

Prostitution in Colonial Bengal: Autobiographical Articulations and Fictional Representations

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Abstract : The proposed paper will examine how prostitution produced a vast corpus of literature in colonial Bengal. This corpus included autobiographical accounts by prostitutes themselves. While the authenticity of some of these has, at times, been doubted by contemporary observers, the sheer magnitude of such narrative prose demands critical attention. Many of these autobiographical narratives focused on the prostitute's early life within respectable society and then proceeded to delineate the transgressions and the inescapable chain of circumstances that eventually rendered her a prostitute. Significantly, these serve to corroborate the findings of official investigations regarding the circumstances that led upper-caste Hindu women in Bengal to embrace prostitution in this period. The literary corpus that dwelt on prostitution also included a vast volume of fiction penned by celebrated writers. These foregrounded a prostitute as the central protagonist, telling the life-stories of prostitutes and the circumstances that made them what they were. Novels and short stories often represented the prostitute as an affective being - an individual capable of deep emotions despite her profession. She was seldom a person who had voluntarily embraced prostitution. She was always a figure of helplessness and suffering, a woman whose desire to love and be loved transcended the carnality of her livelihood. She was an outcast, but she experienced the entire repertoire of emotions experienced by her respectable counterparts. The proposed paper will examine the trends and characteristics of the available repertoire of prostitute-oriented literature in late colonial Bengal. It will begin by focusing on the existing perspectives on the origins of prostitution in late colonial Bengal. It will proceed to discuss the literary corpus supposedly penned by prostitutes themselves and then focus on the manner in which some of the stalwarts of high literature represented the prostitute in their literary creations.

Keywords : emotions, literature, prostitution, transgression

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