

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY BENGALI HOUSEWIFE AND HER ROBINSON CRUSOE DAYS: TRAVEL AND INTIMACY IN KAILASHBASHINI DEBI'S *THE DIARY OF A CERTAIN HOUSEWIFE*

UN AMA DE CASA BENGALÍ DEL SIGLO DIECINUEVE Y SUS DÍAS COMO ROBINSON CRUSOE: VIAJES E INTIMIDAD EN *THE DIARY OF A CERTAIN HOUSEWIFE* DE KAILASHBASHINI DEBI

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Abstract

Kailashbashini Debi's *Janaika Grihabadhu'r Diary* (*The Diary of a Certain Housewife*; written between 1847 and 1873, serialised almost a century later in the monthly *Basumati* in 1952) chronicles her travels along the waterways of eastern Bengal. Her travels are firmly centred around her husband's work; in his absence, she is Robinson Crusoe, marooned in the hinterlands of Bengal with only her daughter.

Bearing in mind the gendered limitations on travel in the nineteenth century for upper-caste Bengali women, this essay investigates Kailashbashini Debi's narration of her travels and the utopic vision of the modern housewife that Kailashbashini constructs for herself. The essay looks into the audacious nature of Kailashbashini's effort: to claim a space in public memory alongside her husband. In the process, the essay seeks to address the restructuring of domestic life made possible by the experience of travel, and explore the contours of women's travel writing in nineteenth-century India.

Keywords: Nineteenth century; Women's writing; Life writing; Travel narratives; India; Colonial Bengal.

Resumen

La obra *Janaika Grihabadhu'r Diary* de Kailashbashini Debi (*The Diary of a Certain Housewife*, escrito entre 1847 y 1873, y publicado por entregas después de casi un siglo en la revista mensual *Basumati* en 1952) narra sus viajes por los canales de Bengala del este. Sus viajes se centran firmemente en el trabajo de su marido, en su ausencia, ella es un Robinson Crusoe, abandonada sola con su hija en la zona rural del país.

Teniendo en cuenta las limitaciones de género que regían la actividad de viajar para las mujeres de las castas altas de Bengala en el siglo diecinueve, el presente ensayo investiga la narración de Kailashbashini Debi de sus viajes y la visión utópica de ama de casa moderna que se construyó para sí misma. Este ensayo investiga la audacia de su esfuerzo: reclamar un espacio en la memoria pública al lado de su marido. En el proceso, este ensayo busca abordar la reestructuración de la vida doméstica hecha posible por la experiencia del viaje, y además explora los contornos de la escritura de viajes por mujeres en el siglo diecinueve en la India.

Palabras clave: siglo diecinueve; escritura de mujeres; (auto)biografía; narrativa de viajes; India; Bengala colonial.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Kailashbashini Debi's *Janaika Grihabadhu'r Diary* (*The Diary of a Certain Housewife*; written between 1847 and 1873, and serialized almost a century later in the *Mashik Basumati* magazine, in 1952) is not the first published travel narrative by a Bengali woman. Krishnabhabini Das' *England'e Bangamahila* (*A Bengali Woman in England*, 1885) has traditionally been considered the earliest published travel narrative of this nature, although Harder's (2020) recent work has engaged with a lesser-known history of narratives emerging

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Association of Asian Studies (AAS) Annual Conference, 2019, in a panel titled, «Spatial Proximities, Cultural Intimacies: Travel as Solidarity, Freedom, and Pleasure within South Asia and the Former Mughal Domains, 1700-1950». I am thankful to my co-panelists, Mou Banerjee, Nicolas Roth, and Muhammed Ashraf Thirisseri, for the same. I am also grateful to Prof. GJV Prasad for his support and commentary on an earlier version of this paper in the course of my doctoral degree.

in the 1860s in women's magazines of the time. It remains, however, one of the earliest texts composed by a Bengali woman in the nineteenth century. Composed over a period of three decades, Kailashbashini's «diary»² chronicles –along with her domestic life with her reformist husband, and her opinions of various Hindu and Brahmo practices– her travels along the waterways of eastern Bengal as she accompanied her husband on his tours to the districts. From the delight of visiting the historic site of the Battle of Plassey, to the long days spent on water playing cards with her husband, Kailashbashini's book narrates both the excitement as well as the mundane everyday nature of travel along the waterways that crisscrossed the erstwhile province of Bengal in British India. At a time when the *bhadramahila*'s³ experiences of travel were limited to chaperoned trips to temples or bathing *ghats*, annual trips to one's parental home, and the occasional, more adventurous pilgrimages to Kashi or Puri, Kailashbashini's narration of her travels stands out. It presents a portrait of conjugal intimacy as she and her husband engage in vivacious debates, argue and confide in one another, and travel constantly across the riverways of lower Bengal. Taking account of the gendered limitations on travel in the nineteenth century for the *bhadramahila*, this essay will investigate Kailashbashini Debi's narration of her travels, and the utopic vision of the modern housewife that Kailashbashini constructs for herself, made possible by the travel that shapes the entire text. The essay will consider the audacious nature of Kailashbashini's enterprise –which is to claim a space for herself in public memory alongside her husband, who was a public figure of note. In the process, the essay will address the restructuring of domestic life made possible by the experience of travel, and explore the contours of women's travel writing in nineteenth-century India.

