

Women's Images, Men's Imagination

Review >

South Asia

The world of Indian women witnessed significant changes in the course of the nineteenth century. Patriarchal notions about lifelong protection and seclusion of women came under fire then and abolition of suttee, the pleas for widow remarriage, and the demands for female education were major issues that engaged public opinion. The position of Indian women also prominently figured in the novels of the period. In her study, Banani Mukhia explores the construction of female characters in fiction written by males.

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This perspective offers interesting new insights in different gender relations, such as between: father and daughter, husband and wife, young wife and male in-laws, and the relations between women themselves: mother and daughter, wife and mother-in-law, and female friends. Banani does this by analysing various social roles played by the heroines in the novels of three great Bengali writers whose careers span more than half a century: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Among the earliest novels analysed in this study are Bankim's *Indira* and *Bishabriksha*, both from 1873; the latest ones are Rabindranath's *Jogajog* (1929) and Sarat Chandra's *Shrikanta* (1917–1933). This broad time-span enables Banani to sketch developments and important changes.

As these novels reflect only to some extent the social realities of their times, Banani adds observations derived from her own historical and sociological research on the period. Yet the novels themselves remain the central focus of this study, as 'these were essentially women-centred stories in which women had been imagined from a great diversity of

backgrounds, characters, moods as well as patterns of behaviour, so as to defy the stereotypical woman' (p.9). The main theme is approached from different disciplines. For this reason the study offers interesting insights for disciplines such as women's studies, history of private life, sociology, pedagogy, and psychology. It may also serve as a model for similar ventures in the novels of the same period written in other Indian languages. The book has an appendix with summaries of all the novels discussed in the main text, an extensive bibliography, and an index. ◀

- Mukhia, Banani, *Women's Images Men's Imagination: Female characters in Bengali fiction in late nineteenth and early twentieth century*, New Delhi: Manohar (2002), pp.167, ISBN 81-7304-410-4

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