



Romanticism on the Net

Nakshi Kantha: Embroidered Quilts and Narratives of Social Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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Abstract

This essay seeks to re-evaluate *nakshi kantha*, a women's quilting tradition in Bengal, and reconfigure the discourse around it. The quilts came in various sizes and shapes, depending on what utility they served. The focus of this essay will be on specimens of the large rectangular pieces, meant to be coverlets or rugs to sit upon, that were called *sujni kantha*. The art of covering the quilted surface with elaborate patterns flourished in colonial Bengal in the nineteenth century. The sweeping changes in the sociopolitical fabric of the region that began with the ascendance of British power after the Battle of Plassey accelerated in the second part of the nineteenth century. The embroidered tableaux stitched into the surface of the *sujni kantha* bear witness to some of these rapid changes. The pieces, which were made in rural Bengal, have been collected in museums across the world, as well as in India. They emerged as collectors' objects around the 1930s, buoyed by a nationalist discourse that sought to foreground the spiritual autonomy of India in its long-standing traditions of art and craft. A product of women's labour inscribed with women's unique perspectives on change has thus been de-historicized and seen as idealized examples of women's service, patience, and cultural purity – values espoused by the nationalist elite of India. This article seeks to locate *nakshi kantha* within the specific historical circumstances of their production and circulation and to see them as registers of a specifically feminine perspective on social change. Partha Chatterjee's well-accepted thesis that binaries of inside/outside that developed in the latter half of colonial rule played out along gendered lines, enjoining a restrictive, homebound life upon women, requires qualification. The *sujni kantha* specimens I examine challenge colonial stereotypes of native women relegated to the shadowy inner quarters of *zenanas* stuck in time, while also resisting the nationalist construct of idealized Indian womanhood.

Biographical Note

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Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

1. Pieces of worn-out cloth, joined, quilted, and embroidered by patient hands, were the canvas on which women of Bengal recorded their lives in a transitional society, along with their perception of the changes taking place under nineteenth-century British colonialism. The label *nakshi kantha*, by which these quilts are now famously known, is a compound word deriving from “naksha” (pattern) and “kantha” (quilt). The term refers to the abundance of motifs executed to hold together and embellish, while also giving new life to, discarded fabrics. Made by rural women in precious hours stolen from rigorous housework, the needlework art was practiced in some of the districts of what is now Bangladesh but that were then parts of undivided Bengal. These richly patterned quilts reassembled and transformed old, discarded cotton *saris* or *dhotis*¹ into exquisite pieces that would survive for years. Made in various sizes, these quilts served different purposes. They could be used as wraps for newborn babies or light covers on a cold night, or they could be spread out for an honoured guest to sit on. Smaller ones, in different shapes, were used to wrap books and mirrors. Some could be shaped to form purses. The smaller ones employed vegetal motifs, but given the expanse of the *sujni kantha*, the women could give free rein to an exuberance of figural motifs.
2. Common to them all was the layering of cloth and surface embellishments. Three layers of recycled cloth, softened by use, were stitched together with a simple but dense running stitch. The threads used were also retrieved from the borders of discarded saris, and the colours were thus mostly common shades of red, black, and yellow. For making the *sujni*

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

kantha, a central panel using the full width of the sari or dhoti (varying from forty-five to fifty inches approximately) was joined with narrower panels on either side to make the quilt broader. The quilted base had a gently rippled texture, which was surrounded by a geometrically patterned border. This served the practical purpose of preventing the edges from fraying. It also acted like a frame, circumscribing a space within which various narrative or allegorical scenes could be incised. The expanse of the quilt often featured stock semiotic elements, such as fish, lotuses, and the tree of life,² which were considered auspicious, derived from ritualistic decorations made during religious ceremonies. These symbolic motifs, easily understood within the community, were combined with figures drawn from everyday life. Thus, gods and goddesses, figures from festivals and folk tales, men and women caught in the middle of daily activities, objects of everyday life, and even foreign soldiers marching in rows or *sahibs* (white men) hunting on horseback crowded around an area with a non-figurative motif at the centre. Apparently removed from the changing flow of life in colonial Bengal, the figures nonetheless testify to the watchful eyes that observed the interactions between the colonizers and the colonized. A recycling process thus turned into a site of creative as well as critical representation of the world as seen by women. These were not commodities to be bought and sold, but unique pieces that bore the stamp of how life was lived and understood by them, telling stories of change and continuity through textile and thread.

3. In this essay I explore two quilts, both exhibited in the Gurusaday Museum in Kolkata, as registers of the socioeconomic transformations accompanying British ascendancy in India as observed by women. By considering the quilts I hope to demonstrate the evidence of

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

feminine perspectives that were crafted into them and to exemplify a way of reading other quilts. Even if all the quilts do not achieve the intricacy of motif and suggestive complexity of the one made by a woman called Manadasundari (fig. 2), many of them did reflect contemporary society with varying degrees of detail. The notes accompanying the exhibits date them from the middle or late nineteenth century – although one can only guess at the likely dates, given that they took years to finish. There are no publication details of the kind one might find for books. A motif like the railway engine embroidered on one of the quilts (fig. 1) indicates a date after 1857, when the Eastern Bengal Railway Act enabled the laying of several lines in Bengal and Assam. Pika Ghosh, in her recently published book *Making Kantha, Making Home: Women at Work in Colonial Bengal*, points out that the name of the maker, or even a dedication to the recipient of a particular piece, embroidered into the nakshi kantha (fig. 1) may indicate that it was made in the second half of the nineteenth century, when literacy began to percolate among women in Bengal (50).

4. According to Ghosh, the highly evolved visual language in some of the quilts also suggests a long tradition of needlework art using mostly vegetal motifs, which was being reinvented to produce intricate visual tableaux of village life and the influx of foreigners.³ Recovered from obscurity by collectors in the 1930s, their introduction into the metropolitan art world became part of a cultural discourse that mirrors romantic attitudes toward the labours of rural folk. What M. H. Abrams identified as “the rectified outlook which inverts the status of the lowly, the trivial, and the mean” (411) in the context of British Romanticism is given a nationalist twist in representations of the nakshi kantha tradition in early twentieth-century Bengal. By coupling the notions of spiritual and cultural authenticity, the kantha

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

tradition was valorized with a strong sentiment of cultural revivalism. This is evident from the fact that around the same time, nakshi kantha also entered the Bengali literary world through a popular ballad published in 1929, *Nakshi Kanthar Maath (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt)*. Ghosh mentions this work while discussing the emotional associations generated by these handmade pieces (29). But her perception of the makers of these quilts as women living on the cusp of change is subsumed by her broader discourse on these pieces as representations of sentiments attached to kinship bonds and the idea of home. The potential of nakshi kantha to reveal a larger view of history, albeit from the margins of a restricted feminine world, is yet to be fully examined. In the historiography of Bengali anti-colonialism, the shadowy figure of the female subject is among the subaltern voices that have often remained unrecorded. Recently, however, some have been recovered from non-official records. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, has pitted women's autobiographies⁴ against the literary representations of women in nineteenth-century Bengal by the noted Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Chatterjee points out how male narratives have been complicit in co-opting women's histories within the larger framework of a nationalist discourse rooted in imported ideas of political justice (126–32). By dwelling on published material, Chatterjee's sociological analysis of women's autobiographies concentrates on literate women who could take advantage of the new and powerful medium of print, mostly through the encouragement of their male kin. Broadening the spectrum of texts offered by Chatterjee, I read the figures on the nakshi kantha pieces as visual texts capable of representing a feminine worldview shaped by the quotidian life of the villages.