To this end, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section of the paper will delve into the complex question of travel and mobility for the

2. Kailashbashini refers to her narrative as her «book». This essay will henceforth do the same, despite the publication of the same with «diary» in its title. A later section of the essay will address the question of nomenclature in greater detail.

3. The word *bhadra*, meaning «polite» or «refined», has a specific caste-class-religious connotation in nineteenth-century Bengal, the prefix being primarily used to describe the English-educated Hindu (or Brahmo) upper caste who had either secured enough wealth to constitute the elite, or had secured a waged occupation sufficient to be deemed middle class.

bhadramahila in the nineteenth century, at a time when «modern» means of travel such as the railways were increasingly transforming the landscape of Bengal (and colonial India at large). The paper will then go on to engage with Bengali travel narratives in the nineteenth century, with an emphasis on women's narratives. It will argue against the scholarly tendency to categorise nineteenth-century women's consciousness of time as a non-modern consciousness, as opposed to that of their male counterparts, and make a case for different strategies of reading women's narratives from the time. Simonti Sen (2005), in her *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870-1910*, has pointed to the frustrating absence of Muslim voices in travel narratives from the period. This absence, as Mahua Sarkar has noted, needs not be treated as a benign coincidence, but as a systematic erasure of Muslim voices, especially those of women who were «written out of normative history» (227)⁴. This paper is no exception to this «normative» historiography, even though it makes a point to situate the *bhadramahila* in her caste-class-religious location. Thereafter, in the final section, the essay will engage with Kailashbashini Debi's book, asking questions about travel, freedom, and intimacy, and Kailashbashini's framing of herself as the protagonist of an everyday domestic drama.

2. THE BHADRAMAHILA AS A TRAVELLER IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

To grasp the fraught question of travel and mobility for the *bhadramahila* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one might turn to a set of satirical black-and-white pen sketches by Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938) from the early decades of the twentieth century. In one sketch (Fig. 1), two sari-clad women –their heads covered as per expectations of modesty– walk down a semi-deserted railway platform. Two men –one clad in traditional *dhoti-kurta* and armed with a fashionable walking stick (meant to represent a Hindu *bhadralok*) and another in a *bandhgala* jacket, sporting a beard and cap (meant to represent a Muslim gentleman)– sit on a bench on their right,

4. For works that foreground the voices of Muslim women from Bengal, see Lalita and Tharu (1995), Amin (1996), Minault (1998), Bagchi (2009), Mahua Sarkar (2010), Das (2017).

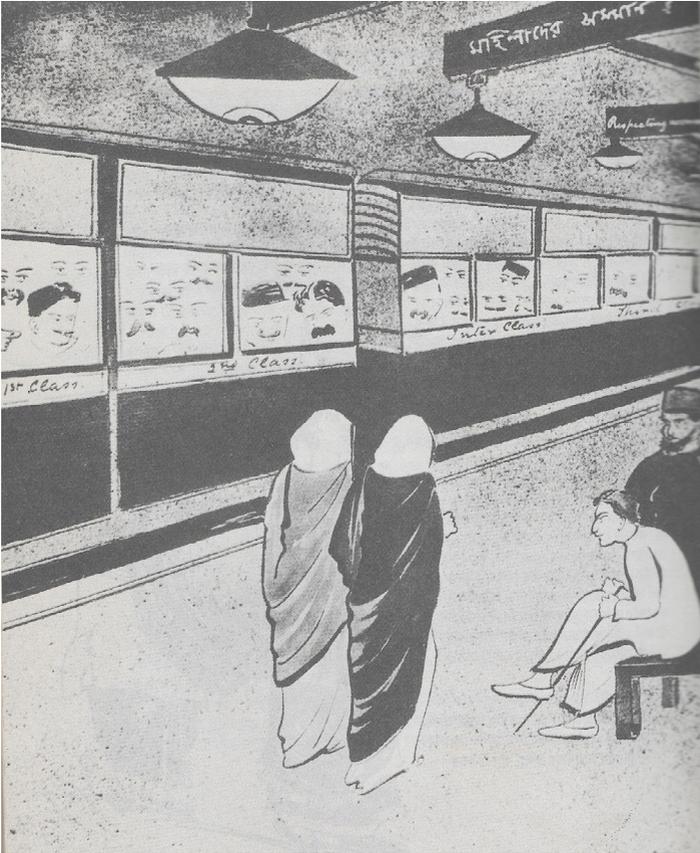


Figure 1. Tagore, Gaganendranath. «Respect for Women?». Keyabat Meye. Ed. Nikhil Sarkar. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1988.

and look on as they pass by. And on their left stands a train, from which men look on from every compartment, from the first to the third-class carriages. Some of the men are represented only by their eyes, or by their eyes and moustaches, while others are depicted with a fuller expression. One man seated in the first-class coach points at the women travellers and leers, while the signboards on the platform read: «Respecting women?/Mohilader samman?», in English and Bengali.



Figure 2. Tagore, Gaganendranath. «Respect Towards Wife in Bengal». Kolkata: Victoria Memorial Hall, 1916.

