather, they were part of an elaborate effort to temper rural insurgency and build up competition among the increasingly iconoclastic Hindu *bhadralok*.[104] The British educational agenda was primarily (if not strictly) a function of government need for a more efficient rule in an increasingly bellicose British India. It was a part of the British plan to "divide and rule" the Indians. The government's involvement in Bengali social reformation was, nevertheless, historically important. It reflects the English government's willingness to work with the demands of peasant and middle-class Muslims in order to create opportunities for new working class Bengalis to advance socially and politically.

One important effect if the post-1857 British political strategy was that it helped to solidify "the development of political consciousness by religious communities"[105] among Bengali Indians. In particular, it encouraged the diverse groups of Bengali Muslims to organize in "modern" ways. Most importantly, interaction and communication between the classes of the urban *ashrāf*, the *'ulema,* and mobile rural peasantry increased as a result of all the aforementioned changes. These changes were characterized more concretely by marriage ties, living together in new localities (especially cities), and the spread of Muslim

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[104]Ibid.
[105]Hardy, *The Indian Muslims*, 116.

anjumans (literary, social and political associations).[106] For example, a group of "progressives" from the Dhaka College began an *anjuman*, the *Musalman Suhrid Sammilani*, which promoted *andarmahal* (or *zenana*) education under the broader aim of restoring the degenerated Muslim society in Bengal. The organization created a syllabus for women based on that of the Calcutta University, and handed out books and distributed work for women in the cities of Dhaka, Barisal, Mymensingh, and Calcutta. Thirty-seven students took the Sammilani exams between the years 1883 and 1905, when the Sammilani ceased to exist.[107] Publications also grew along with a widening reader base. Journals and periodicals that published during the first quarter of the twentieth century included the following: *Islam-pracharak, Mihir o Sudhakar, Kohinur, Pracharak, Nu-al-Imam, Nabanur, Al-Eslām, Islam-darshan, Bangiya-Musalman-Sahitya-patrika, Saogāt, Moslem Bharat, Dhumketu, Choltan, Samyabadi, Sariyate Eslam, Gana bani, Masik Mohammadi, Sikha, Saptahik Saogāt,* and *Moyajjin*.[108]

Eventually, middle and lower-class Muslims entered into competition with Hindus and other educated indigenous groups such as the Parsis, Punjabi Sikhs, the *ashrāf,* and the *'ulema* for a diminishing number of working positions under British rule. After the partition of Bengal in 1905, the Muslim-dominated capital of East Bengal, Dhaka, was created. Many jobs moved from Calcutta to Dhaka,

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[106]R. Ahmed, 20.
[107]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 150-151.
[108]See M.N. Islam for this list of periodicals, pp. 1-2.

to the benefit of Muslims and to the disenfranchisement of many Hindus.[109] The

demand for white-collar professionals fell drastically in Calcutta[110] and increased

sharply in Dhaka. This shift of power from Calcutta to Dhaka (from Hindus to

Muslims) intensified competition and polarization among communities trying to

survive under British rule.[111] The competition exacerbated negative press and

opinion about anyone threatening the status quo of upper-caste Hindu dominance

in the region. It is for this reason that late nineteenth century and early twentieth

century Bengali newspapers, pamphlets, and journals launched campaigns spear-

headed by the Hindu *bhadralok* that authors such as M. Sarkar read as decidedly

anti-Muslim.[112]

Nevertheless, the new upwardly mobile groups in need of power and

education relied on the *bhadralok* as models for change and reform. As I show

below, the content and style of the Bengali Muslim media closely approximated

the style and content of the Hindu media, especially about issues pertaining to the

role of women in Bengali society. It is not surprising that Muslim writings were

laced with both propaganda against the Hindus, Brahmos, and British, as well as

sentiments of respect and envy toward many of them. The emerging Muslim

middle class looked not only to the government and to the Muslim elite for

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[109]Minault, from a conversation on August 1, 2009.
[110]Broomfield, 32-33.

[111]R. Ahmed, 21.
[112]M. Sarkar, Chapter 2.

incentives to receive education and participate in politics, but also and primarily to that class of people that had already become a viable political force by gaining cultural and financial capital within the colonial system—the existing *bhadralok*. People of every sort in Bengal who had any amount of education, leisure, or ambition came into contact (whether through physical participation or through access to the printed word) with the Hindu and Brahmo *bhadralok* reform discourses, media, politics, and educational institutions.

The upshot of these historical events is that at the turn of the century Bengali Muslims were bound in much the same predicament that the Hindus had faced a few decades earlier. They were in the process of defining themselves anew in order to cope with changing times and pressing economic stresses under the new British colonial system. One technical difference was that for Muslims, the "Awakening" occurred several decades later. From the 1870s onward, the Bengali Muslims' "major material and ideological concern was modernization and a quest for identity."[113] Evidence for this is found in periodicals of the day, through which vociferous debates about Bengali Muslim identity were carried out. Other evidence exists in the didactic material of the period (both for women and for men), which explained how to be a good Muslim. Finally, women themselves indicate that a search for self-definition was underway. Several

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[113]Amin, "The New Woman in Literature and the Novels of Nojibur Rahman and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," 121.

periodicas that focused on the issue of women's education published Muslim women's writing about education. Among them were *Mussulman, Nabanoor, Mohammadi, Al-Eslām, Sadhana, Bulbul, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Mohammadi,* and *Saogāt*.[114]

Through a reading of these periodicals it becomes clear that Muslim women were among the many members of the middle class who were expressing themselves in unprecedented ways, albeit within the framework of the colonial system, communal politics, and according to the exigencies of the day. One of the most pressing issues for the middle class was women's position in society, just as it was for Hindus and Brahmos, whose ideas I also discuss in the next section. Education was viewed as the key to upward mobility and to maintenance of social status for all middle class people. In the next section I show that it was women who, being mostly uneducated, possessed the greatest potential to advance socially, politically, and economically via new educational opportunities and literacy. The effects that such advancement might have on the family were alarming to more traditional sectors of society, who argued against western education (and in some cases any education) for women. The Bengali social structure was based in the institution of the family, and some people thought that any change to the structure of the Bengali family unit could cause fundamental

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[114]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 112 and 122.

and potentially irreversible changes to Bengali society and lifestyle. Bengalis thus saw women's changing roles both as an opportunity for power and as a potential threat to Bengali culture. They developed educational plans that championed women's education, but that would also preserve the traditional family structure. The mainstream middle class Hindu and Muslim discourse on women's education must be seen as an adaptation to a specific historical situation in which economic factors guided and determined social reform projects.

Part III

Brahmo Discursive Influneces

By the 1840s, many influential members of the Brahmo Samaj were convinced of the merits of education for women,[115] but all the way through the 1930s, Brahmos, Hindus, and Muslims publicly debated the question, even as schools for girls slowly began to spring up. The Brahmo Samaj was viewed with utmost suspicion and hostility by the dominant community of Hindus because of their relatively radical views towards women's position in society and reform necessary to change that position.[116] These included the idea that women should be educated.[117] Brahmos, Hindus, and Muslims all tried to predict what effects education would have on women's lives, and in particular what effects social reform might have on the home and family. In 1886, as a result of differing perspectives on women's education and women's rights within the family—the institution on which women's roles as mothers and wives was founded—the Brahmo Samaj formally split. One faction espoused a "traditional" Hindu vision for women in the home and the society, while the other favored positions that centered on women's rights as individual citizens of the state.[118] The ideas of the traditional strain of Brahmoism are well-represented in words of the renowned Brahmo leader Keshub Chandra Sen, who gave a lecture to the Victoria Discussion Society in London, in which

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[115]Karlekar, *Voices from Within*, 81.
[116]See Kopf for a detailed history of violent reaction against the reform-minded Brahmos.
[117]Karlekar, 83.
[118]See Kopf, Chapter 1.

he said that Bengali women's education should be "calculated to make Indian women good wives, mothers sisters and daughters."[119] To this end, Sen founded the Victoria College.

In his book *The Brahmo Samaj and The Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind,* Kopf shows how the Brahmo version of a British Puritan ethic "resolved a youthful identity crisis and led to an adult consciousness of achievement and the responsibility of social reform."[120] Among the Hindu *bhadralok*, Brahmo ideas and organizational activities influenced almost everyone in Bengal who had access to print media, as the Brahmos were some of the first people to develop periodicals to espouse those views. Their views on women's education were particularly contagious, and can be seen in various forms in the words and actions of men and women of all classes and religions who initiated reform movements after the Brahmos. For instance, a member of the Hindu *bhadralok* stated his view about the purpose of women's education, which echoed Sen's:

> Females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adapted to men…Woman has but one resource—Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to the comfort and happiness of her husband, to look after and tend her children, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies…[121].

This view acknowledges the need for women to be educated while at the same time attempting to mollify those concerned about the potential ill-effects of women's education on traditional Bengali life.

[119]See Karlekar, 84 for notes on the conservative strain of Hindu/Brahmo thought.
[120]Kopf, xv.
[121]*Tattvabodhini Patrika*, 1880 in *Samayik Patre*, ed. Ghosh, V. p. 75, quoted in Sumanta Banerjee, 162.