Colonial and Nationalist Narratives of Indian Women

5. To look critically at the images we find in the nakshi kantha pieces is to read against the grain of both colonial and nationalist stereotypes and recover fragments of the various histories of colonial Bengal – histories that have been marginalized by the grand narrative of the “Bengal Renaissance” – that is, of an anti-colonial cultural, spiritual, and nationalist awakening led by the Western-educated elite. The quilts that have survived are not simply examples of women’s painstaking labour, uncorrupted esthetic sensibilities, and devoted service; they are also encrypted texts that offer, under the cover of naivete, vignettes of historical changes as experienced or observed from the confines of home. The advent of colonial power transformed the agrarian economy, creating great wealth for a few but impoverishing a great many others. A dynamic public sphere developed for enterprising men willing to collaborate and transact business with the British. The new elite like the Tagore family, the Debs of Sovabazar, and even Rammohan Roy are commonly recalled names in this context. Women, on the other hand, continued to be sequestered and shackled to their narrow domestic roles but were not quite blind to the currents of the outside world. They registered, with anxiety or subtle irony, the novel and incongruous features of a new social order emerging from restructured systems of land ownership, revenue collection, and trade. Their gaze framed some of their visual representations on the quilts.

6. Media such as folk songs, ritual music, and nakshi kantha pieces evince reflections of feminine perspectives otherwise banished to the peripheries of a male-dominated culture. The challenge for women, when critiquing society, would have been to compose a form of

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

expression that would not be overtly defiant. The contrast between the acceptance of ritual songs and the marginalization of folk songs typifies the suppression of women's unbridled voices. Songs or doggerels, originating often from lower-class women, sometimes circulated surreptitiously in the inner quarters of the gentry. But the women entertainers practising folk forms, or the songs that entertained the lowly women employed as menial labourers in affluent homes, were often branded as crude and pernicious by the newly created gentry (*bhadralok*), who were frequently the objects of their bawdy critique (Banerjee 127–30). They were easily consigned to the realm of a disreputable subculture from which respectable women were expected to stay away. Ritual songs, on the other hand, were accepted as women's pious expression, for they were a form of prayer associated with integral aspects of women's lives – marriages, births, harvests. The women sang them on auspicious occasions, using the vernacular rather than the Sanskrit prayers, which few would have known, let alone understood. Similarly, nakshi kantha continued to circulate unregulated by any censorial gaze, as they were deemed to be naive artifacts made by women steeped in an unchanging world of familial bonds and devotion. The social position of these women depended on their unquestioning acquiescence to family codes of conduct and modesty prevailing in a patriarchal society that were inimical to their individual self-expression.⁵ But, as the nakshi kantha pieces evince, women, of course, were not completely naïve; coded into their visual narratives are keen perceptions of the disparities and incongruities of a cross-section of subjugated people with unequal experiences in the new colonial order. Thus, traditional symbols like the lotus or fish, which were also used in ritual decorations, coexist with trains, boats, soldiers – markers of changes in the sphere of the everyday – in the field of the nakshi kantha.

7. The diktats of patriarchy denied women belonging to conservative Bengali families opportunities for education or self-realization. Paradoxically, even within the newly modern gentry, the men who desired women's emancipation from evils such as illiteracy or strict sequestration in the female quarters took it upon themselves to devise and enjoin codes of conduct upon upper class women with scant regard for their individual agency (Bannerji 171-72).⁶ This meant that women – except those in the limited Western-educated circle in Calcutta, such as the Dutt sisters, Toru and Aru, or the women of the Tagore family – were reduced to mere shadows glimpsed mostly from a distance. They mostly entered the imagination of the West as mediated figures who were often spoken about but had little possibility of speaking for themselves. The claustrophobic world of the *zenana*, the forlorn life of the child bride too often widowed before reaching adolescence and condemned to a life of material and sexual deprivation, the agonized shrieks of the *sati* trapped in the engulfing flames of the husband's funeral pyre – in the absence of women's own biographical accounts, truth and hearsay mixed freely in the accounts of colonial travellers and were communicated to a Western audience. Even the well-meant efforts of the early nineteenth-century Indian reformers – again, mostly male⁷ – contributed to this picture; in their bid to address the plight of women in Hindu society, they wrote strongly of women's victimhood and the darkness of the world inhabited by them. As a result, the saga of women's enlightenment in a place like Bengal, where the colonial encounter was bringing in rapid socioeconomic changes, elided accounts of women's independent initiatives by reducing them to the status of passive objects of reformist zeal.

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

8. The Western stereotypes about the Indian woman as submissive and terrorized victims of a perverted and oppressive Brahminic order stemmed from the accounts of the early colonists, missionaries,⁸ and painters⁹ who recorded their impressions of a strange and alien country with equal measures of horror and fascination. The image was not easily dispelled, and Indian scholars have deliberated on the reasons for its persistence. According to Chatterjee,¹⁰ colonial rule in a land with an acknowledged civilizational heritage had to be justified to a home audience then preoccupied with debates on equity and political justice (118–19). The most emotive subject in the arsenal of colonial propaganda was the plight of India's women, epitomized sensationally in the very public spectacle of sati. Chatterjee refers to Lata Mani's examination of the debate around the subject of sati; in her book-length study, Mani has sketched how an infrequent practice was made a *cause célèbre* in the larger tussle between colonial and indigenous authority.¹¹ Sati, according to Mani, became emblematic of the differences between civilizations, opening administrative debates about acceptable degrees of colonial intervention in matters of faith and custom. Mani's discussions have drawn attention to the fact that although the abolition of the custom in 1829 in areas under British jurisdiction is regarded as a turning point for women's emancipation in India, the debate about abolition had to be settled based on the interpretation of religious injunctions rather than rational humanitarian principles espoused by Enlightenment philosophy. The discourse, including the arguments offered by the reformer Rammohun Roy, concentrated on whether sati could be considered a valid Hindu religious injunction. The debates about scriptural precepts thus failed to project the women themselves as subjects with thinking minds and suffering bodies. The role of the colonial government was represented as an emancipatory one, even though it was careful not to

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

project the legislation as a repudiation of Hindu religious faith. This image of the role of colonial governance persisted in the British imagination. In the preface to *The Suttee: A Poem, With Notes*, written in 1846, seventeen years after the practice was abolished, the anonymous poet contrasts the attitudes of the Hindu with those of the Christian, particularly the British under Queen Victoria: “Although the practice of burning, and of burying alive the widows of Hindûs, with the remains of their husbands, still prevails in Hindûstaun, it is happily no longer tolerated in those parts which are subject to British rule” (ii). The fact that the proceeds from the sale of this work were to go to the Church Missionary Society suggests that portrayals of hapless Hindu women persisted in the imagination of the West and served to garner support for the proselytizing activities of missionaries.