Another 1916 sketch (Fig. 2), also set on a railway platform, features a Bengali gentleman in European attire, casually smoking a cigarette as he hogs the umbrella in pouring rain. His wife stands quietly in one corner, covering a small child with her *sari* even as she is drenched in the process. The railway station signboard on top reads: «*Sahadharmini'r Samman/Respect for a Wife*», while another signboard names the railway station as «*Bengal/Bangla*».



Figura 3. Tagore, Gaganendranath. «Nuisance of a Wife». London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1917.

Yet another black-and-white sketch, from 1917 (Fig. 3), features a gentleman dressed in fashionable *dhoti-kurta*, a walking stick on one hand and a cigar on the other. He ambles along, seemingly unconcerned as his wife

follows behind him, carrying motley luggage and a small child. Three children of varying ages, dressed in a pastiche of Indian and European attire, accompany them. The Bengali caption of this sketch cites a proverb, «*Pathe nari bibarjita* (women are to be shunned while travelling)», while the English caption simply says, «Nuisance of a wife».

Tagore's satirical sketches offer characteristically sharp insights into the predicaments of the *bhadramahila* as a traveller. The leering male gaze in Fig. 1 cuts across the boundaries of religion and class, surrounds the women from all sides and appears to promise unspeakable horrors should they step into the railway carriage. Gaganendranath Tagore's aunt, Jnanadanandini Debi, was a pioneering figure in discarding the practice of *purdah* and traveling all the way to Bombay with her civil servant husband, Satyendranath Tagore, and then to London. Hanna Papanek writes: «*Purdah*, meaning curtain, is the word most commonly used for the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in much of South Asia» (289). Though often associated with Muslim women alone, *purdah* in nineteenth-century Bengal pertained to Hindu as well as Muslim women⁵. Jnanadanandini Debi's example would be followed by other women in the Tagore household, and then, the Brahmo Samaj. In what Himani Bannerji (1993) has called the sartorial project of the Tagore household, Jnanadanandini Debi (among others in the Tagore household) was also instrumental in transforming the style in which the *sari* was worn by Bengali women, adapting it to a manner deemed suitable for public wear. This would be subject to considerable censure from caste Hindu society, which offered multiple justifications for the segregation of the *bhadramahila* within the household. For instance, the *Bamabodhini Patrika* (a periodical for women's consumption) wrote in 1864:

When there is no scope for good and immense scope for evil in women stepping out in the public, then we must conclude that such an act is against Ishwar's own laws. It cannot be called true freedom, but willfulness. If they [women] step into the public spaces, evil souls who are subject only to their desires will attack them and destroy them, so therefore we do not think anyone should participate in such wrong deeds. (quoted in Das 40)

5. See Das 2017 for a discussion of the practice of *purdah* in Hindu and Muslim households in colonial Bengal.

The *Sambad Prabhakar* (the first Bengali-language daily) echoed the same sentiment a few years later, in 1869, when it argued that «women are objects of lust for many», and therefore, «[if] such a woman travels an unfamiliar path on their own, and someone attacks them, then who will be there to protect her? We may not be able to prevent a mishap even if it happens in front of us, not everyone is physically strong» (quoted in Das 41). One advice manual for women, titled *Bangali Meye'r Neeti-Shiksha* (*The Moral Education of Bengali Women*, 1890), has the writer –Dr. Jadunath Bandopadhyay– passionately denounce the evils of careless travel on the part of modern women:

It is not that women do not know that it is difficult to uphold their purity and dignity if they go on pilgrimages, or for the holy dip at the Ganga on auspicious occasions, or to festivals and carnivals. It is a matter of great pain that women insist on [doing such things] in spite of knowing this. Women have caused many disasters in many places because of this stubborn behaviour. (n.p)

Mukhopadhyay uses the word *anarth*, which I have translated here as «disaster». The word, however, has a connotation of transgression. Mukhopadhyay goes on to narrate the story of a modern wife who committed suicide because her mother-in-law did not permit a holy dip in the Ganges. It is the lack of proper education, Mukhopadhyay concludes, that leads modern women to undertake such drastic action.

From influential periodicals and dailies like the *Bambodhini Patrika* and the *Sambad Prabhakar*, to advice manuals, the masculine anxiety over the preservation of the «purity and dignity» of the *bhadramahila* in the course of travel appears a common concern for commentators at the time. This anxiety over the sexual and caste purity of the *bhadramahila* traveller underlines the growing mobility of the *bhadramahila*, especially in the light of the fact that by the 1890s, the railways were no longer a novelty, and neither were women travelling in them. The Indian Railways, in the 1870s, introduced the women's carriage to facilitate the travel of middle-class «respectable» women. As Laura Bear has pointed out, the «greatest anxiety expressed about train travel in the response from the middle-class Indians consulted [about facilitating travel for women] was that it exposed women to the public gaze of strangers unrelated by blood and kinship» (47-48). The Indian middle classes, therefore, «produced elaborate schemes of portable folding doors to

shield the movement of women from *palkis* (screened carriages carried by servants) to compartments to prevent women's exposure to «many strange and new eyes» (Bear 47-48). The *bhadramahila's* «*bhadra*» status is marked by exclusion along the axes of caste-class-religion. The travel taboo placed on the *bhadramahila* served to ensure her separation, not merely from the gaze of unfamiliar men, but *also* from the company of *other* women excluded from polite society. Mass public transit such as the railways threatened this very exclusion. Gaganendranath Tagore's early twentieth-century sketches (Fig. 1, Fig. 2) thus grant prominent visual space to the railway platform, highlighting its ambivalent status as a site of mobility as well as exposure to the public gaze. What remains unspoken is the potential threat of respectable women gazing upon «strangers unrelated by blood and kinship» (Bear 47), thereby undermining sexual and caste purity out of their own volition.