According to Uma Chakravarti, the origin of this version of Hindu womanhood rests on the theory of the superiority of the Aryan race and Vedic Golden Age.[122] This theory was defended by appeal to Indo-European linguistics and racial taxonomy, but in reality it was an artificial history carefully constructed to serve the social, economic and political interests of the nationalists of the colonial period. Through this nationalist construction of history, the traditional Hindu woman was conceived of as a helpmate who, while intelligent and virtuous, was able to care for the home and family while participating in public life.[123] Her modern position as illiterate and imprisoned in the home was the result of invasion by Muslim foreigners.[124] Such explanations for the treatment of women were a necessary adaptation in order for Hindus to advance as a group under British rule, as one of the chief justifications cited by the British for their rule of India was the plight of indigenous women. The invention of a distinctly Hindu tradition served the purpose of allowing groups of indigenous Indians to preserve their dignity and customs even as they allowed women to receive some education. The Brahmos and Hindus were not the only people to invent new history and ideals, however, as Muslim reformers also drew from the past in order to create the model of the ideal woman.

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[122]Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past," 38-60.
[123]Ibid., 53-56.
[124]Ibid.

Intellectual and Cultural Construction of Bengali Muslim Women

As I have noted, middle-class Muslims at the turn of the century were in competition with Hindus and Brahmos for status in the British system. Since all three groups were adjusting to maximize their influence in the same externally imposed system, their ways of adapting have important similarities. Just as the Hindu nationalists invented traditions in order to create an ideal for women, so the Muslims invented ideals for Muslim women that were largely similar, but adapted to various tenets of Islam, rather than to a Golden Vedic Age, or to *Shastras*. It is also no surprise that the ideal woman, both for the Hindus and for the Muslims, was similar to the Victorian British woman in many respects.[125] Many Muslim men and women cited verses in the Koran directing women and men to receive education and knowledge, and in the same breath suggested that people attend lecture-styled schools and learn English. Such efforts to curry favor with the British spawned a backlash from groups like the Arab world-oriented Wahabis, who resented both British rule and those Bengalis who sought to advance within a "western" framework.

The historical position of Muslims, however, was even more complicated. Bengali *ashrāf* and middle-class Muslims historically borrowed ideas about

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[125]See Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* 15 and Amin (1994 and 1996), for discussions of Victorian relationships to the process of Indian Muslim *embourgeoisement*.

proper social etiquette for women from the *sharif* cultures of north India,[126] but

during British rule of India, the Bengali elite and middle classes drew upon at

least four newly developing schools of thought to outline a plan for the education

of women: the Deobandi, Aligharian, Brahmo, and the British Victorian. Amin

simplifies the problem by saying that Muslims were polarized into two groups:

the "high born *ashrāf* (who claimed their origin from the distant Middle East,

Iran, and Turkey), and the great majority of indigenous extraction, the *atraf*."[127]

She goes on to claim that Muslim reformers, including Muslim *bhadramahilā*,

had two primary sources through which to negotiate a new identity: "the Brahmo

reformist agenda, so close at hand, and the Middle-Eastern reinterpretation of

Islam."[128] She claims that Muslim middle class Bengalis are best understood as

sharif bhadralok—of the modernist Islamic trend to interpret Islamic scriptures in

"light of rationalist-utilitarian principles."[129] Given ideological differences, such

as views toward education and language, Amin fits her subjects into the

framework of the *bhadralok* rather than *abhadralok* or *ashrāf*.   Middle class

Bengali Muslims were the "cultured rich," but separate from the feudal

aristocratic families, the *ashrāf*, because of their modernism, i.e. their belief in

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[126]Amin, "The Changing World of Bengali Muslim Women, 122-123.
[127]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 2.
[128]Ibid., 4.
[129]Ibid.

women's emancipation and education.[130]

When the complex of identity formation is understood in terms of social-symbolic interaction, the problem for the rising Bengali middle classes may be seen as "one of acceptance and recognition"[131] of the new middle class by the orthodox community of Muslims. This community, deriving ideas about Islam from outside of India, prescribed a version of Islam whose symbols were the Persian and Arabic languages and a certain dress style almost totally alien to the local Bengali language and culture. As noted above, the majority of the Muslims in Bengal were peasants from the rural areas and had almost no contact with the Islamic world beyond Bengal until after 1870. The non-*ashrāf* spoke vernacular languages and belonged to a cult of Allah connected to the Chishti order of Indian Sufism.[132] Non-*ashrāf* Bengali Muslims were, by many people's accounts, indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbors.[133] Thus the question of which Islamic symbols were to be considered and adopted as the new "authentic" signs of Islamic community was unresolved both for the peasants of the rural areas and for the Muslim middle class. The terms of the negotiation carried a special

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[130]Ibid., 5.

[131]R. Ahmed, 13.
[132]Eaton, 44.
[133]Ibid; see also various missionary accounts, such as Julius Richter *A History of Missions in India*, pp. 400-401. The etic perspectives are valuable in terms of their candidness about issues such as religio-cultural hybridity. The inability of missionaries to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims caused missionaries great difficulty as they were trying to understand "the heathens" in terms of their own religious systems in order to successfully convert them to Christianity.

weight for members of the new educated Muslim middle class who had much to gain or lose as a result of class and religious identification. The symbols available to them for fashioning a public persona were either foreign to a popular yet localized indigenous version of Islam (deemed anti-Islamic by the orthodox *'ulema*) or antagonistic to the common understanding of what it meant to be Bengali (Hindu). In other words, the middle class Muslims had to lose something if they were to gain something. The question is which of these aspects of Muslim culture they garnered, and which they discarded.

The Deobandis promoted ideas that were geographically widespread and common among members of the lower and middle classes. They were against the decaying Mughal cultural forms of Islam and were especially against the Aligarhians, who tended to champion liberal ideas such as modernization and western styles of education. Their *'ulema* promoted an Islamic variety of education that ensured the reproduction of Muslim culture as distinct from that of Hindus, British, and Christians. They called for a purification of domestic rituals and for an increase of knowledge of scriptural Islam (as opposed to folk customs) in order to nurture individual piety and the solidarity of the greater Muslim community.[134] The Deobandis (despite being ideologically egalitarian) aimed to legislate women's actions and their sexuality via the advocacy of certain types of

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[134]Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 62.

education based on scripture and social reform.[135] The foremost example is the

reformer Maulana Ashrāf Ali Thanavi, whose main concern was to preserve

women's honor and enhance family status through women.[136] He wrote

specifically in favor of patriarchal familial relations and against women entering

into public places such as mosques for any reason—religious or social.[137]

Thanavi's idealized lady was an imitation of the Prophet, albeit with added

social duties and restrictions. For example, Thanavi was against women's

customs of wearing revealing clothing,[138] and in a section called "On Women

Wearing Very Sheer Clothing" he wrote, "many women wear clothes in name but

in fact are naked. Such women will not go to paradise, nor will they even catch a

whiff of its perfume."[139] Faith, he claimed, required that women be modest; an

immodest woman was known to have an intrinsically bad character and would be

damned to hell.[140] The consequence was that the Deobandis rarely supported

formal institutionalized education for women. Where they did provide women's

formal schooling, it was achieved at the price of embittering a good majority of

the Muslim community.

The Aligarhians also considered aspects of Mughal *sharif* culture in need

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[135]Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 63; See also Amin, "The New Woman in Literature," 123-125.
[136]B. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*, 40.
[137]B. Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*, 206.
[138]Ibid., 185.
[139]Ibid., 211.
[140]Ibid., 214.

of reform, but they were decidedly against the "regressive" movements of the

Deobandis.[141] Those tending toward the Aligarhian model preferred a

"liberalized and rationalized Islam" that captured "the imaginations of the better-

off urban dwellers and rural literate."[142] The Aligarhians were greatly influenced

by the political discourses of the British and the Brahmos, from whom much of

the ideological content of the Bengali Muslim debate about the nature of women's

education derives. For instance, while remaining firm patrons of Urdu, Persian,

and Arabic learning, the Aligarhians promoted English education via the

establishment of lecture halls, schools, and a large university.[143] Many of the

women celebrated in Bengali literature and didactic material for women were

actually a cross between the perfect lady described by authors like Thanavi, and

the ideal type of the Aligarhian school and Brahmo schools.[144] For example,

Rashidul Khairi (1865-1936) described the ideal image of a woman as a capable,

pious and chaste heroine who worked doggedly at home and bore suffering in

silence.[145] What is consistent in the Bengali Muslim reformist literature about the

ideal Bengali Muslim woman is the emphasis on the role of women as duty-bound

homemakers. It was a view of women's roles that was already popular in Bengali

culture; the reformist literature made only slight modifications to an already

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[141]Amin, "The New Woman in Literature," 122.
[142]Ibid., 123.
[143]Minault, *The Extended* Family, 8.
[144]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 124.
[145]Ibid.; see also Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, for a more detailed analysis of the ways reform discourse shaped Muslim educational proposals.

existing ideal.