9. The unnamed author of *The Suttee* seems to have been deploying certain representational clichés that had become current since the early nineteenth century in literary productions in Britain. Interestingly, the epigraph, which quotes lines from Robert Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), shows how images derived from the earlier period persisted as convenient tropes of Hindu primitivity, though it does not echo the vivid portrayal of physical distress of the woman found in the earlier poem. Southey’s poem contains a horrific picture of the trapped woman whose cries are drowned by the “wild dissonance” (The Funeral, stanza 9, line 21) originating from those who accompany the procession. His poetic imagination captured the reality of the woman’s suffering and her attempted resistance to an inevitable fate, something quite missing from the later poem, which focuses more on the protagonist’s unquestioning submission to Brahmanical customs. The widow in *The Suttee* is “Unskill’d to judge, and willing to be led” (12). The image of the burning

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

widow also resonated with several women poets; Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Lydia Sigourney both wrote poems on the subject. Some, like Landon, saw it through a prism of elevated spirituality,¹² but others held up the practice as a reflection of the degenerate and savage state of the natives. In Sigourney's poem, the sati's shriek haunts the male perpetrators as her voice rises above their "demoniac shout" (line 41). Other popular Romantic orientalist works of the early nineteenth century, including Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, also referred to sati, associating it with a particular idea of India, and of Indian women as victims, in the popular British imagination. Deemed incapable of any rational engagement with the world, even their acts of resistance seem fated to end tragically. As evident from the 1846 poem, these early-nineteenth-century conceptions of women within "traditional Indian" society (the reality was much more diverse), continued well into the later decades of the century. The silent testimony that occasionally emerges from a close inspection of some of the extant nakshi kantha helps to dispel the exoticized darkness that has been indiscriminately perpetuated by orientalist literature and paintings.

10. Sati was certainly the most sensationalist trope that represented the plight of Indian women to a Western audience, but it was not the only one. Through references in the travel writings of Helen Mackenzie (1853) and Fanny Parkes (1850), the zenana became another signal image of the moribund condition of Indian society.¹³ Though the accounts of Parkes and Mackenzie suggest that the zenana was not completely immune to restlessness, in the popular imagination it continued to conjure a world of blind faith and narrow orthodoxy. These images persisted even in the early twentieth century, with the women's quarters

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

being considered insulated from the changes resulting from the emerging network of relations under colonialism. Such an incarcerated feminine sphere, it was deemed, could only be emancipated by the masculine agency of either the British government and Christian church or by a handful of enlightened men deriving their values from English education. Absent from these narratives was any attention to what women themselves made of their situation.

11. The most intricately patterned examples of nakshi kantha, found on the rugs or coverlets called sujni kantha, offer a counter-narrative from the margins that contests such representations by the colonizer and the intellectually converted colonized elite. This unique tradition of embroidered narratives can claim a place in the history of the subaltern experience of colonialism, first brought to the fore by the historian Ranajit Guha. While the rise of Indian resistance to British rule challenges the myth of enlightened colonial governance, the root causes were not uniform. The realities of life under colonialism – an impoverished rural economy, an exploitative nexus between the British and the comprador class, and widening disparities in the entire fabric of society – affected different classes differently. For the poor peasants it was an explosive combination that erupted in their sporadic uprisings outside the mainstream nationalist movement. Even before the advent of nationalist politics, peasant discontent in Bengal kept erupting from the late eighteenth century as a result of a regime of exorbitant rents and hardships exacerbated by failed harvests. Though not all of it was caused solely by the British, they soon became the focus of resistance along with the exploitative landlords who had become powerful under the new regime.¹⁴ Around 1831, more than two decades before the Indian rebellion of 1857,

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

Titu Mir, a peasant leader, actually seized power for a short while from the British in Faridpur and Kustia, both towns in Bengal. The Santhals, an indigenous tribe, rebelled in 1855. These movements were not part of what we recognize as “nationalist struggles.” But they were certainly expressions of proto-nationalist discontent that surfaced outside the circles of the elite intelligentsia who eventually became the leaders of the nationalist movement.

12. The women who crafted the nakshi kantha, though far removed from the hurly-burly of rebellion, were not completely insulated against these events. Though they represent a different kind of subaltern consciousness, as colonized subjects in a patriarchal society, there could be occasional flashes of a critique of the times arising from a closer connection with rural realities.

13. Under the *zamindari* system, the power and wealth of the big landholders were contingent upon regularly recognizing the superiority of the new masters, at least in public life. Bengal, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, was the first part of India to come under East India Company rule. The ensuing years witnessed the emergence of the *babus*, a new elite class in Calcutta with close links to the British. The accumulation of great wealth was displayed in their ostentatious mansions, which also became sites for lavish entertainments.¹⁵ Calcutta attracted not only the landed elite, but also men from the burgeoning middle class who hoped to benefit from the opportunities provided by a modern education, made possible by the establishment of English-language academies, the Hindu College in 1817, and the University of Calcutta in 1857. Soon, rich landholders’ sons as

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

well as meritorious students of lesser means began to travel from the villages to study in the colleges. Apart from higher education, the city provided an escape from the moribund orthodoxy of village society. The city was the place of opportunities as well as dissipation, and money flowed both in and out of pockets. The women who remained out of sight, left out and left behind, felt these crosscurrents which were disrupting the familiar course of their own lives. The sujni kantha pieces in museum collections today, if regarded carefully, display how they registered the socioeconomic tensions of the times. The connections between the foreign traders and the aspirational class among the natives did not escape the watchful eyes that looked out from behind the walls of the home. The contrasting figures and motifs that crowd the embroidered panels derive from observed socioeconomic disparities and incongruities that arose in the new social order.

14. The growing schism between the city and the village resulted in the latter being considered “unmodern” and in need of reform. But, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the rise of nationalist sentiments led to a cultural revivalism that resulted in village life being considered a site of continuing cultural values that had to be preserved, of a cultural autonomy jeopardized in the metropolis because of the need to accommodate the ways of the foreigners. If nationalism in India were to be bolstered by the reclamation of traditional values, it had to be articulated through the rediscovery of traditions that were considered to belong to the authentic soul of the country but had been imperilled by the arrival of industrial products from the West. It was against this backdrop that the art and craft sensibilities of the early decades of the twentieth century began to emphasize the richness of Indian artistic traditions and indigenous handicrafts. Women’s handicrafts in

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

particular were viewed as examples of a continuous flow of esthetic sensibilities in the private sphere, as opposed to the ostentations of the neo-rich. The Hindu Mela,¹⁶ part of a revivalist cultural project, had a dedicated section for women's handicrafts. The first decade of the new century also saw the establishment of organizations encouraging women's handicrafts, led by elite women including those belonging to the Tagore family. The debut of the nakshi kantha as a collector's item, and as a subject of an emergent nationalist discourse around Indian art, may be linked to this particular trend in the Indian national movement. If the village, particularly village women, represented the essence of India's undaunted spiritual autonomy, then these quilts were exquisite expressions of that heritage, executed lovingly by women in the privacy of their homes.