The Bengali gentleman's disrespect for his «nuisance of a wife» and his callous disregard for his children in Gaganendranath's sketches (Fig. 2, Fig. 3) points to another dimension of the gendered experience of travel in the Bengali *bhadralok* household. The logic of gendered seclusion, justified by the separation of the «inner» and «outer» spheres⁶ –the household/domestic space (*ghar*) and the outside world/public space (*bahir*)– placed the burden of upholding the sanctity of the household upon the *bhadramahila*. In this logic, it is the Bengali household that continued to serve as a beacon of spiritual strength and cultural sovereignty, as opposed to everyday racist humiliation on the part of the colonising British and the onslaught of colonial modernity that marked the public sphere. The purity of the household, the sovereign domain of the *bhadramahila*, therefore, was contingent on that of the purity –spiritual, sexual, as well as caste purity– of the *bhadramahila* herself. However, as Gaganendranath's beleaguered *bhadramahila* (in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) serve to highlight, stepping out of the physical space of the household did not exempt the *bhadramahila* from her domestic duties. On the contrary, she remains the primary caregiver for her children on the road, even as her husband plays the part of a disaffected *flâneur*. In Fig. 3, she is seen carrying the luggage, as though carrying the burden of the domestic unit, even while outside the boundaries of the household. For the *bhadramahila* traveller in

6. See Chatterjee 1989, Karlekar 1993, Sarkar 2001, Chattopadhyay 2005, Murmu 2020.

the nineteenth century, it seems, the dividing line between the household and the outside world was a fluid one –even when she inhabited the outer domain, she carried the domestic unit and the household (*ghar-sangsar* is often hyphenated in popular Bengali parlance) with her.

What does such manner of travel entail for the *bhadramahila*? How does one negotiate with the «modern» form that is the travelogue, and develop reading strategies for such narratives written by *bhadramahila* authors? The following section of the essay will further engage with these concerns as it addresses Bengali travel narratives from the nineteenth century.

3. READING WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF TRAVEL

Contemporary scholarship on nineteenth-century Bengali travel writing has emphasised its intimate ties with the English-educated elite *bhadralok's* quest for fashioning a «modern» self. Pre-British Bengal was familiar with a strong tradition of travel narratives in Sanskrit, Bengali, and Persian. The *tirtha-mahatyas* narrated the journeys of Hindu pilgrims to holy sites, while the *mangalkabya* tradition had accounts of traders and pilgrims alike. The Indo-Persian *safarnamas*, with their penchant for the marvellous, were part and parcel of the literary traditions of the region. In an often-cited essay, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay argues that the emerging form of the travelogue in nineteenth-century Bengal was marked by «a certain formal instability», on account of having «to negotiate with the pre-existing Sanskrit/Bengali and Persian traditions» (294-295). The travel narratives of colonial Bengal, for Mukhopadhyay, «become» travelogues courtesy of «the intervening politics of experience resulting in a certain colonization of the Bengali self» (296). Simonti Sen, following Mukhopadhyay's line of argument, concludes that «[it] was the historic sense of becoming modern as well as national that largely accounts for the production of this Bengali literary genre [travel writing]» (5). In her study of Bengali narratives of travel to Europe, Sen makes an important distinction between the travel narratives produced in colonial India and pre-British narratives of travel. Pre-British narratives of travel, Sen observes, display a «different vision of world order, a different sense of historicity and most significantly a different sense of I and other» (28). Drawing upon Edward Said, Sen argues that travel writing emerging out of colonial Bengal

–featuring travellers to the «West»– could not but engage with the «fixed civilizational assumptions» about the «Orient» and the «West», and construct the colonial traveller's self in the light of the aforementioned assumptions (28). Simonti Sen's work does not engage with travel within South Asia, let alone Bengal. However, the association of modern Bengali travel writing with emerging nationalist sentiments is a significant observation, and here one might draw upon Swarupa Gupta's (2018) research on the interregional histories and travel narratives produced by the Bengali literati at the time, to grasp the significance of the emerging nationalist imaginary upon narratives of travel well within the bounds of South Asia. As Gupta points out, Bengali travel writing centred around interregional travel operated with the «two-fold aim» of «knowing the regional «self» in its manifold dimensions», and «knowing the «others» [who inhabited the regions neighbouring Bengal] so that they could be included in a framework of social and cultural harmony which could challenge the colonial allegation of eternal disunity and lack of harmony» (68).