The Discourse on the Home

The traditional Muslim journal, *Al-Eslām* published an article by Sheikh

Abdur Rahman about modern educated women in which Rahman declared that

the rightful place of women was in the home, caring for children. He warns in the

same article that education could have certain negative effects on women. His

ideas were influential and well represent the paradigm of the excellent Muslim

lady, or *bhadramahilā*, who was known in popular literature of the period as

Grihalakshmi:

> Of late one finds *mahilās* [sic] who pride themselves as being educated,
> who rise at eight in the morning to a cup of tea and biscuits, shudder at the
> thought of the kitchen, idle their time over clothes and cosmetics, who laze
> on an easy chair, hair unbound, novel in hand or some embroidery, pay no
> heed to elders and love to venture outside the home instead of staying in
> the *andar*—what name shall we give them? They are certainly not the
> *Grihalakshmi* [sic] or the shade giving foliage of the Muslim home.[146]

Rahman's view is that the novel-reading, educated woman (*mahilā*) is lazy and is

opposed to the ideal view of womanhood conceived of as the goddess of the home

(or *andarmahal*), Lakshmi. Rahman drew his ideas from local Bengali culture

and most likely from a popular didactic manual for women by the Bankim

Chandra Chatterji-inspired writer Girijāprasanna Rāycaudhurī, titled *The Lakshmī*

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[146]Sheikh Abdur Rahman, "Shikshar Bhitti" ("The Basis of Education"), quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 189.

of the Home. The Lakshmī of the Home focuses primarily on women's roles within the family and teaches women proper social behavior as defined by domestic space. From the book one learns that idolatry and romantic love (*bhālobāsā*) are strictly forbidden, and that such qualities are the effects of selfishness and sin. Women acquired these bad habits where they left the *andarmahal*, and especially in schools. They were also the products of indulgence in novels and plays. Women should take joy only in the family, the household, and most of all in dharma, which supersedes all forms of personal happiness.[147] The point of women's education was thus not for women's personal happiness, whatever that might consist in, but was directed to benefit the husband, the family, the nation, and the entire universe.

According to Judith Walsh, all Bengali men desired to have a household *Lakshmi,* who was the goddess of wealth and prosperity.[148] More accurately, men wanted women to be Lakshmis in order to bring their husbands wealth and prosperity. In Bengali society, women were generally considered a separate and inferior class than men, and possessed dangerous powers and impulses.[149] Since many thought that the purpose of a woman's life was merely to have children (or sons), custom set controls on women's sexual activity. Parents were bound by duty to ensure a daughter marry at or before puberty, and to make a husband

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[147]Walsh, *How to be the Goddess of Your Home*, 95-100.
[148]Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, 36.
[149]Ibid.

cohabitate with his wife. The idea was to prevent women from being sexually promiscuous; the result was that women were quartered inside the home (*zenana* or *andarmahal*) where they were bred and educated to be wives and to bear sons.[150] The model of the goddess was thus used in an effort to maintain the status quo of male dominance, or to convince women of the high merits of a life lived for the benefits of male members of the family.

Rahman, quoted above, shared the values of men such as Girijāprasanna Rāycaudhurī who were simultaneously writing didactic literature for Hindu women. Rahman's willingness to cite a Hindu goddess as a role model for Muslim women supports the view that a woman's status as a proper lady, a *bhadramahilā,* is in practical terms more a function of social values and class position than of religious affiliation. More specifically, the particular value in question is that a respectable woman's place is in the home. As far as a woman's education was concerned, no other value could trump the domestication principle, which guided the plan for women's education. As I shall continue to explain in what follows, the principle was the backbone of the middle-class economy, and hence also of middle-class identity.

Judith E. Walsh's book, *How to be the Goddess of Your Home: An Anthology of Bengali Domestic Manuals,* is replete with examples of Hindu

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[150]Ibid.

women (*bhadramahilā*) who viewed the role of women as fitting squarely within the domestic setting, just as Muslim men and women did. Walsh quotes one writer who wrote an article in a Bengali newspaper that is particularly striking in tone and conviction about the problems associated with "modern" women:

> Modern *Lakshmī* of the home have developed such feelings of disgust for housework that they are ashamed to do it themselves. It is as if they say "I myself will sit like a painted figure and do nothing—or if I do something, I'll waste my time in knitting or playing a game of dice—or I'll ruin my own good taste by reading some obscene play or novel. The housework, the rearing of the children, and all the rest—it will all be done by a servant.[151]

The author was acquainted with women who were most likely from upper-class, landed families and accustomed to living a life of leisure. Upper-class women had servants to do housework and raise children, and so they spent the days doing as they pleased. For the most part, however, the majority of women who were in school or reading literature were from the middle classes and could not afford to sit in idleness. Women such as the above author had to maintain the appearance of respectability by remaining chaste and virtuous while at the same time had to emphasize domestic work. She took pride in her domestic role and was reluctant to stray from that role. She, like many middle class women, considered anything opposed to hard work shameless, because it could result in a disorderly or broken home.

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[151]The Bengali Woman (Bangiya mahilā) 1887, 18, quoted in Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, 63.

Muslim women's advice literature that was published in the Bengali press also expressed a need for a more sophisticated and acceptable (i.e., respectable) way to domesticate fellow Muslim women. In response to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "*Alankar nā*" ("Badge of Slavery"), which denounced women's circumscribed roles in the family as slavery, one woman wrote:

> The manner in which she (Rokeya) has criticized the male species seems wanton and unbecoming of high birth. I reiterate that a woman's place is in the home. Husband and family her primary concern rather than learning how to plead in the courtroom—our goal is raising our children, providing comfort to our husbands and being the *grihalakshmi*.[152]

This woman appeals to the idea that men are the unquestioned leaders of Bengali society. She also assumes a woman's role was in the home attending to her husband and children, and that her readers share her opinion. She uses the royal "we," saying that "our goal" is to nurture a family and its members. She and her audience assume that any deviation from this ethic is "wanton" or inappropriate: it meant that the woman in question (Rokeya) must be of "low birth." In other words, to challenge the status quo of the home and its patriarchal hierarchy was to risk a loss in status; it was to be unrespectable. This would entail economic loss as well as social: if a family lost its status, it would cease to be counted among the middle class in Bengal and would lose the unprecedented social mobility and opportunity that such a designation afforded. Here again, the use of Lakshmi in

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[152] Mahilā, Bhādra, *Māsik Mohāmmadii,* 1310 BS, quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 109.

the discourse points to the fact that the purpose of women's educational reform

was to serve the cultural and socio-economic needs of the middle class, and that

such needs trumped the idea of a middle-class identity based on religious

differences. Respectability was something that middle class women worked for;

it certainly was not given. Markers that signified the *bhadra* identity were spelled

out for women in writings, and included everything from attitude, bodily

comportment, decorum, to clothing styles, which I discuss next.

Respectability and Clothing

As has been mentioned, Muslims and Hindus engaged in an intense self-

critique through periodicals, journals, and magazines. They commented liberally

and enthusiastically on all sorts of changes affecting their neighboring

communities. Many Muslims were alarmed by the appearance of a new kind of

Muslim seeming to "mimic" the habits of the members of non-Muslim

communities:

> Under the influence of English and the model of the neighboring Hindu
> community, these youngsters are assuming half-Hindu or half-Faringi
> identity. We have no sense of our own identity, no sense of self-
> respect.[153]

And:

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[153]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 8; quoted from the *Sultān*

> They [educated Muslim youth] feel obliged to admire the ways of
> cultured, educated Hindus and to imitate them. These Muslims crave to
> emulate Hindu "babus" and become "babus" themselves, knowing little
> how the latter look down upon them…Many Muslims in the hope of
> becoming "bhadralok" shave off their beard and discard their Muslim
> identity and even look down their noses at pious men.[154]

As the quotations show, dress styles were an important marker of group identity

for Muslims in the nineteenth and the late twentieth century.   Muslims who

aspired to be *bhadralok* (or those who wore blazers, colored shirts, shaved their

beards, wore spectacles, and flouted religion) were resented by Muslims who

chose different signs to indicate their religious and group affiliation. According

to Mustafa Nurul Islam, this was because many Muslims were becoming

increasingly aware of the grounds of communal tension, which included Hindu

monopoly of job markets within government service as well as within self-

governing bodies, such as the Calcutta Corporation. Many Muslims were also

upset because Hindu moneylenders exploited Muslims, and because Hindu

zamindars interfered in Muslim religious practice.[155] This assessment makes

sense given the economic and historical situation. Some Muslims were bound to

be angry at the time, especially toward "babus," who made a point of socially

ostracizing Muslims.

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[154]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 7; (from Ibne Māz, *Bhai Musalman Jago).*
[155]M. Islam, *Bengali Muslim Public Opinion as Reflected in the Bengali Press*, 107.

The underlying social significance of such statements is harder to gauge, however, since it also suggests that not all Muslims were angry at Hindus or averse to Hindi and Brahmo practices. In response to opposition to the embourgeoisement (or *bhadra*-fication) of Muslims in written media, Amin asks, "Where then was the *Home for Bengali Muslims* to be found?" What is striking is not that the Muslims addressed by the media are insulted or are metaphorically homeless, but that Muslim adoption of Hindu or English styles of dress, mannerisms, and ways of speaking was somehow thought of as tantamount to rejecting one's Muslim identity. In other words, it is true that Bengali Muslims were in a difficult position, receiving heavy criticism from sections of the Muslim society who were articulate, powerful, and resentful. But the opinions so expressed do not prove anything about so-called "babus" ceasing to be Muslim. The point is that the presence of Muslims who emulated Hindus or Europeans in terms of outward signs of dress style and attitude were recognized as such: *bhadralok*. According to such sources, Muslim *bhadralok* were not uncommon. In fact, they posed a considerable threat to some definitions of Muslim-ness.