15. The ideal Indian woman whose prime virtues were devotion and piety was a cliché that coloured the way in which women's productions were viewed. In 1876, when Rassundari Devi, an upper-class housewife living in rural Bengal, published *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, the preface, by Jyotirindranath Tagore (the elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore), noted her dutiful devotion and religiosity with approval. Surprisingly, he ignored the tremendous initiative and grit she displayed in conquering her letters in secret.¹⁷ The introduction of nakshi kantha in the public sphere also perpetuated similar views about women, though the participation of women in politics during the nationalist upsurge following the partition of Bengal in 1905 had already proved that political awareness had been brewing among women of both rural and metropolitan societies. Stories abound in oral recollections of women helping to shelter firebrand youths on the run, offering gold jewellery for the cause of freedom, abjuring foreign goods, and not lighting the kitchen fire as a mark of protest.

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

That these actions were not limited to the cities undercuts the assumption that rural folk remained chained to a pre-modern past, while the Western-educated metropolitan elite alone provided leadership in the nationalist awakening and social reformation.

16. The subjects of the nakshi kantha designs appear mundane compared to more polemical writings concerning the plight of women as a result of child-marriage, early widowhood, lack of education, and other social issues. These writings appeared in nineteenth-century women's magazines¹⁸ meant for a limited readership comprising educated women belonging to liberal households. But the nakshi kantha are not, for that reason, unworldly, even though the cultural discourse around them has tended to emphasize their origin in a sphere supposedly uncorrupted by crass materialism or overt sophistication.

17. The process of recycling old clothes and the milieu within which a nakshi kantha would typically be made and circulated influenced the way they were regarded and presented to the world at large in the 1930s. The embroidered pieces had long remained within families as heirlooms, but in the late 1930s Gurusaday Dutt, an officer in the Indian Civil Services of British India, and Stella Kramrisch, joint editors of *The Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, brought them to the notice of the wider public. Their discourse reiterated the nationalist and orientalist discourses. Both invested the pieces with the aura of heritage objects encapsulating an unbroken tradition nurtured through kinship ties, rather than through the compulsions of economic transactions.

Romanticizing Nakshi Kantha: Home, Nature, Spirit

18. Displayed in the Gurusaday Museum, which houses Dutt's extensive collection of folk arts, the pieces I discuss here offer themselves as surfaces bearing distinct marks of their makers' sensitive perception of the outside world as viewed from the inside. This inside/outside binary was an actual experience in women's lives, given the severe restrictions on their mobility, with even the outer quarters of the big mansions being prohibited territory. The typical layout of the large mansions had two distinct quarters, usually with a courtyard separating them. The outer quarters were reserved for men, and women did not step into them. Most of these women observed the *purdah*, not appearing before men other than their closest male relatives, and then only with the sari or the veil pulled down to cover their faces from prying eyes. The cover on the head also helped women belonging to families of modest means to keep themselves away from the public eye, even if they did not have the luxury of having exclusive quarters. Married couples did not meet openly during the day, and even men who adopted modern manners and mores in public mostly left them behind on entering the inner quarters. In spite of that, the home could not be wholly insulated from the changes taking place outside. Young men brought back newfangled products from the city as gifts – often clandestine, as they were considered embarrassing romantic attention – for the young wives they had to leave back in the village. Sometimes they also brought with them ideas that contradicted the conservative mores of their families. On a darker note, failed harvests or debts accumulated as a result of profligate lifestyles could cause reversals in family fortunes that affected women. In the case of large landowners, tenants could be affected if an estate were put up

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

for auction. For many women, particularly those in upper-class families, these transactions in the world outside their homes could only be viewed from interstitial spaces like a window casement, a terrace, or a screened balcony. A woman's face at the window, gazing out at the world beyond, is a recurring motif found on terracotta temples dotting the Bengal countryside, depicting how sequestration may have literally curtailed women's view of the world but could not curb their curiosity. The world, with all its licence and revelry, percolated into her quarters, across the long corridors or courtyards that separated the outer from the inner quarters of the home.

19. The sujni kantha pieces were often the joint handiwork of several women of the same family, sometimes even cutting across generations. The more intricate the design, the longer it took to finish a piece. This may have been one of the reasons for the wide variety of motifs we find on them. The quilts became registers of changing times and experiences as well as inherited objects linking generations. Often presented as gifts to mark life events like marriage or childbirth, their circulation preserved kinship bonds and bore the aura of family, rather than socioeconomic history. Such representation was institutionalized by folk archivists such as Dutt and Kramrisch, but the perception was already ingrained within the Bengali society in which they circulated. Even Pika Ghosh's valuable recent study situates the quilts within the discourse of homemaking.

20. In the October 1939 volume of the *Modern Review*, a monthly miscellany that was popular among the Indian intelligentsia in the first part of the twentieth century, Dutt wrote:

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

The Kantha art represents the serene and joyous self-expression of a race of women creative artists whose watchwords are thrift, beauty and sound craftsmanship. In their creations we find a combination of a keen power of observation and a profound feeling of sympathy with the movements of the joyous teeming life of nature – a combination of an intense sense of beauty and a scrupulous avoidance of luxury, sophistication and over refinement. (461)

It is evident from this passage that Dutt sets the terms of the discourse around the kantha art by aligning it with certain virtues like thrift and homely esthetics, which were valued feminine attributes. The sanctity of domestic life and service is something that was also emphasized by the women themselves, as is evident from their writing in magazine articles and autobiographies. It is no accident, perhaps, that small samplers could be found in many families with kantha work containing an adage in Bengali that may be translated as, “A happy home is the accomplishment of a virtuous woman.” The association of thrift with the nakshi kantha is particularly significant, as it sets this form of embroidery apart from the fancy needlework done by more “modern” women, with imported material and “English” patterns. While that was lampooned by conservative male writers as an expensive pastime and a conscious display of accomplishment (Chatterjee 122), the nakshi kantha quilts, which ensured that discarded fabric was not wasted but repurposed to provide for domestic needs, were regarded as exemplary specimens of female frugality. The combination of women’s labour and creativity poured into an item of domestic utility became idealized. Implicit in Dutt’s admiration is a sense that these were superior to the imitations of foreign botanical patterns, which were considered artificial and needlessly

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

refined. Only in the nakshi kantha could an authentic depiction of the natural environment be found, Dutt seemed to suggest. His privileging of rural women's closeness to nature seems to echo certain Romantic-era male poets' preoccupations with the authenticity of emotions in the lap of nature.¹⁹ It does, however, ignore the fact that the women may actually have been drawing from a common pool of vegetal and animal motifs. In spite of the endless varieties of ways in which they were combined, the floral motifs, for instance, recur in floor decorations made during auspicious ceremonies and on engraved moulds made for sweets. The embroidered animals and birds also seem to replicate figures found in locally made wooden or clay toys. Therefore, what Dutt commends as the "life of nature" may well have been inspired by stylized representations of natural objects in items meant for daily use or leisure within the home. What he overlooks is how these quilts depict the physical environment of life at various levels of society.