This rich body of existing scholarship on Bengali travel narratives of the nineteenth century, however, remains somewhat inconsistent in its treatment of women's narratives. The fraught nature of the Bengali *bhadramahila's* travel, as discussed earlier in this essay, merits the question: how does the *bhadramahila's* narrative of travel seek to fashion the modern self? Somdatta Mandal's (2010) meticulous «mapping» of the «female gaze», as well as Sukla Chatterjee's (2018) more recent engagement with the *bhadramahila's* «female gaze» turned upon their European counterparts attempts to bridge this gap. Chatterjee's argument, that the «female literary tradition in Bengal, especially in the colonial regime was both conformist and contradictory» (15) is significant in this regard and will be a point of concern in this essay as well. Chatterjee writes:

While in some narratives one can see female writers projecting themselves as «sociological chameleons» imitating dominant patriarchal ideas, thoughts, and culture, in others we find them carving a distinct individual niche, defining and promoting a subculture within the society—a subculture that also accommodated fissures. (Chatterjee 15)

In the light of the gendered dimensions of travel in the nineteenth century, as pointed out earlier in this essay, it is somewhat difficult to wholeheartedly

agree with Simonti Sen's claim –while reading Krishnabhabini Das' pioneering travelogue– that «in all essentials of representation and choices of themes it is very difficult to distinguish a woman's account from that of a man» (23). Sen contradicts her own claim when she cites Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay's reading of Hariprabha Takeda's (1915) travel narrative, *Banga Mahila'r Japan Jatra (A Bengali Woman's Journey to Japan)*, wherein Mukhopadhyay detects «a spatialisation of time that is foregrounded in the Bengali «woman's time» revolving around *sansar*» (Sen 23). Hariprabha Takeda's pre-occupation with her Japanese in-laws' household, considered a married woman's true household in nineteenth-century domestic ideologies, and her domestic unit in her narrative is a distinctly feminine account. Such a narrative cannot be conflated with travel narratives written by male writers from the same period. As Barnita Bagchi (2015) has pointed out in her study of the early Indian women novelists, women's narratives of the time must be understood in terms of their «gendered imaginings» (61). Bagchi writes:

The fiction of Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianandhan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal, set in the interstices of the private and public spheres, participates in the larger, multivalent reform of gender relations and other matters in late nineteenth-century Indian society. The focus of reform in these fictions often concerns women's education, livelihoods, and claims to spaces in the public sphere. However, reform in these novels also takes the shape of concerns over affect, finding love, or seeking conjugal, romantic, or sexual fulfilment in ways that stretch and question patriarchy. (Bagchi 61)

The travel narratives of Hariprabha Takeda or Kailashbashini Debi, much like the fiction of Toru Dutt or Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, must be studied in this context, keeping in mind the «gendered imaginings of selves and subjects» (Bagchi 61) that is part and parcel of women's narratives of the time.

It is similarly difficult to wholeheartedly agree with the relegation of the Bengali *bhadramahila* to a non-modern temporality and her sole association with pre-colonial modes of time-reckoning, as Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay does, identifying a «woman's time» revolving around *sansar* (Sen 23). Maroona Murmu's (2020) study of Krishnabhabini Das and Prasannamayee Debi's narratives of travel similarly cites the aforementioned statement by Mukhopadhyay, but does not engage with the implications of the same. Any

reading of travel narratives produced by *bhadramahila* in the nineteenth century must recognize the complexities of time-reckoning in colonial Bengal, wherein pre-colonial modes of time-reckoning existed alongside colonial time discipline and the regime of clock time⁷. One need only consider the Bengali almanacs of the period, where the tasks and duties for each day, marking the appropriate time for each task, now existed alongside «additional current temporal information» such as railways timetables and stamp rates (Banerjee 45). The *bhadramahila*'s everyday life did not exist in a vacuum, outside of these crowded everydays. While advice manuals for women offered tips on time discipline and the value of time, Bengali women had to contend with the regime of the modern clock in multiple ways. The husband's engagements in the public sphere, for instance, could not but rely on clock time. Household duties such as cooking had to be adjusted to the ticking of the clock and the rhythm of the Gregorian calendar, even as household rituals continued to adhere to a different mode of time-reckoning. Hariprabha Takeda's preoccupation with her in-laws' household and her domestic unit thus does not exist in contradiction with her meticulous noting of date and time on her travels, or her appreciation of Japanese women's ability to manage their time. Takeda's time-consciousness expresses itself in clock time and she considers the appropriate use of leisure time in a manner not unlike the advice manuals of nineteenth century. Prasannamayee Debi's travelogue, titled *Aryavarta: Janaika Banga-Mahila'r Bhraman Brittanta* (*Aryavarta: The Travelogue of a Certain Bengali Women*, 1888), blends a nationalist concern with India's so-called Aryan past and her present «degeneration» with mourning the absence of a domestic unit to belong to⁸.

For the *bhadramahila* traveller in the nineteenth century, as noted earlier in this essay, the dividing line between the household and the outside world was a fluid one. Reading strategies for travel narratives by *bhadramahila* writers must account for the complexities of time-reckoning that made up the *bhadramahila*'s everyday, without relegating her to the domain of the non-modern. Instead, one might ask, what does the *bhadramahila*'s self-fashioning in the

7. See Sarkar 1997 for a discussion of colonial time discipline and the coming of the clock in Bengal.

8. See Murmu 2020 for further discussion.

pages of a modern form such as the travel narrative or the autobiography look like? In the following section of the paper, this essay will delve into the text of Kailashbashini Debi's travel narrative, *Janaika Grihabadhu'r Diary (The Diary of a Certain Housewife)*, exploring the utopic vision of the modern housewife that Kailashbashini constructs for herself, and the freedoms that she claims for herself in the course of her travels.