The construction of the *bhadramahilās'* public image was also the subject of lively debate, fraught with contradictions and antagonisms. Nevertheless, the discourse reveals that there was a normative discourse, and that there were overriding similarities between Hindu and Muslim middle class women that cannot be denied. For instance, it is obvious that women's fashion trends were

not static in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as different groups constantly changed their dress according to the rapidly changing times, using clothing as a sign of *bhadra* status. Often, middle-class Muslims wore *saris* and *dhoti*s, which usually symbolized Hindu religious affiliation.[156] This drew criticism from more conservative Muslims who wanted women to wear clothing that symbolized Muslim respectability. Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah noted in her autobiography that many ladies repudiated her and her cousin for wearing "modern" fashions such as pastel shades and new cuts and borders. Some "ladies" remarked:

> You girls are becoming absolute *mems*; even for a wedding dress you do not want to have bright colors and rich trimmings. If you had your way, I would dare say you would like to get a white gown.[157]

Shaista and her contemporaries could see that many women did not understand her choice to dress in uncustomary, "western" ways. Some women whom Shaista knew were indignant toward English-educated women because in following the trends of English ladies (*mems*), they had lost a sense of what was worthy of emulation and respect—gaudy clothing, characterized by deep colors and complimented by elaborate ornamentation. Such elaborate clothing was worn by the rich and respectable classes of Muslims, and Shaista's western apparel was

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[156]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 127.
[157]Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, 24.

considered a rejection of the *sharif* customs that dominated the community in which she grew up.

Another subject of controversy was the ability of clothing to indicate a woman's respectability in terms of its ability to preserve the image of her modesty. Eshak Mian wrote in *Islam-darsan* that Muslim girls from respectable families were wearing "fine, semi-transparent saris from Farasdanga" instead of distinctively Muslim clothing, and they were doing this in imitation of the heroines of Hindu novels.[158] Eshak Mian bemoaned such mimicry because the Muslim women were not learning to copy the valor and honorable qualities of Hindu heroines but merely their indecent fashion styles.[159] At the same time, Hindu *bhadramahilā* imitated the clothing of high-class Muslim women instead of adopting styles of dress thought appropriate for "respectable" people. Some Hindu women opposed the imitation of certain kinds of Muslim dresses saying,

> Indian women, imitating the Begums of the Nawabs, started using very fine or transparent clothes. As a result of this, wives of Bengali homes felt no shame in going to bathe in the Ganges, or attending invitations. But finally many have begun to realize the bad taste involved in wearing one transparent/fine piece of cloth.[160]

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[158]Eshak Mian, "Mosalman Chatrer Hindu Bhab", *Islam-darsan*, 5th yr., 1st no.; *Aswin*, 1332 B. S. (1925), quoted in M. Islam, 255.
[159]Ibid.
[160]H. Bannerji, "Attired in Virtue" (translated from Hemantakumari Choudhuri, 'Striloker Paricchad'. Passage also found in M. Sarkar, 67.

The situation was one in which both Hindus and Muslims were borrowing from each other and from the British. In this respect, no clear criteria distinguished one religious group from the next. Rather, the above men and women desired only to maintain an image of respectability in terms of pre-conceived ideas (or symbols) of which behaviors and clothing styles confer status and which do not. In the above examples, sheer clothing meant un-respectability or a loss in status; such clothing was a sign used to distinguish the new class of respectable Bengali women from all the rest.

Mahua Sarkar uses the above quotation along with others that are similar in content and tone to argue that the picture of Muslim woman was "the 'inherently atavistic' other of the 'ideal modern woman' (Hindu, middle class, and upper caste) in the contemporary popular Hindu imagination."[161] M. Sarkar explains that it is

> in the figure of the traditional woman—silenced and victimized by the barbarity of Muslim men—that Muslim women make one of their few appearances in the Hindu-dominated nationalist discourse of late-nineteenth- and early early-twentieth century Bengal.[162]

Sarkar reaches this conclusion without offering instances of Muslim opinion toward Hindus within a nationalist context. Neither does she consider the possibility that the author's aim was not to berate Muslims, but to object to any

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[161]M. Sarkar, 74.
[162]Ibid.

group of women dressing in transparent clothes.   Therefore, it is difficult to

surmise whether Sarkar's analysis—that Muslims were the ultimate victimized

"others" in the writings of Hindu nationalists—is accurate or not. In my reading,

the above is an example of a Hindu woman's obsession with telling other women

how to dress respectably. The woman does not approve of fine clothing for

women because she considers it shameless, a breaking of the code of modesty and

virtue that is the hallmark of the respectable middle class. In addition, that Hindu

nationalist discourse rarely even mentioned Muslim women (except for rare

instances such as the one cited above) is an indication that religion was not the

main issue.

Himani Bannerji's assessment of the same quotation about Hindu women

wearing "fine" Muslim clothing is remarkably different from that of M. Sarkar,

and in my view more cogent.   She explains in her essay, "Attired in Virtue," that

nationalist literature was a critique of middle-class culture intended to replace

Bengali women's habits with habits more similar to those of middle class,

Victorian English women. She suggests that the *bhadramahilā* is "no more or no

less a sign of genteel womanhood" and serves as an "interpellating device for

middle-class women, whose lives must illustrate certain gender-class relations of

their time."[163]   Important to the *bhadramahilā's* identity were certain ideological

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[163]H. Bannerji, 83.

features that were projected (symbolically) onto women's bodies. These features were particular bodily ornaments, jewelry, and clothing. Women's writings about proper styles for middle-class Bengali women reveal that there was a normative discourse about women's clothing and mannerisms that aimed to moderate and ultimately control female sexuality. Unlike M. Sarkar, H. Bannerji nowhere supposes that Muslim women are excluded from the class of *bhadramahilā* (she does not mention religion in her work). Rather, Bannerji implies that the members of this class were propertied. Her implication makes sense considering that only women from propertied families had the leisure to sit around, think, and write about what the best or most appropriate kinds of dress should be. She explains that "the discursive organization of physical exposure, including veiling or leaving bare the face… forms a constitutive relation between sexuality and society… and maps out the moral boundaries of the propertied classes."[164] Both Hindu and Muslim middle class women were known to dress in socially acceptable, or "modest" fashions. This meant that they veiled their faces before certain men and in public and that they chose to wear opaque clothing as a sign of respectability and modesty. Wearing and especially commenting about "decent" clothing for women in such as manner (as to evoke a sense of shame and modesty) guaranteed that a woman was a member of the articulate class, the *bhadralok*.

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[164]H. Bannerji, 87.

The code of modesty that is the marker of the respectable middle class is, in my analysis, one of the most subtle but important (however visibly obvious) aspects of the creation of the image of the Bengali *bhadramahilā*. It is under this code, or rather, through the discourse of shame (*lajja*) and physical exposure that H. Bannerji is able to draw the same conclusions as S. Banerjee, namely that the objects of derision by members of the *bhadralok* were those who were sexually promiscuous, such as singers, actresses, and prostitutes. If Muslims were shameless (or if they exhibited insufficient modesty in dress style, and so on.), they were criticized and socially ostracized as a result. Yet, the criteria for being considered *bhadra* as articulated in the discourse (and practice) of shame and modesty did not mention any religious requirements. In fact, Muslims, or at least those displaying the tendency to practice *purdah*, would be considered some of the most exemplary models.

It is important to see in such comments not simply a sense that one religious community was defining itself against another—e.g., Hindus against Muslims. This process of articulation involved differentiation, but the process of differentiation did not impose a firm distinction between Hindu and Muslim signs of respectability. Rather, Bengali writings show that a firm distinction divided modest women from immodest women, a division which I will discuss in the next section.

The Other: Abhadramahilā

One of the biggest obstacles to quick and widespread expansion of women's education was that middle class women had few available models of "respectable" educated women to draw upon in fashioning their own images. Except in cases where women were actually incarnations of the Prophet or Lakshmi—pious, hard working, and totally self-sacrificing for their children, husbands, and communities—being a middle-class Bengali woman meant being caught in a dilemma. A woman could either work hard raising and maintaining a family and home, or she could take time to herself and engage in activities such as reading novels and plays or going out into the world for physical and mental entertainment and relief. The former incarcerated her; the latter rendered her unrespectable and weak in the eyes of others, as it was frowned upon for women to appear in public. As a result, education as a prospect for women was a double-edged sword, and many middle class Bengali women's writings reveal a deep-seated fear of the effects of education.

Many of these anxieties centered on educated women's leisure, and the desire of educated women to read novels and plays. People considered novels and plays dangerous because of their tendency to draw women away from their "place"—busily at work in the home. They were known to foster ideas of independence, and eventually lead to a life characterized by a total "inversion or

reversion" of the symbols comprising a normative *bhadra* identity.[165] In fact, the art forms were conducive to expressing discontent and cultural criticism. The heroines often mocked typical male characteristics and romanticized infidelity; the content of novels was often aimed to entertain rather than to engineer the mind in socially constructive ways (to make husbands happy or to produce sons). Therefore, some *bhadra* men made it a point to create more "suitable" literature for women.[166] If the literature did not follow their prescribed ideals—and dramas often did not—then they represented everything that was not *bhadra*: a disorderly home, a broken-down family, dereliction of duty, irreligiousness, and an immodest wife, or a wayward husband.

The characterization of the *bhadramahilā's* "other" was embodied in the female characters in novels and plays, and in actresses, prostitutes, and Vaishnava women. As I have mentioned, Hindu *bhadramahilā* considered such women *chotolok* (low class and unrespectable). Actresses in the *bhadralok* theatres were the lowest of all because they performed in public and because many of them were in fact prostitutes. Popular literary figure Manomohan Bosu lamented that actresses could often be found only in the red-light districts, and that for respectable young men to be consorting with such women was unfathomable.[167] The fear of young *bhadralok* men interacting with prostitutes was not unfounded.