21. If Dutt's account of the nakshi kantha was tinged with the nationalist valorization of women and village life, Kramrisch combined a folk archivist's interest with an ideological investment in the communitarian life of rural Bengal, considered to be the repository of timeless spiritual tradition. In one of the pioneering essays on this textile art, Kramrisch has left a definitive account of the symbolic significance of nakshi kantha motifs and the sequence in which they are deployed, contextualizing them within a larger field of ritual arts associated with Hindu religious ceremonies. Referring to the custom of painting patterns on the floor with powdered rice mixed with water, known as *alpona*, she concludes that the kantha also creates an auspicious field known as a *mandala*. According to Kramrisch,

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

The material symbolism of the Kantha, its being made of rags, joined invisibly, is that of a restitution of wholeness. The symbolism of the embroidery is that of universal manifestation and a return to the centre; the disc of the central lotus, and the trees in the corners pointing with their top to the centre are the “leitmotive” [sic]. The design of the kantha directly results from this dual symbolism. The rags when sewn together and reinforced by darning stitches conform in shape with that of any woven fabric in its wholeness. It must be square or rectangular according to the threads which are interwoven at right angles. The four cornered cloth has its centre fixed by folding it crosswise. The *Bindu*, the centre of the lotus wheel and the trees in the diagonals are marked at the same time. The rest of the design is inserted consistently, concentric circles around the lotus and stripes or panels parallel with the edges, and as much as is left of the field between the central lotus and the edges is filled with figures. (151)

What Dutt had recognized as thrift is given a mystical twist by Kramrisch. Her interpretation appears aligned with Romantic ideas regarding the so-called timeless Orient suspended in an atemporal state. Dutt, in his eagerness to find the uncorrupted culture of the country, and Kramrisch, in her determination to detect traces of the spiritual and eternal, overlook the more mundane observations encoded in some of the pieces. Neither has any comment to offer on the organization of the panels and the scenes they depict, which were undoubtedly influenced by the individual viewpoints of their creators. Each piece, therefore, was both original and traditional at the same time. This paradox is hinted at by Dutt, who observed in his essay how the element of communality, a sharing of traditions

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

arising from close kinship, coexisted with originality. He comments on how such originality arises from each woman's unique experience of life:

A remarkable feature of the art of the Kantha is that the female artist makes it a point of honour never to imitate a design from another kantha but always to bring out original design in each work, based partly no doubt on the memory of the kanthas which have been produced before by the family or which have been observed in other families in the village but drawing largely on her own individual experience and imagination. (Dutt 458–59)

The originality rightly noted by Dutt would not have been possible had these been bespoke pieces made for a market, catering to the tastes of foreign consumers. [The Satgaon quilts](#), for instance, had been prized items of Indo-Portuguese trade (Finn n.p.). These, too, were beautifully embroidered handmade products, but made to order in *karkhanas*, or organized production centres, using rich silks and cross-cultural designs dominated by hunting or maritime scenes. Often, they reflected the strength and valour of the European adventurers, and the esthetics were those of European tapestry, but fused with motifs of Indian landscapes and animals.

22. The nakshi kantha was outside the network of such commercial transactions. Kramrisch mentions that “no commercial incentive accelerates or vitiates the process” (142). To a modern viewer such as me, it seems quite possible that the women who designed and made them were not entirely oblivious to the commercial and revenue networks of a colonial

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

system disrupting the older socioeconomic fabric. They experienced the changes as long shadows cast on various aspects of life that filtered into their sequestered lives. Taxes, laws, changes in agricultural patterns, the advent of technology, newfangled baubles brought home by the men who went to the city – all these would have brought the “world” to the threshold of the “home.” My subsequent discussions of some of the pieces will demonstrate, I hope, that insulated from the dictates of markets, the nakshi kantha created by the women over time became the palimpsests recording their impressions of the new social dynamics. Perhaps it also helped that these pieces were not meant to be hung up on the wall and gazed at but were spread out for specially favoured people, mostly men, to sit upon. Thus, they evaded the kind of critical attention that they receive within a museum setting and continued to circulate as objects of domestic use embellished with naïve artistry. But now, hung on gallery walls and inspected closely by the modern viewer, the nakshi kantha tradition unfolds a history registered from the thresholds of home by women who had little scope to express their own opinions freely.

Counter-Narratives: Quilts of Colonial Encounter

23. The examples of nakshi kantha shown in figures 1 and 2 help us to visualize the inequities of colonial society through contrapuntal images. They offer a historical perspective outside the conventions of colonial or nationalist discourses in which myth and lived histories intermingle unselfconsciously. The sacred and the profane coexist in close proximity in the panels of the quilts.



Fig. 1. Sujni kantha, a type of quilted bedspread, in the collection of the Gurusaday Museum, c. nineteenth century CE. Size: 5'9" X 4'1/2", Jessore (Undivided Bengal).

24. The first example (fig. 1) suggests how the intrusion of modern technology into rural landscapes may have been viewed by the local population, including women. The hand that worked the needle has skilfully divided the surface into different zones, each embellished with a variety of motifs. But the most striking feature in the piece is the way a traditional chariot, meant for carrying idols during religious processions, is contrasted on the opposite side with a train, a very recent arrival, puffing smoke as it steams past in its many-wheeled majesty. The strange, almost bovine, shape of the engine, however, suggests that perhaps train engines were not yet familiar enough sights to be captured in detail. It may have been easier to approximate a shape closer to a bullock, as bullock carts were still

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

the primary means of transportation for most villagers. Could it be that, by shaping the engine like a bullock, the creator was suggesting a parallel between the beast of burden and the steam-powered marvel of Western technology? On the other hand, the railways and the people who journeyed on them probably seemed as remote to the common people, women especially, as the gods who rode the chariot, which is the temple-like structure shown on the opposite side. Careful scrutiny shows circles at the bottom of that figure, signifying wheels, distinguishing the structure as a chariot. The occurrence of motifs like trains, steamboats, and foreign travellers on such pieces suggests how the artists were made aware of the advent of technology and the presence of the foreigners from the intersections of “home” and “world” – windows, balconies, or rooftops. The interaction between a rapidly industrializing West and the pre-industrialized East that commenced during the Romantic era continued well into the second half of the nineteenth century. The mechanical marvels of engineering were initially peripheral presences in daily life but wielded a new kind of authority associated with awe-inspiring inventions and administrative changes. In the quilt under scrutiny, the slow fading away of an indigenous lifestyle and wonder and curiosity about new forces are presented as part of the rich tapestry of life.