4. KAILASHBASHINI DEBI: TRAVEL AND INTIMACY

The posthumous publication of *The Diary of a Certain Housewife* with the word «diary» in its title has led to an uncritical acceptance of the text as the personal diary of a housewife with no authorial ambitions⁹. This framing, however, fails to take into account one of the most significant aspects of Kailashbashini's narrative: the motif of travel that runs throughout the text, and makes possible the vision of domestic intimacy that Kailashbashini presents in her narrative. The text is unassuming in its conversational tone and colloquial vigour, reminiscent of the deliberately colloquial prose of Peary Chand Mitra's (Tekchand Thakur) *Alaler Gharer Dulaal* and Kaliprasanna Singha's (Hutom) *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*. Published as it was without any corrections in 1953, with multiple errors in spelling, the text generates the impression of an author with little in the way of formal education but undaunted, nonetheless, by the prospect of writing her life and her travels. The «formal instability» that Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (296) considers part and parcel of early Bengali narratives of travel is evident in Kailashbashini's book. Even though it was published in the monthly *Basumati* journal as a «diary», there is little in the text to suggest that it was a journal for Kailashbashini's eyes alone. On the contrary, the final section of the text, composed of five hastily-written paragraphs, written on 7th June and 7th August, 1873 – the latter being the day of Kishori Chand Mitra's passing– has an explicit address to Kailashbashini's «readers» («*he pathak o pathikagan*»):

Dear readers, my book ends today. My life ends today. On the 24th day of Shraavan, the thirteenth day in the cycle of the moon, Wednesday, the day of Jhulan yatra, at 11 pm in the night, I give up all my worldly happiness. I

9. For instance, neither Ahana Biswas and Prasun Ghosh (2013) nor Shubhra Ray (2015) question the naming of the text as a «diary».

still have life, but I die today. I have ended all my happiness at Kashi Mitra's Ghat. (Kailashbashini Debi 120)

As a reader, Kailashbashini would have been familiar with life narratives and narratives of travel. There is no evidence that she ever read Rashsundari Dasi's *Amar Jiban* (1865), the first self-narrative in print by a Bengali woman, but it is unlikely that she had not consumed biographies and autobiographies prescribed as «appropriate» reading for women at the time. Shubhra Ray, talking about Kailashbashini's book, observes that «while Persian and Bengali had indigenous versions of the diary in *rojnamcha* or *karcha*, it is unlikely that Kailashbashini, given her location and her educational background, either had access to or could model her text on these traditions» (102). The book, as she calls it, eschews any attempt to chronicle her day-to-day activities as a diary or *rojnamcha* might do, such as in her contemporary Saratchandra Das' travel diary, *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet* (1902). Time-consciousness, however, marks an important aspect of Kailashbashini's writing. Her diligent references to dates in *Bangabda* (Bengali calendar), to clock time, and to important current events such as the passing of Dwarkanath Tagore or the 1857 Sepoy Uprising alongside the more mundane events of everyday life, foregrounds a self-conscious narrative rooted in history. These temporal signposts mark Kailashbashini's book as the narrative meanders between anecdotes from the past and the present, without any apparent effort at a narrative structure. Kailashbashini's narrative, furthermore, is conscious of place and location. She makes note of the place of composition before embarking upon her anecdotes, and compulsively identifies where a certain event took place. This consciousness of time and place aligns Kailashbashini with travel writers of her time. This essay, therefore, will read Kailashbashini's narrative as a travel narrative, despite its lack of sophistication in some regards and its posthumous publication with the word «diary» in its title.

Kailashbashini Debi's narrative foregrounds questions about travel and domesticity, about travel and intimacy, in nineteenth century Bengal. The book is an engaging portrait of an elite *bhadralok* household, privileged both in terms of its caste status (*kayastha*) and its proximity to the colonial administrative machinery. Like many of his contemporaries, Kailashbashini's father-in-law, Ramnarayan Mitra, made his fortune as a broker or agent to European merchants and officials of the East India Company. Her brother-in-law, Peary

Chand Mitra, apart from being the writer of the first Bengali novel, was also a journalist, entrepreneur, and a public official of note, occupying positions such as member of the Bengal Legislative Council and honorary magistrate of the Calcutta Municipal Board. Her husband, Kishori Chand Mitra, was a journalist and writer, as well as a deputy magistrate in the colonial administrative machinery. He would go on to become a police magistrate of Calcutta in 1854. His conflict with Europeans over the discriminatory policy of excluding Europeans from the legal purview of Indian magistrates would eventually lead to the loss of his position. It is this proximity to the colonial administrative machinery and the *bhadralok* elite that has Kailashbashini refer to the esteemed members of the British Indian Association and their alcohol consumption with delightful candour, and comment off-hand about staying in a majestic guesthouse owned by the wealthy businessman and philanthropist Mutty Lall Seal. It is important to recognise this privileged location at the onset, because it is Kishori Chand Mitra's position in the colonial administrative machinery that made Kailashbashini's travels possible in the first place.