[165]S. Banerjee, 140.
[166]See Minault, *Secluded Scholars,* Chapter 2 "A Suitable Literature" for a full list of examples.
[167]*Madhyastha*, c. 1873 (Paush, B.S. 1280), pp. 621-23, quoted in S. Banerjee, 156.

In Calcutta in 1853, there were more than 12,000 prostitutes in a city of about

400,000.[168] By 1867, the population of Calcutta had decreased somewhat, but the

number of prostitutes had risen to over 30,000.[169] Such a large prostitute

population indicates strong demand for their services and strong incentives to

enter the profession. Ibrahim Khan notes in his memoir that brothels could be

found in nearly all the marketplaces and ports. He commented that the brothels

brought in large amounts of money, and that "young men from the middle class,

well to do families of the countryside would frequent those areas and sometimes

bring the women home as wives."[170] Men rarely married prostitutes, but it did

happen on occasion, and such occurrences would cause major problems for

bhadra families.

As is indicated by some of the Muslim voices recorded above, Hindus

were not the only ones who felt the threatening presence of the popular Bengali

theater and brothel. Rahima Khanam believed that education divorced from the

fundamental principles of Islam would be injurious to students' well being. She

thought that liberal education would lead a girl to act immodestly, and lose her

honor.[171] Sheikh Abdur Rahman wrote that Muslim women needed "a type of

education suited to Muslim society," and that it was not possible to send girls to

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[168]S. Banerjee, 143.
[169]Ibid.
[170]Ibrahim Khan, *Bātāyan,* 94-95, quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 65.
[171]Rahima Khanum Milky, "Muslim Nāri Shikshār Paddhati" ("Process of Women's Education") Saogāt,
5:8, 681 Māgh 1334 BS, quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 192.

school past the age of puberty, because

> traveling by carriage and wearing tight-fitting chemises and blouses … the reading of trashy dramas and novels, the writing of graphic love letters, attending the theatre and enhancing physical beauty with colorful garments and cosmetics have become part of (western type) education. That kind of education perverts taste, undermines religious faith and gives rise to bad behavior.[172]

Rahman considered all of the activities described above to be antithetical to the ideal woman, as embodied by *grihalakshmi*. He used the common stereotypes such as the evil theater and the play in order to emphasize what is good for Muslim women: an education centered on religion and the home.[173] Begum Fatema Lohani also wrote in *Saogāt*, a publication that favored education for women, that if

> …in imitation of the English, Brahmo, or Parsi lady we doll ourselves up, and take to reading novels and plays totally neglecting cooking and other domestic chores like so much garbage, then of course men will not take kindly to our attending educational institutions and going out.[174]

Begam Lohani's personal view was that a limited education was desirable and necessary for women, but that any attempt to imitate the activities of more "westernized" women was inadvisable and could prevent women from receiving

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[172]Sheikh Abdur Rahman, "Siksar Bhitti," in *Al-Eslām*, 5th yr., 8th no.; *Agrahayan,* 1326 B.S., quoted in M. Islam, 196.

[173]M. Islam, 197; his list if appropriate subjects included "Urdu, Religious instruction, Bengali, History and Geography, Arithmatic, Physical environment, Hygiene, Moral training, Arts and Crafts, Embroidery, Cooking (ways of preparing many delicious dishes), Childcare and looking after the members of the household, House keeping and Handwriting."

[174]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 189.

instruction outside the home at all.   Therefore, she and other women insisted on an educational agenda aimed to deter women from bad habits (westernization) and to make women better *grihastanis*. Nurunnehar Khatun brought up a similar concern about the issue of *zenana* education vs. formal schooling when she conceded that the state of Muslims girls' education was lamentable. Her major complaint was that the missionary and Brahmo-styled schools were unsuitable to impart Islamic learning and therefore would not do for Muslim women. Such institutions, she explained, lead to a "predilection for the consumption of novels and plays."[175] Muslim women's demands for better, Islamic education were similar Hindu women's demands for better Hindu schools for girls. To Khatun and many others, being respectable meant being pious and feminine, which for Muslims and Hindus alike meant being an active homemaker for the benefit of men and children. The image of respectability, for Muslims and Hindus, had as its opposite the flamboyant and secularized images of the western woman and the prostitute, who ventured outside the home, conversed with men, and felt no shame.

In sum, the fear of certain artistic forms confirms that modesty and domestic responsibilities were of great importance to women's public self-images in colonial Bengal, and that any deviance from such norms caused anxiety and

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[175]Nurunnehar Khatun, "Nāri Jātir Shikshā," *Saogāt*, Jaishtha 1326, 1:7, 521-522, quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 191.

could result in severe practical consequences. In particular, reading novels and plays was considered an impious, shameless act, as were certain genres of song and dance. They were truly subversive as they "seemed to temporarily liberate the women not only from the external censorship prevalent in *bhadralok* homes, but also from the internal censor—the traditional fear of the power wielded by men."[176] As I have demonstrated, the fear of cultural subversion was not confined to only one religious group. Rather, it was maginified through debates about education and defined a new kind of religiousness for both Hindus and Muslims. The effect of the worldview was that most middle class Hindu and Muslim women did not seek education outside the home. When they did, their education often stopped at puberty. Very rarely did women receive enough education to pursue professional or academic careers beyond the security of the *andarmahal* in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.

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[176]Ibid., 140.

Part IV

Challenges to the Status Quo

There were, of course, men and women whose ideas varied greatly from those ideas, which I discussed in the previous section. Many women received formal education and wrote about their experiences as the new, educated class of Bengali women. Nationalist historians and present day scholars such as Judith Walsh, Meredith Borthwick, Geraldine Forbes, Gail Minault, and Sonia Nishat Amin are respected authors who document women's educational histories and show how a select few of pioneering women inspired others to go to schools and found schools themselves. Men were also known to challenge the status quo, but as should be obvious by now, the status quo for respectability was based on criteria that were applied unevenly to men and women. In other words, *bhadra* status was a class-based, gendered construct. For instance, respectable Hindu and Muslim men entered the theatres as they pleased, and there is hardly any evidence suggesting that a man or a *bhadralok* family suffered ignominy because of a taste for drama or theaters, despite the presence of prostitutes among the actresses. Men were entitled to mobility and access to institutions such as schools (and brothels), whereas women would be shamed and humiliated should they exhibit similar behavior.

The relationship between *bhadralok* men and certain well-known actresses illustrates the double standard inherent to the class as a class group, and suggests

that membership to *bhadralok* was based on gendered notions of respectability.

For example, even after marrying a *bhadralok* man, actress and former prostitute

Binodini Dasi was not considered a full-fledged *bhadramahilā*. Even in her own

home, where she was wealthy and had the help of many servants, she was not

permitted to forget her past low status. The former actress, held in esteem by

many *bhadralok* who frequented her shows, was not permitted to live at her

husband's primary residence, nor was her daughter allowed to attend school with

other *bhadralok* girls. [177] The society to which she should have been admitted

ostracized both her and her child. Binodini's example reveals that while the class

was open and allowed some mobility, the notion of feminine modesty and

respectability was slow to change. A man would still be considered respectable

even after acting in ways that would surely mean the loss of status for a woman

and her children.

Binodini's case shows what the pattern of anxieties also proves: that

encroachment by an "unrespectable woman" into respectable social circles was a

real and constant threat. Some women of *bhadra* families recognized that men

went to prostitutes in part because *bhadra* men preferred educated women. Men's

affection for the theater houses and the women within them became an argument

for women to be educated:

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[177]R. Bhattacharya, "'Public Women': Early Actresses of the Bengali Stage," 199.

Recently, a foreign lady has written a book about the women of Bengal where she discusses the section most inclined to female education. Needless to say these are the prostitutes. They send their girls to school, not to acquire good husbands, but better to ply their trade. Prostitutes have understood that the young educated man of today prefers the company of these educated and accomplished girls…What the modern educated youths do not get from wives at home, or from women in society at large, yet that which is so desirable on account of Western education and the spirit of the age they seek among these smart, educated prostitutes.[178]

Middle-class Bengalis realized that in order for middle class women to make good wives, they had to be more desirable to men than western-educated and low class women. This required that they receive some formal schooling. Otherwise they would be unable to satisfy the increasing desire of middle-class men for a cultured and educated woman, and the men would seek such women in the theaters and brothels.

Respectability in Transition

A less extreme example of challenge to the status quo is the case of Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's education. Shaista's father, a well-known Bengali intellectual, saw that the changing times had changed men's desires and behaviors toward women, and that women should adjust accordingly in order to be happy and successful. He said to his sister, who despised the idea that Shaista should be English educated, "I am not going to marry her off to a *mulla* or *maulvi*,

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[178]Razia Khatun, "Bangiya moslem mahilāgener shikshār dhārā", ("The Trend of Muslim Women in Bengal"), Saogāt, 5:1, 71, Āshārh 1334 BS. quoted in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 204.

and the boys of today want an educated wife. That is an added reason, if anything, for educating girls."[179] What is interesting about Suhrawrdy's response to his sister's entreaty is that he was able to make a distinction between the attitudes of certain religious leaders and family members who promoted the non-education (or continued domestication) of women, and those Muslims who desired progress of the community via women's education. He recognized that his society was torn over the idea of English education for girls, but he paid no heed to the arguments against education that appealed to strict notions of feminine shame and domesticity. He saw that people desperately clung to such ideas and customs, which were invented and reinvented during a time characterized by cultural exchange and class competition. The consequence of his decision to ignore society in the face of much opposition was the loss of society's respect for his daughter and his family. Some, however, supported Shaista's education and helped her to become one of the most important female political figures in Indian and Pakistani history. This respect was hard won and of a new type. She was respected for being among the propertied class and for belonging to a wealthy family. The status that this afforded, together with her natural talents, allowed her to go to school and to challenge normative female behavior by working professionally in whatever capacity she desired.