Fig. 2. Sujni kantha (quilted bedspread), c. nineteenth century CE, from Khulna, now in Bangladesh. From the collection of the Gurusaday Sangrahashala, Kolkata.

25. In figure 2, which holds pride of place in the same collection, we can find evidence of an extraordinary talent combined with an astute historical responsiveness. This quilt demonstrates the extreme possibilities of this narrative form by combining a legacy of women's representative techniques with a growing desire to record an individual woman's observation of her world. Once again, though a specific date is absent, the embroidered coin about which Ghosh has written suggests a date between 1835 and 1862 (90). The quilt displays the typical layout that Kramrisch outlined, beginning with a central radiating lotus and the tree of life in the four corners. The latter motif, symbolizing continuity amid

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

change, takes on special significance here as the narrative on the quilt tells of the advent of the foreign in a native milieu. The lotus, invested with various symbolic significances in the Indian subcontinent, is the seat of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity in the Hindu pantheon. It is among the commonest motifs that occur on these quilts. The motif alludes to the aura of a woman's designated role as the custodian of the family's well-being. It is also a common symbol used in the patterns made on the floor during Hindu rituals, the *alpona*, which also involves the demarcation of an area with auspicious signs. With the lotus as the central motif, Manadasundari, the creator of this quilt, expands the designs in concentric circles. First is a circle of paisleys, then another one containing not only her own name, but also a dedication to her father. The inclusion of her name as the maker of the piece is rather rare and suggests that it is a relatively late specimen from the nineteenth century.²⁰ This inscription is the last of the concentric rings; the rest of the space, stretching to the tightly stitched border, is covered by linear panels containing highly detailed depictions of her world. A close inspection reveals that it has been divided into four major zones that are interlinked, but not exactly intermingled. One of the most prominent motifs is the representation of a stately mansion, with architectural details typical of the grand homes of the rich built by fusing Indian and colonial architectural styles. These mansions, results of the rising fortunes of those who dealt with the British, stood out from the humble mud houses of the surrounding landscapes, proclaiming the social prestige gained by this new elite. In Manadasundari's quilt, the master of the estate stands at the gate of the pillared mansion, accompanied by a woman. Both are dressed in a non-traditional manner – not only is the man turned out in trousers, but the lady appears to be baring her arms.²¹ Such attempts by a certain group of Indians to align themselves culturally with the British – an

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

allegiance signified by their attire, among other things – became the subject of ridicule in many Bengali literary works, particularly farces, that appeared in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 122–24). The question of what women should wear if they emerged from the house was a topic of deliberation among the enlightened section of Bengali society. Women wearing European gowns were particularly criticized, as it was considered blind imitation and transgression of the cultural purity expected of women.²² In contrast to the paranoia about cultural corruption that was frequently expressed in print by male writers censuring women’s awkward attempts at Anglicization,²³ Manadasundari’s needle simply wrought a certain stiffness in the woman’s gait to suggest her unease in unfamiliar clothing. The scenes of outside activities embroidered on the linear panels mark the transition from the semiotic lotus to the figurative panels, corresponding with a transition from tradition to contemporaneity, which proves that the effort to insulate the private sphere from the public was fated to be futile.

26. The inclusion of women onlookers above the couple emphasizes that the tidings of change could not be kept away from the secluded women’s quarters. Looking out from the confines of the home, these figures create the effect of dual perspectives as the scene depicted outside the house seems to be viewed both from within and without. This particular motif evokes the terracotta tiles in temples scattered across Bengal. Like the embroidered women, the figures on the tiles also seem to indicate how the external world filtered into the women’s world through interstitial spaces like windows and balconies. In Manadasundari’s quilt, life outside seems to proceed in complete obliviousness to the curious gazes. The shorter sides of the rectangular piece represent contrasting attitudes. A

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

row of European (probably British) soldiers, seen strutting rather than marching in front of the mansion, constitutes the penultimate row embroidered below the mansion gate. In their bow ties and hats, they appear more like dandies, particularly in comparison to the row of bayonet-wielding soldiers on the opposite side. Very likely the latter are Indian sepoy, shown marching in a disciplined file with a boldly executed elephant and a rather dainty-looking phaeton above them illustrating the contrast between a robust animal power and the effete material culture that was evolving. The two long sides contain contrasting rows of figures separated along socioeconomic lines. On one side, numerous little figures, executed in great detail, depict a scene of entertainment; on the opposite side appears the other end of the social spectrum – the peasant subjects who were the most wretched victims of the exploitative tax structures under colonial rule. Under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, the East India Company fixed the amount to be collected in taxes from the zamindars, which would not be waived even in times of calamities that might affect crops. Over time, this proved disastrous, as many landowners could not pay the stipulated amount in years of bad harvests. This meant that the more unscrupulous and heartless among them would flog their peasants to extract the tax they had to pay. They rode their hapless tenants to avoid bankruptcy and maintain their own luxurious lifestyles. The compact between these local potentates and the colonial administration was socially sealed through periodic entertainment of the foreign officers. This is clearly recorded in the panel dominated by the two seated figures, along with armed guards probably employed by the landlord, and, last but not least, the women who attend upon the men. The lavish entertainments arranged by the comprador gentry included wine, women, music, and dance. The revelries of the night also led to sexual indiscretions that were mostly carried out with impunity by the agents of

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

the colonial government. The silent witness of the terracotta tiles on some of the temples in Bengal provides evidence of such illicit intermingling in spite of the strictures of a race-conscious colonial society and a caste-conscious indigenous society. The watchful eyes of Manadasundari did not miss the irony implicit in the fabric of this social contact zone as she depicted the network of colonial relations in the panels she devised. The seated figure on the left appears to be a British official – perhaps even a revenue collector – in boots and trousers, with a medallion behind him that bears a resemblance to coins in circulation (Ghosh 90). The other figure on the right has a peacock behind him. This may indicate that he is the Indian host, a zamindar, entertaining the powerful foreigner with a display of his wealth.²⁴ They are showered with attention and served by a battery of attendants presumably provided by the owner of the estate. The posture of the women in this row suggests that they are performing some kind of entertainment. This would imply that they are nautch girls or entertainers, living outside the purview of the strict norms of behaviour enjoined upon daughters and wives in “respectable” households. Their lives were certainly far removed from that of a woman like Manadasundari, who was ensconced in her web of familial relations. The quilt nevertheless bears witness to her alert eyes, which did not miss the activities of a world of sexual licence, very different from her own but probably related to the economic and social fortunes of her family, who may have been complicit in providing licentious entertainment to the foreigners in order to secure their favours. Very often, the tears and loneliness of neglected young wives pervaded the women’s quarters as the menfolk indulged in the pleasures of professional female entertainers. One wonders if her father, to whom this quilt was so dutifully dedicated, had any inkling of her thoughts, and how he may have reacted to them.