Kailashbashini's narrative also mentions other books that she read, such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Mrinalini* (1869) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Kailashbashini does not clarify if she had read *Robinson Crusoe* in English, although the popularity of its translated edition has been asserted upon by a famous contemporary: «when I was young I had the great good fortune of coming upon a Bengali translation of *Robinson Crusoe*. I still believe that it is the best book for boys that has ever been written» (Rabindranath Tagore, quoted in Das 158). She does not elaborate upon how she came by the volume. Readers are left to speculate if it belonged to her husband's personal collection, or if it was something that he or another well-wisher obtained for her perusal. Perhaps Kailashbashini was recommended the book in a bid to «improve» her reading habits and help her become an intellectual companion to her erudite, modern husband. The book, however, seems to have left enough of an impact for her to identify with the titular character and refer to herself as «Robinson Crusoe» in the days of her isolation in the hinterlands. While Kishori Chand Mitra travelled to remote villages on work, Kailashbashini claimed their temporary outpost in Jahanabad the way Crusoe claimed his island: «When he [her husband] went to the *mofussil* [locations outside the capitals of the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay Presidencies], I lived

like Robinson Crusoe» (96). Kailashbashini speaks of long days, of hours sunk in self-absorption when she only «slept ate read books did artwork, taught [her] daughter and wrote this book» (96), the days blurring together in an experience of time that is altogether different from her normal practice of obsessively noting down hours and minutes. Elsewhere, she writes of being left alone in Jahanabad after the departure of her mother-in-law for Calcutta: «Mother left for Calcutta on the 4th of Baishakh. It was difficult for a few days. But then things improved. I am used to living alone» (99). Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* might allow little space for women, but Kailashbashini, in her appropriation of Crusoe's shoes for herself, transforms Crusoe's island into something different altogether. She misspells Crusoe's name as «Robinson Kurush», and nativizes him in the process. If Crusoe, courtesy his travels, claims for himself an island where he is the sovereign, Kailashbashini as «Kurush» claims for herself the freedom of self-absorption, far removed from the polite society of Calcutta in her temporary outposts in the districts.

This image of herself as self-absorbed, consumed in her pursuit of reading, writing, and sleeping –save for the task of educating her daughter– is an unusual image. It is an image of leisure, far from the idealised figure of the domestic goddess and her ceaseless domestic labour. It is, in fact, an image marked by idleness (*alashya*), deemed a grave feminine error and a recipe for chaos and anarchy in the household sphere¹⁰. Kailashbashini as «Kurush», however, grants herself the right to self-absorption and leisure in her sovereign domain. This freedom to claim leisure, as the narrative underlines, is made possible by her freedom to travel to places removed from the constrictive structure of the household and polite society. The removal of Kailashbashini's world from the grasp of custom is made evident in a contrast Kailashbashini presents early in her book. The Crusoe-like isolation in her sovereign outposts in the districts is markedly different from the «hellish» isolation imposed upon her by custom, that of the confinement room which she is careful to describe early on in her narrative,

My husband wrote to me saying that I have no words to express my joy upon hearing that you have given birth to a daughter... I eagerly await the day you will be able to write me a letter.

10. See Moitra 2015 for further elaboration on the same.

But how could I write to him? Our confinement rooms are more akin to a prison. I might be the daughter of a well-off person and the wife of a well-off person, but I must remain there as a person of little means. A damp floor, upon which lies a mattress, a blanket, and a pillow—that is the sole comfort afforded in confinement... My husband does not know of it, all he writes in every letter are complaints about how unkind I am to him, how much I receive pleasure in watching him suffer. [He writes that] I implore you to write just one line to me in every letter I send you, but you do not respond, I will not write to you again.

I was terrified, because if he did not write to me for a day or two then I would surely die. So I took the pen and ink meant for *sutika puja* [a ritual for the confinement period] and set out to write to him. (Kailashbashini Debi 85)

Kailashbashini hastens to add: «I write this because this is how we spent our days as young brides» (85). In a stylistic choice not unlike Rashsundari Dasi in *Amar Jiban*, Kailashbashini brackets her complaint about ritual confinement of pregnant women with the generalized observation that difficulties exist in every step of one's of life, «be it summer or monsoon or winter, be it as a young bride or the mistress of the household» (85). The modern husband does not know of these confines of customary ritual, due to which the domestic space can become a prison. Kailashbashini thus records this confinement and isolation in her book. She places it in contrast with the freedom of self-absorption she claims for herself as «Robinson Kurush» in her temporary islands of sovereignty as she travels from Rampur to Jahanabad, from Chhatraganj to Natore and beyond. Picking up the pen and ink meant for ritual worship marks a transgression that she willingly undertakes for his sake. In his company, in their travels together, such transgressions become easier in the domestic space that they build together, as partners in an ideal companionate marriage.