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[179]Ikramullah, 32.

In short, the image of the *bhadramhaila* was based largely on the idea of the home. However, this ideal was changing due to the efforts of a handful of distinguished, educated women. These women do not, however, represent normal *bhadramahilā*. Rather, they are the exceptions that prove the rule: women who received education were viewed as morally suspect. In particular, children of formerly low-class women were not admitted into *bhadra* institutions, despite the fact that their mothers had married into the middle class. Also, children of high-born families would be considered unrespectable for attending public or English schools. Women generally complied with and even reinforced the status quo in order to protect themselves from incurring social and economic damages, and in order to exclude those they considered beneath them. This was because being a typical, home-bound *bhadramahilā* benefitted most middle class women in nineteenth century and early twentieth century Bengal. To remain respectable in the eyes of the majority of Bengalis, women had to choose a life defined by a firm dedication to modest practices centered on the home and family.

The next two examples also demonstrate how women negotiated the terms of respectability for women. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Krishnabhabibi Das argued against the state of female education, which entailed the domestication of women and male control of women's activities. The alternative notion of respectability de-emphasized religious duty and was divorced from simple notions of feminine modesty and piety. In other words, the new or "alternative"

bhadramahilā more closely approximated men in terms of the conditions of respectability, although they did not aspire to be identical to men in all respects.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one learned middle class Bengali woman who worked feverishly to reform the views of her society, which ensured that a woman's respectability was obtained through domestication or *purdah.* She spoke out against *purdah,* the code of honor that required women to veil and seclude themselves at home, because *purdah* ensured that women would remain at home and away from schools. She argued that *purdah* was harmful to women, and restricted women's access (and right under Islamic law) to education. She encouraged women to seek schooling outside the home, and founded a school for girls herself. She asked others to change their perspectives on the controversial issue and encouraged respect for educated women. In this effort, she had much to say about the stigmas against educating women, calling them "imaginary" and inimical to Bengali society:

> Most of the people are so prejudiced against female education that the very term makes them shudder with all the evil effects. The society might forgive the pitfalls of an uneducated woman, but the slightest mistake—real or imaginary—on the part of a woman with some education is magnified hundredfold, and laying all at the door of education they shout with one voice, "down with female education."[180]

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[180]Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Motichor*, 26, quoted in H. Joarder and S. Joarder, *Begum Rokeya: The Emancipator,* 20.

People considered Rokeya amoral, irreligious, and disreputable for her views on education. This was consistent with *bhadra* morality that associated feminine modesty and domesticity as the signs of respectability for middle class Bengali women. Her pupils also lost respect in the eyes of society for going to school. Some labeled her students and peers prostitutes, going as far as to call them "the scum of Bengali society."[181] For these reasons, Rokeya wrote about social justice for women and defended women's education, as in the above excerpt taken from *Motichor*. Rokeya's tactic was to expose the contradictions and ignorance in arguments against women's education. In the above quotation, she points out that opponents of women's suffer from confirmation bias. She says that they mistreat or misrepresent educated women by magnifying their mistakes, and by declaring those mistakes to be the direct result of education.

Interestingly, Rokeya's accusations were not directed at any one group of people. Instead, she says that "most people" in her society are guilty of slander against the character of good women. She claims that it is the entire society that is united against women to keep them uneducated and to undermine efforts to better women's lives. Rokeya's point is that society oppresses women by not supporting women's education and also oppresses them by publicizing the

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[181]R. Hossain, *Padmarag*, x.

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missteps of women who have an education. She draws attention to such discrimination and the ideology that supports it.

In contemporary literature, Rokeya was portrayed as angry and irreverent because she was perturbed by her society and women's complacency in their menial, social roles. However, with profound insight, she saw that women's condition was not only personally distasteful, but also socially wrong because it threatened social and cultural balance. She thought that the condition of Muslim women and their educational development was asymmetrical with women of other religions, especially Hindus, and she looked to the Brahmos and educated Hindus as examples of groups in the same society who had adjusted to modern times. She knew that the perceived educational and cultural gap between Hindus and Muslims was widening, and that it increasingly differentiated and degraded Muslims in the eyes of many. This in turn led to more poverty and violence, which were factors that increased injustices toward women. Because she considered the lack of education the major cause of inequality between Hindus and Muslims, she saw in female education the remedy for social and cultural divisions.[182] In other words, Rokeya explained that the cause of women's plight and ignorance was not so much the fault of her religion or intrinsically related to biological deficiencies of the female sex. Rather, it was the result of continually

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[182]See Roushan Jahan's "Introduction" to *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini* for a re-statement of Rokeya's theory of social inequality and its basis in Muslim social and educational practices, 12.

tying Muslim women's education to the idea of un-respectability. Social injustice and un-respectability was projected onto educated Bengali Muslim women because they studied and knew well by experience the wrongs and contradictions present in Bengali society, which kept women confined to the home.

According to Roushan Jahan, most people reacted with embarrassment to Rokeya's plan for women's education and her denunciation of extreme seclusion (forced domestication) of women.[183] It was this "unveiling of the hidden face" of her society that turned the taken-for-granted notion of Bengali respectability on its head. She made common ideals of respectability seem absurd, hypocritical, and despicable. In *Motichor* she declared that there is nothing inferior about women's intellect as compared to men's.[184] In *Padmarag*, too, Rokeya wrote of a system of education in which women were trained to be socially and economically independent from men. The women in Tarini Bhavan live almost entirely without dependence on men, and finance their own livelihood based in individual hard work and various natural talents. She is clear in this writing, however, that the purpose of education in Tarini Bhavan is to encourage girls to "grow up into good daughters, housewives and mothers inspired by high ideals and to love their country and their religion more than life itself."[185] Rokeya sought to overthrow a male-dominated society that kept women captive in the home; yet she

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[183]Jahan, Introduction to *Inside Seclusion*, 28.
[184]Jahan, Introduction to *Inside Seclusion*, 13.
[185]Hossain, *Padmarag*, 31.

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simultaneously argued that education was beneficial because it made women better at managing the household. So while Rokeya defended formal education on the one hand, and even supported the kind of education that led to women's economic independence of men, she never embraced complete independence for women. Her *bhadramahilā* was another Lakshmi, the goddess of a small domain.

Another persuasive proponent of women's education was Krishnabhabini Das. Like Rokeya, she argued that women could receive education and be better wives and mothers as a result. Krishnabhabini was strongly opposed to the association of "liberal" or "modern" education with bad or un-respectable women. She emphasizes what western education can do for people if fully embraced:

> There are some who raise objection to women's education on the ground that women lose their womanly virtues through the influence of education. They compete in everything with men and pay no attention to housework, etc. but if they [those who object] were to open their eyes they could see that this belief is wholly erroneous. In spite of the great amount of progress made in women's education in America, women there are neither inattentive to their homes, nor ignorant of child-care. In fact they are able to do both housework and childcare with great regulation and discipline, thus increasing happiness within the home, and facilitating the progress of the nation. Of course a few women, wearing men's clothing abuse their independence and higher education, but does it make sense to be outraged about women's education and independence in general by the examples of a few?[186]

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[186]K. Das, (1891a), "Ingraj Mahilar Shiksha o Swadhinatar Gati" ("English Women's Progress in Educational Independence"), in bharati o Balak (B.S. Sraban, 1297, 14yr): 286-91, quoted in H. Bannerji, "Attired in Virtue," 140-141.

Krishnabhabini begins her argument by saying that some people think that education will lead women to neglect the home. She attacks this idea by pointing out that American women are capable managers of their homes. Having provided this evidence that westernization does not lead to the destruction of the home, she connects women's education to the good of the family and the nation. The nation is the extended family that depends on women for its basis and construction.[187] The nation thus needs women in order to exist, and it needs them to prosper in order to succeed. The logic is clear and simple: women's education is the cure, not the cause, of ruin to individuals, families and communities.

The above passage is interesting not only for what it says about education, but also for what it does not say. It does not say that women should gain total freedom from their social roles through education. Specifically, Krishnabhabini believed that higher education has permitted some to "abuse their independence" and has led them to "dress like men." She implies that independence is part of the purpose of education for women, but she does not mean to suggest that women should be like men through education, at least in terms of their appearance. Dressing in men's clothing is provocative not because the clothes are revealing, but because they are a symbolic rejection of prescribed gender roles, without

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[187]Minault, *The Extended Family*, Introduction, 15.

which the Bengali social structure would collapse. This is why the author sets

limitations on female independence: she wants to reassure her audience that

educated women will still respect their social roles.