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

27. The panel on the opposite side (top) seems to be much less detailed, unless one looks carefully. There appears an entire row of village women, probably belonging to peasant families. Heads covered in the traditional manner of Bengali married women, their backs turned to the scenes on the opposite panel, they suggest the enforced absence of most women from public spaces. It seems like a telling metaphor for their distance from the world on the other side. Although these women were accorded a place within village societies, they were far more vulnerable because of their lower socioeconomic status. Their security – financial and sexual – depended on the vagaries of their husbands' fortunes. Debt or widowhood could easily expose them to the predatory attentions of powerful men, regardless of caste or race. The male figures behind them are mostly clad in loincloths. Ghosh suggests that they are mendicants (118–9). It cannot, however, be forgotten that peasants sometimes turned to mendicancy to escape grinding poverty and the hardships inflicted by society. Inhabiting the lowest rung of the colonial structure of taxation, peasants were the worst sufferers of the exploitation and violence in the entire system. The extractivist regime inaugurated by the British meant that, even in the fertile lands of Bengal, peasants could die of hunger. The poverty-signifying power of the loincloth would be used much later by Gandhi when he wore it as a mark of solidarity with the poor and in protest of British economic exploitation. Here, it acts as a foil to the well-clad men on the opposite side (bottom) and a reminder of the vast economic disparities that existed under colonial rule.

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

28. Manadasundari's quilt gives us an expansive view of a village society in transition. Her clever arrangement of figures in separate zones that adjoin or sometimes counterpoise each other from opposing sides creates a visual impression of the pulls and pressures in colonial Bengal, which is an example of a contact zone "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism" (Pratt 34).²⁵ She brings alive an entire cast of foreigners and Indians who are ranged along axes of socioeconomic interest rather than racial affiliations. Her vision is particularly penetrating when it turns to women. Not confining herself only to the women of her own class, she appears to exhibit a quiet empathy for the women who occupied the periphery of her world – from the humble peasant wife serving the household in various capacities to the dancing women entertaining her male relatives and their British guests. As her deft fingers picked out these figures with needle and thread, what did Manadasundari think? Was she thankful for her own security compared to both these classes of women, or did she look upon their relative freedom with wistful eyes? Did she yearn for the freedom to venture out into the world? Did she pity the socially inferior women, or were they considered threats to the stability of her home? The subtle interrelations between the colonizer and the colonized, coded into this quilt, counter the portrayal of ignorant, naïve zenana women in orientalist missionary writings as well as the pure and pious souls of the nationalist construct. Rather, they reveal a sensitive and intelligent mind capable of observing, understanding, narrating, and questioning the uncomfortable history of collaboration between indigenous comprador forces and foreign imperialists – a history that is often conveniently obscured in nationalist recollections.

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

Looking at this work with the hindsight of posterity, one might detect signs of the inequities that led to the sporadic explosions of popular discontent that Guha has documented.

29. Manadasundari's work is an exquisitely detailed example of the art of the nakshi kantha, but she is by no means the only one who recorded the impact of the colonial encounter through this unexpected medium with which women obliquely told their stories on their terms, making the quilts incised and incisive at the same time. The presence of irony within these embroidered narratives points to the existence of brewing sociopolitical consciousness. The curator's note to a sujni kantha (c. 1870) in the collection of the British Museum states, "The detail illustrating the parable of the Kingdom of the Rats presents an ironic comment on wealthy Bengalis: while they parade in European dress, the rats rule at home."
30. Women used a most personal object, sujni kantha, a quilted spread meant for use only by a very special person or on a very special occasion, as a register of their impressions of the world. The quilts are mute and masked narratives that have been characterized by archivists as emblems of women's dutiful acquiescence to the role of caregiver within the patriarchal household. Dutt, for instance, says, "a '*Sujni Kantha*' is almost invariably dedicated to a beloved friend or relative and is in many cases deeply charged with a passionate sentiment of affection or love" (460). Charged by the nationalist patriarchy of his time, he emphasizes their circulation as gifts "charged with . . . love." He thus fails to appreciate, or chooses to ignore, the inchoate social critique lurking within the panels.

Ballad Sentimentalization and Critical Embroidery

31. In the concluding section of this essay, I return to the ballad published in 1929 – *Nakshi Kanthar Maath (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt)* – which subsumes the making of a nakshi kantha within a sentimentalized portrayal of tragic love.²⁶ Written by the poet Jasimuddin, who hailed from the Faridpur district in erstwhile East Bengal, it appeared a year prior to Dutt’s article. The first published edition of this poem had a foreword that recommended it as a work representing the “sweetness of village life,” indicating the gap between reality and the ideal that plagued representations of rural Bengal in many literary works. In this tragic tale, Saaju, the female protagonist, begins her nakshi kantha when she is a happy young bride. Her husband, Rupai, often plays the flute beside her while she embroiders. Their happiness, however, is short-lived. One night, when the standing crop in the village is about to be looted, Rupai gathers the villagers to defend it. A terrible fight ensues in which many are killed. Realizing that the police would pursue him, Rupai flees from home. As she longs for the return of her fugitive husband, Saaju’s only outlet is in making a nakshi kantha on which her needle draws the events of her life. She continues to work obsessively on her quilt while pining away for her lost love. Finally, with her life draining out of her, she tells her mother to cover her grave with it when she dies, convinced that if her husband ever returned, he would be able to read the pain of her luckless life on its embroidered field. The following lines provide an example of how Jasimuddin describes Saaju’s outpouring of pain into her quilt:

Spreading out the nakshi kantha Saaju draws pictures all night,

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

As if she is a lovelorn poet of her secret sorrows.

Many memories of joys and woes are written on its bosom,

The history of her life speaks in line after line. (40; my trans.)²⁷

32. According to the ballad, village lore says that Saaju's husband, as predicted by his fond wife, returned many years later and was found dead by her grave, the quilt wrapped around his body. In making the quilt the canvas on which Saaju's romantic love and longing come alive, Jasimuddin's work invests her with the power of telling her own life story. However, the elegiac tone of the poem and Saaju's increasing reclusiveness as she loses hope actually move this literary evocation of a nakshi kantha to the ahistorical realm of a sentimental love story. The poem fails to reflect the robust realism one finds in the actual quilts that have survived. In Jasimuddin's ballad, the peasant-wife's quilt is a chronicle of star-crossed lovers set in a time that is part of recent memory. Her fate is linked to the violence within an impoverished agrarian economy and the failure of the much-vaunted colonial government to protect the poor, necessitating her husband's flight and changing her life overnight. Jasimuddin's description of Saaju's embroidery, however, does not mention whether these details are present in her quilt. Instead, it is the male poet who speaks of the tumultuous events, while the girl herself becomes a figure of powerless love and the pain of endless waiting. The fields of the quilted pieces preserved as heirlooms or displayed in galleries hold scattered fragments of the larger story of economic, cultural, and political interactions between Bengal and Britain as seen from the thresholds of home. Like Saaju, the nakshi kantha pieces, too, seem to be in waiting – waiting to be discovered and brought

Romanticism on the Net #77–78 (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

to light from the sentimentalized, idealized, and de-historicized domains to which they have been consigned.