Part V

Other Signs of Respectability

By now it should be clear that the Muslim educated middle class shared an identity similar to that of the Hindu educated middle class in colonial Bengal. Part I was a review of literature contributing to the view that Muslims were neither *bhadralok* nor *bhadramahla*. In Part II, I amended that history and demonstrated how Muslims occupied a similar economic position under the colonial regime as the new literate working class, the Hindu *bhadralok*. In part III, I explained how internally differentiated the Muslim community was in terms of ideas and practices, and that this diversity is reflected in the debates about middle class feminine identity in Bengal. I have shown that many writings for and about middle-class Muslim women's education and respectability mirror writings about Hindu women and their education. In particular, the discourse on the home and the discourse on shame and modesty are determined by cultural and economic values, which direct the notion of middle-class feminine respectability. The respective religions have co-opted and defended these values, and incorporate them into a single code of respectability that transcends religious divides. In part IV, I gave examples of Hindu and Muslim *bhadramhila* whose examples, social, and educational philosophies challenged the status quo. However, it is clear that those who were able to push norms and question society were nevertheless women of their time. They shared the economic and historical situation that

required women to submit to certain social values. Part V is an overview of language politics in colonial Bengal, as language increasingly became an important marker of difference, distinguishing Muslim Bengali culture from Hindu culture. I emphasize that middle class urban educated Muslim women learned to read and write Bengali alongside English and Urdu. Their knowledge of multiple languages allowed them to communicate effectively and self-identify with other women who were also predisposed to gain social mobility and group recognition through literacy and the kind of respect literacy afforded women.

The Decline of *Sharif* Culture and Influence

As has been mentioned, the *ashrāf* looked down upon the masses of Bengalis who practiced local versions of Islam. The *ashrāf* considered themselves descendents of Mughal ruling families who immigrated to Bengal. They also saw themselves as the natural rulers of the land.[188] The *ashrāf* often tried to establish their supremacy and difference from other groups inhabiting the region, and their means mirror the ways in which some Hindu *bhadralok* excluded certain types of people socially. Upper class Muslims made a concerted effort to speak in tongues other than the vernacular languages, and socialized only within tight-knit groups of close family relations, just as the upper-caste Hindu *bhadralok* Sanskritized their language and refused to mix with certain kinds of

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[188]Eaton, 28.

people. The Calcutta Madrassah (or rather the entire madrasa system) is an example of the elite Muslim tendency to promote the study of Persian and Arabic languages to the exclusion of Bengali and other north Indian languages. In this way, Muslim school policy favored students of rich and "respectable parentage" to the exclusion of others; it was inclined to accept applicants willing to cultivate the same "species of erudition" that continued to separate the Muslim aristocracy and intellectuals from the masses of poor, illiterate cultivators and skilled laborers.[189] According to Richard Eaton, the Muslim elite also displayed the same attitude of disdain toward people who tilled the land as upper caste Hindus displayed toward manual workers. The plough, says Eaton, was the ultimate sign separating the *ashrāf* from the Bengali Muslim cultivators. "Where cultivators defined their Muslim identity around cultivating the soil, the *ashrāf* disdained the plough and refused to touch it."[190] Recall that Broomfield, writing of the Hindu middle class, had observed that abstention from manual labor was the hallmark of the respectable class, the *bhadralok.*[191] A survey of the Nadia districts confirms this sentiment and explains that the upper class Muslims found cultivation a lowly and degrading style of life.[192] A census written in the same year bore the remark,

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[189]T. Bhattacharya, 179.

[190]Eaton, 42.
[191]Broomfield, 6.
[192]Eaton, 42.

"like the higher Hindu castes, the Ashrāf consider it degrading to accept menial service or to handle the plough."[193]

In 1919, *Al-Eslām* published an article that rebuked the "'sense of Brahminhood amongst high-born Muslims', who regarded themselves as differing in every respect from commoners, as if they were a completely different species."[194] The magazine also accused high class Muslims of denying opportunities to common people by controlling education and culture "for fear that they may gain aristocratic status."[195] Other Muslims in Bengal were thus acutely aware of the exclusionary practices of the *ashrāf*, and the new middle-class intelligentsia was particularly irritated by these practices. The reality was that the gap between the *ashrāf*, the high caste Hindus, and the middle classes was closing rapidly. By the 1920s, a re-definition of the Bengali Muslim aristocracy was in effect. The new urban aristocracy exuded the qualities of hard work and education, and particularly English education, which the old urban *ashrāf* did not. One article in *Saogāt* asked,

> [I]n what sense are intelligent, educated, religious and cultured people
> from Muslim families born in Bengal inferior to the so-called aristocracy,

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[193]H.H. Risely, 1901 Census of Muslims in the Nadia Districts of Bengal, quoted in Eaton, 42.
[194]Editor, "Samaj Kalima", *Islam-pracharak*, 2nd yr., 2nd no.; *Jyaistha*, 1299 B.S (1892), quoted in M. Islam, 249.
[195]Mohammad Mayjar Rahman, "Samaj Chitra", *Al-Eslām*, 5th yr., 5th no.; *Bhadra*, 1326 B.S. (1919), quoted in M. Islam, 249.

which came here from abroad and is illiterate, uncultured and lacking in intellect?[196]

The new respectable Muslim, according to the same source, is thoroughly educated, and is "of good taste and religious faith, who, having savoured British culture, disseminates it generously to others: all the rest are '*Atrafs*'."[197] This inversion of the class structure in Bengal is most evident on the new class's use of English and vernacular (Bengali) education in order to obtain lucrative jobs and status within an environment that did, in fact, favor people having been cultured in European ways. The author of the article argues that the new respectable class of Muslims was to be characterized by culture, religion, and literacy.

The Bengali Language as a Sign of Respectability

As has been discussed, new literary forms were emerging, and many people had access to more than one language in which to publish their works. The emerging middle class of Muslims was distinct in terms of their use of Bengali as a literary and political language. For some time, Bengali had been a mark of low status in Muslim society, but by the turn of the century, this was not necessarily the case.   Many Muslims wrote in Bengali, some prolifically, including Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Rokeya wrote and spoke in Urdu, Bengali,

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[196]Syed Emdad Ali, "Ashrāf-Atraf", *Saogāt,* 6th yr., 1st no.; *Sraban,* 1336 B. S. (1923), quoted in Islam, 250.
[197]Ibid.

and English. She founded Urdu- and Bengali-medium schools.[198] Muslims such as Rokeya were intensely proud of their Bengali roots, which allowed them to socialize in diverse settings. Rokeya lamented the fact that the school she started did not teach Bengali, and that the only teachers in her school besides herself and her aunt where Christians, Brahmos, Anglo Indians, or of non-Bengali Muslim origin, the result of which was the reproduction of *sharif* culture via her schooling. She wanted to begin a Bengali school for Muslim women, but simply did not have adequate support for it for many years.[199] In this respect, Bengali Muslim middle-class women had to endure the imposition of a strange *sharif* culture and Urdu language as a part of their education for a longer time than did the men of their culture.

The defense of Bengali as an authentically "Muslim" language has a long past, which was further complicated with the rise of Indian nationalism and communalism in the twentieth century. People who felt that Arabic and Persianate languages were the only acceptable languages of Muslims did not approve of Muslims who chose to write in Bengali. The compromise was to promote the study of Urdu among Bengalis, so that middle and upper-class Bengalis who wrote in Bengali were also required to read and write in Urdu. Many, such as Ameer Ali, were emphatic that "Arabic and Urdu maintain the

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[198]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 22-23.

[199] Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 156.

unity of sentiment throughout the Islamic world."[200] In order to defend Bengali, some people, such as Abdul Karim, argued that what is now called Bengali is actually based in the language and culture of past generations of Muslims.[201] This last point has major import for the present discussion, for there is linguistic evidence that *bhadralok* life—in its most "*shud*" Hindu manifestations—was at least partly based on a culture and an idiom deriving from Muslim (or Mughal) culture. S.M. Banerjee notes that much of the domestic culture and language of the *bhadralok* had roots in a mixed heritage. Specifically, the "etymological titles for servants such as the *khaunsamaun* (table servant), *khitmatgar* (waiter), the *bewerchee* (cook), etc." are "Persian and Arabic indicating their roots in Islamic culture."[202] Thus, even from a linguistic perspective the binary between the Hindu and the Muslim in the middle and upper classes does not withstand scrutiny. Bengali Muslims used and accepted Bengali, non-Persian, and non-Arabic language as their own; Bengali Hindus used Persian and Arabic in their everyday speech as well.

Despite the fact that there were Muslims and Hindus who espoused a "pure" language in order to maintain an Islamic or *Hindutva* appearance, most Bengalis spoke the popular from of Bengali that was a linguistic hybrid. The desire of the *bhadralok* to maintain an exclusivity through the use of certain

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[200]De, *Bengal Muslims in Search of Social Identity, 1904-1947*, 100.
[201]Ibid., 101.
[202]S.M. Banerjee, 40.

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Hindu or Muslim languages purged of "foreign" elements is overwrought by Bengalis and scholarship, which sees the colonial history through a post-partition and post-Indian independence (or nationalist) lenses. The evidence of cultural and linguistic heterodoxy in Muslim and Hindu middle class discourse is substantial, however, and deserves more attention. It would be especially useful in the context of the study of *bhadramhila*, whose styles of speech, such as the use of titles, indicate a complicated system of denoting religious affiliation and creating a certain kind of public persona. For instance, at the early stage in Indian colonial history, Bengali Muslim women used the Sanskrit appellations such as *Sri* and *Srimati*. These titles were replaced because of linguistic and cultural reconstruction of the later periods.[203] Nevertheless, people like Faizunnessa were *Begam Saheba* to their subordinates, *Strijukta-saheba* in legal documents, and even "the enlightened Muhammadan."[204] English-educated Hindu and Muslim women were also known to have dropped their Sanskrit and Persian titles, (*Sri* and *Saheba*) and opted for "Mrs." instead.[205] The unstated point is that titles, while sometimes indicating a person's religion, do not necessarily do so; neither does one's religion have any inherent connection with one's title. The confusion over titles was reflected in the complexity surrounding women's identity during the time period, and it is not merely an artifact of historical interest. Nevertheless,

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[203]Ibid.
[204]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 15.
[205]Ibid.

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many authors who study this time period stress an inherent connection between individuals' titles and some preconceived notion of "religion." They are thus insensitive to or ignore the history that is characterized by cultural exchange, assuming that a language and a title denote religion unequivocally.

Amin and De are able to show how diverse and hybrid Muslim literaure was in colonial Bengal. Literature by and about Muslim women almost always closely approximated the content and tone of the Hindu *bhadra*, or Brahmo literature, and this sometimes to the horror of both Muslims and Hindus. The common theme in women's novels was a kind of love epitomized by the virtuous wife and mother. The novels were also didactic, and contained information about proper social relationships, much like the educational manuals discussed in Part IV. Faizunessa's *Rupjālāl* was the first novel (*upākhyān*) known to have been written by a Bengali Muslim woman and is composed in what some critics call "pure" Bengali, as she used almost no "loan words" from Persian or Arabic.[206] De states that there was an ardent effort put forth by the Bengali Muslims to invent a language called *Mussalmani Bengali*, but that effort failed due to its similarity to (and absurd attempts to depart from) popular Bengali. The result was the proliferation of texts and novels by Muslims that exhibited the same values and style as Hindus. The writing interjected Urdu, Arabic, and Persian words but

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[206]Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal*, 215-216.

nevertheless resembled Hindu writing in terms of format, style, and even religious belief—to the point that there were often disagreements about authorship and authenticity.[207] The effort to Islamicize Bengali rather than Bengalicize Islam is most pronounced in the effort of some to insist that Bengali be transcribed into Arabic script in order to preserve the essence of Islamic words. Nevertheless, such efforts were aborted and deemed impractical by the masses of Bengali Muslims who, for the most part, considered Bengali their mother tongue and saw little value in such projects.[208] It was not until after 1920, when the National Congress began to promote Hindi as the national language, that the majority of the Muslim Bengali press began to take seriously a consideration of Urdu as a viable option through which to promote unity among Muslims.[209] It was also during this time that schools for Muslim girls became more popular. Needless to say, the debates such as that about the nature and content of Bengali and its relation to Islam did not speed along Muslim women's educational projects. In fact, it was one of the greatest hindrances. The language question, like the *purdah* system, was tied to a dying culture of elites who used symbols like language and seclusion of women to create a Muslim unity. Where women fought for education within Muslim culture, they did so under strict conditions of *purdah*. The cases in which women succeeded in the efforts to formally school Muslim

[207]De, 105.

[208]M. Islam, 226-240.
[209]M. Islam, 226-244

women, English—the language and the government—was involved, as were several other foreign and local and languages, which women somehow had to master.

For almost all practical purposes, the Hindus and Muslims belonged to a single and largely undivided culture, and it should be clear beyond a doubt that the two communties were by no means isolated from each other. Most importantly, they spoke the same language—Bengali. This was true despite the beliefs and the activities of radicals who were bent on creating Hindu-Muslim separatism via the creation of artificial but "authentically" religious languages (heavily Sanskritized Bengali or Musalmani Bengali). They therefore recognized each other through the same media and discourses, and self-identified as the new articulate class of Bengalis in the same linguistic and literary fashion.

Part VI

Conclusion

In this paper I have expanded on Amin's work and defended the use of the term *bhadramahilā* as an analytic category. It serves Amin's purposes to recognize the hybrid nature of the people she studies. By accepting the possibility of comparison between Hindus and Muslims, and by calling them all *bhadramahilā*, she is able to highlight the variety of influences on Muslim women in colonial Bengal and obviates the need to dwell on the absence of information or the presence of negative information about Muslim women in Hindu nationalist literature. She is also able to show how the Brahmo reformers in the Bengal awakening had a great impact on the psyches of Muslim women, who as a result resemble Hindu *bhadramahilā* in fundamental ways. I agree that the women Amin discusses may indeed be called "*bhadramahilā*" since they self-identify in this way, and because a description of their lifestyles and values fits the established description of *bhadramahilā*.

In following Amin, my aim has not been to establish general claims about all Muslims or about an essential identity called Muslim or Bengali. My goal has been to emphasize the opposite: that there are many different kinds of Muslims, some of whom were similar to Hindus and who are rightly understood as members of the *bhadralok* class. This conclusion attests to the vitality and

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creativity of a small group of people who were able to accommodate and assimilate the tenets of their religion to a rapidly changing and extremely competitive (and often stifling) social environment. In this respect, Amin has a great deal to teach anyone working on the histories of Bengali women.

In particular, Mahua Sarkar's discussion would have benefitted from a more careful rendering of the Hindu middle class and their complex relationship to members of the Muslim middle class. I chose to discuss middle class notions of respectability because through these discourses (which include those covering women's education, clothing, decorum, etc.), differences between Hindus and Muslims become negligible. In particular, the discourse on shame, modesty and domestic education reveal that middle class women, regardless of religious affiliation, held similar beliefs, goals and self-perceptions. A close examination of their lives—their historical situation—also reveals similarities in terms of the process of receiving education and articulating their ideas and purposes. M. Sarkar does not deconstruct the terms that Hindus used to describe themselves, instead focusing only on negative propaganda against Muslims. M. Sarkar thus appears to be more concerned with the anti-Muslim character of the Hindu reform movement than with understanding the women of colonial Bengal in their own terms. It is for this reason that M. Sarkar declares Muslim women invisible—a feat of magic that cannot withstand close scrutiny.

Other discussions of middle class Bengali women would also benefit from a more careful examination of the politics of language, which would be a fruitful subject for future work. Bengali women's identities were fashioned from complex symbols and media of discourse, which defined the respectable class. What I have attempted to show is that Hindu and Muslim middle class women were similar in having had some exposure to English learning, and that both Hindus and Muslims nevertheless were Bengali, spoke Bengali, and self-identified accordingly. In my review of literature of the period, I have shown that the emerging middle class was characterized by a complex process of articulation and negotiation. In this literature, middle class educated women, despite having different religious affiliations, held the same view of the proper social role of women in the family, and hence the same view of what it was to be respectable.

Finally, I hope that I have shown that the discourse surrounding the *bhadramahilā* highlights the importance of identity politics and cultural similarity to the study of colonial Bengal. Although the term *bhadramahilā* was coined by Hindus and is commonly used to refer to Hindus, they are not forever entitled to ownership of it. In my analysis, I have provided ample evidence that rigid distinctions between the elite Hindu and Muslim culture in colonial Bengal do not withstand scrutiny. The writings that center on or imply a Hindu definition of the *bhadralok* are predicated upon an epistemological identification of *bhadra*-ness with Hindu-ness, which implies the other-ness of Muslims. Therefore, these

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writings are misleading about the nature of the Bengali middle class and its boundaries. For instance, S. M. Banerjee claimed that the *bhadralok* needed the *chotolok* as others against whom to define their distinctive *bhadra* status. Given that not all Muslims were servants, and that there were clear Islamic roots of *bhadra* culture (as is evidenced by the *bhadralok* use of Persian and Islamic vocabulary), it is curious that S. M. Banerjee does not further explore the possibility of *bhadra* Muslims and instead discounts them as *chotolok*. She, like others, must maintain that servants and Muslims be considered indisputably *chotolok* in order to sustain her assumption that *bhadralok* means Hindu. In other words, she tacitly acknowledges that the binary does not hold, but in insisting that it does, she participates in the discourse that inadvertently eliminates the lives of Muslim women from the history of the Bengali middle class. The consideration of middle class, respectable Muslims would have given her more insight with into *bhadra* perceptions of their social lessers, and more importantly, a necessary depth of understanding about the nature of Bengali society.

I end with note of caution, however. I suggest that Amin's use of *bhadramahilā* as an analytic category could force issues of power and class competition into the study retrospectively, as it has done in the present study. The category came into vogue under the influence of the colonial knowledge system and perpetuates its hierarchy, thereby maintaining the colonial system of power. Indeed, there is relatively little evidence that the term was used widely to refer to

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Muslims or accepted for such use by even a small community of people in dialogue with one another. For all these reasons, more research is necessary on this subject. Evidence of how the use of the term *bhadramahilā* was received by various members of Bengali society would be particularly useful in this regard. Perhaps, then, a more complete answer might be given as to whether the educated Muslim women of Colonial Bengal were considered *bhadra*. This plea comes in response to a deep suspicion that scholars have become hypersensitive to categorization games, the result of which has been to over-politicize their subjects. This attitude follows more closely the discourse of post-colonial nationalism and reflects less and less the actions, voices, and intentions of the women being studied.

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Vita

Jacqueline Lee Pallardy was born on December 15th, 1982. Her parents are Jean Victoria Thibault Pallardy and Lee Francis Pallardy III. Jacqueline receievd her B. A. in Liberal Studies from the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. Her permanent addresss is: 4305 Robin Lane, Tampa FL 33609.

This thesis was typed by Jacqueline Pallardy.