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Notes

¹ *Sari* and *dhoti* are unstitched garments worn by women and men respectively in India.

² The lotus motif could signify the seat of Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity; it also symbolizes spiritual harmony with the cosmos. The fish symbolizes fertility and the tree of life, the connection between the material and the spiritual.

³ Ghosh distinguishes between the “real” and the “nakshi,” or decorative, quilts, which were much more ambitious in their figural depictions than humble everyday quilts (10).

⁴ In *The Nation and its Fragments* Chatterjee discusses *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, a seminal autobiography in Bengali by Rassundari Devi, a self-taught housewife whose book was published in 1876. He also dwells on other female autobiographies such as those written by Saradasundari Debi and Kailashbashini Debi.

⁵ In her autobiography *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, Rassundari Devi’s constant anxiety about not breaking the code of conduct expected of an ideal housewife is an illustration of this social condition.

⁶ The family of the renowned poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Tagores of Jorasanko in Calcutta (Kolkata), is a case in point. The Tagore women were among the first to

step outside the home into a mixed society. Jnanadanandini, wife of the poet's eldest brother, is credited as being the pathbreaker; she devised a new mode of wearing the traditional sari with a blouse and a chemise underneath, suitable for "polite society." She was also responsible for "training" subsequent daughters-in-law of the family in the manners and modes of modern deportment. The Tagore women were to become a model for many women from other enlightened families in matters of style, manners, and speech.

⁷ Raja Rammohan Roy, who campaigned for the abolition of sati, and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, the architect of the widow remarriage movement and anti-child marriage campaigns, are prime examples.

⁸ William Carey's campaign to abolish the practice of sati is well-known.

⁹ [The Solvyns Project](#) of the University of Texas at Austin reproduces some of Balthazar Solvyns' depictions of sati. In addition to Solvyns, Tilly Kettle, Johan Zoffany, and William Hodges, among others, explored the subject in their paintings.

¹⁰ Chatterjee has pointed out that by moving the "women's question" to the realm of self-reform, rather than administrative legislation, Indian nationalists sought to assert a newfound sense of pride that resisted colonial representations of Indian customs and interventions in the personal sphere.

¹¹ Lata Mani's exhaustive account in *Contentious Traditions – The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* reveals how a practice mostly limited to the upper castes, particularly those living in and around Calcutta, was highlighted by British administrators, Christian missionaries, and educated Indians.

¹² *A Suttee* by Landon concludes with a romantic prospect of eternal union consecrated by the funeral pyre.

¹³ I refer to Mackenzie's *Life in the Mission, the Camp, and the Zenáná; or, Six Years in India* and Parkes's *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, During Four- and-Twenty Years in the East; With Revelations of Life in the Zenana*.

¹⁴ There were sporadic outbursts of peasant rebellion from the 1780s onward. The root cause was an increasingly exploitative regime of rent collection by local landlords who had the blessings of the East India Company. Ranajit Guha points out in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* that the sources for studying these rebellions are mostly elitist, as a large part of the records are official ones. These, therefore, reflect only the rulers' perspectives. Even the folk literature about the early uprisings could be biased, as the poets were often beholden to the comprador class of landed gentry for their patronage and took the landlordist view of the threat from the peasant rebels. The representation of the *Rangpur Dhing* (rebellion) of 1783 by Ratiram Das in *Rangpur Jager Gaan* is a case in point. The Indigo Revolt of 1859, however, found a sympathetic portrayal in Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan*, translated by James Long as *The Indigo Mirror*.

¹⁵ Nabakrishna Deb, who built a palatial residence in Shobhabazar in Calcutta, signalled the beginning of this phenomenon when he hosted Robert Clive at his mansion during a grand Durga Puja, a festival celebrating a mother goddess, to commemorate the British victory at Plassey.

¹⁶ A *mela* is a fair or exhibition. The Hindu Mela was founded to promote nationalist feelings and Hindu self-esteem, deemed to be under attack as a result of colonial subjugation.

¹⁷ It must be noted that Rassundari Devi, a self-taught woman who described how she learned to read in secret, was also at pains to portray herself as timid, dutiful, and divinely guided. But though she projects her autobiographical writing as a divine miracle, what strikes the modern reader most is the determination with which she managed to transcend prevalent taboos regarding women's

education while retaining the façade of a docile Hindu housewife. Repeated pregnancies, the need to cook and care for a large family, and even the fear of widowhood for a literate woman could not deter her from the goal of learning to read.

¹⁸ For example, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, first published in 1863, was among the most popular of the magazines that drew an avid female readership and several women contributors. Many of the articles dwelled on the duties of the modern woman or the importance of education for women.

¹⁹ Wordsworth's comments in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he explains his preference for "low and rustic life" may be recalled as a case in point.

²⁰ Ghosh dwells at length on the possible significance of the inscription (85, 87–88).

²¹ Ghosh does not preclude the possibility that the woman may be a mistress. It was generally unthinkable for a woman from a respectable family to bare her arms in public. Women were expected to cover up as much as possible, as a sign of their modesty. Manadasundari's figuration is, therefore, unusual and may justify Ghosh's conjecture (103).

²² Bannerji's "Textile Prison: Discourse on Shame (Lajja) in the Attire of the Gentlewoman (Bhadramahila) in Colonial Bengal" cites writings by women themselves on the acceptability of donning Western wear.

²³ Compilations of farces written in the nineteenth century, available in Bengali, testify to the exaggerated representations of women as objects of ridicule if they adopted what was considered anglicized manners and modes.

²⁴ Ghosh interprets them both as Indians, but given the inclusion of the medallion depicting a coin with a coat of arms to which she has drawn attention, I think that it is more likely that the figure on the left is a British revenue collector (105). The picture of the revels that is etched out in thread reinforces my assumption.

²⁵ In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Marie Louise Pratt provides insights into how the disempowered wrote themselves into the history of colonialism. Although nakshi kantha could be interpreted as an art of the contact zone, the women artists themselves might not have been concerned with recognition of their viewpoints.

²⁶ Ghosh also refers to this poem in *Making Kantha, Making Home: Women at Work in Colonial Bengal* (29, 60, 63) but mostly to emphasize the association of love with touch rather than the socioeconomic underpinnings of Saaju’s fate.

²⁷ In the following supplementary translation, I have tried to reproduce Jasimuddin’s use of couplets by taking some liberties:

Spreading out her nakshi kantha, Saaju draws pictures on it all night long,

Like a poet transforming her lovelorn pangs into song.

Many memories of joys and sorrow are stitched upon its breast,

In line upon line her life’s history she expressed.