This partnership, valorised in contemporary discourse by «reformist» *bhadralok* such as Kishori Chand Mitra and the refined company he kept, comes alive in Kailashbashini's narrative. The apparent lack of narrative structure in Kailashbashini's book does not take away from the fact that the narrative begins and ends with her conjugal life with her husband, her domestic unit. It starts with an anecdote about their son's death and her husband's subsequent illness, and comes to an end—somewhat abruptly—with his death and her horror over her loss. Far from lacking in authorial

ambition, Kailashbashini's narrative marks an impertinent claim to a space in public memory alongside her husband, a public figure of note. She casts him in an unfamiliar, intimate light through the eyes of a devoted wife. In the process, she frames her own story as that of the heroine of a domestic drama. This framing is much like the popular novels written by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, which she mentions reading and discussing with her friend and companion, Lakshimani. Shubhra Ray takes note of the same element when she observes that:

The relationship between Kailashbashini and her husband is shown to be perfect—he is the loving husband who cannot imagine life without her, and she is a person who cannot bear even the slightest of his sorrows. The best doctors are brought in—both British and Indian—every time she is ill; he keeps in mind her discomfort while taking decisions and refuses to get his daughter married to anybody simply to maintain the purity of the lineage. (Ray 108)

This utopic vision of the modern companionate marriage that Kailashbashini constructs for herself is made possible by the motif of travel that shapes the entire narrative of the book. Kailashbashini travels incessantly. Indeed, the very first lines of the text speak of travelling to Rampur—an oft-mentioned location in the districts in the course of the text. Kailashbashini notes that their boat departs via the Nimtollah Ghat in Calcutta, along with the precise time of departure. What follows thereafter is a dizzying array of names and places—Sukhsagar, Kalna, Ghosalpur, Plassey, Murshidabad—all within the first page of Kailashbashini's book, places that she travels to in the course of her journey to Rampur. This sets a pattern for the rest of the narrative. Even when Kishori Chand is headquartered in Natore or Jahanabad, Kailashbashini and Kumud (their daughter), along with a small army of employees, frequently travel with him to the hinterlands. On occasion, Kishori Chand's mother accompanies them as she divides her time between her sons. The catalogue of places is rivalled by the busy catalogue of people Kailashbashini meets, both Indian and European. Through this emphasis on her intimacy with her husband, Kailashbashini takes a stand that is sharply opposed to the vision of the wife as a «nuisance» to her husband while travelling (as in Fig. 3). Her travel narrative is peppered with charming, intimate conversations between husband and wife, as though on an extended honeymoon.

Kailashbashini appears to imply that it is this act of travelling together that makes such intimacy possible.

Not unlike Rabindranath Tagore, whose celebrated journeys across the same waterways of eastern Bengal are more popularly known (*Chhinaptrabali*, 1960), Kailashbashini is an astute observer of the natural world around her as well, and the narrative offers vivid descriptions of the almighty Padma in the Bengal monsoon. Kailashbashini offers thick descriptions of the complexities of such constant travel in lower Bengal, mostly by water. She writes about the aches that accompanied sitting in the boat for a long time, about the difficulties of traveling with an infant—especially when it came to obtaining milk for her consumption in more remote locations—and the dangers of storms and boats capsizing on the fearsome Padma in monsoon months. She writes, for instance, about a storm where their boat had met with waves as high as two-storey buildings, with the Padma gobbling up the soft soil of the riverine islands (*chars*) around them. Kailashbashini speaks of her terror as she watched smaller boats capsize around them. Eventually, she took shelter on one such island with her daughter, where she spent the rest of the storm praying. They made their way back with little food or water, even for the infant. These episodes, when contrasted with Rabindranath Tagore's travels along similar waterscapes, put in sharp relief the gendered experiences of travel in nineteenth century India. Tagore, it is important to note, was not entirely free of the domestic unit in his travels—there are episodes when family members, including his wife and children, travel along with him. Tagore writes affectionately about his children. He peppers his letters with humorous anecdotes such as that of a domestic servant called Bhajiya showing up in Silaidaha, with a request to be reinstated to his original position after having been demoted by the mistress of the household. These brief episodes of domesticity are contrasted with episodes like that of his struggle to come up with satisfactory arrangements for sudden guests in Silaidaha:

A little while ago, the engineer from Pabna arrived with his *mem* and his children. Bob [Indira Devi Choudhurani], you know I am not very good at being a host, my brain stops working. And besides, I didn't think he would have two children with him. I didn't have a lot of food with me because I was going to stay alone. (Tagore 85)

Tagore, in the above-quoted lines, writes in the rueful tunes of a man saddled with sudden domestic responsibilities that are normally the domain of his wife. Kailashbashini, in contrast, has to obtain milk for her infant daughter in the remotest areas of eastern Bengal and tend to her mother-in-law when she accompanies them. Like the wife represented by Gaganendranath Tagore in Fig. 3, Kailashbashini carries her *ghar-sangsar* with herself.

The extent of her travels notwithstanding, Kailashbashini makes it clear that certain taboos remain in place, such as accompanying her husband for walks in the gardens. On most occasions, her boat leaves Calcutta only via the Nimtollah Ghat, which allowed *purdah* for women on their way to the boat. On other occasions, her palanquin is wrapped in a coffin-like enclosure that was in vogue at the time to ensure *purdah*. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, a contemporary of Kailashbashini Debi, has spoken of such enclosures used by upper caste Hindu women travelling to the holy Ganges for a ritual bath, her tone a mix of humour and sympathy.

I thought the palanquin would halt by the river and the women would disembark to take a holy dip in the Ganges. But my imagination failed me. The palanquin bearers, the attendants, and even the female servants—all of them carried the palanquin into the water. They stopped when the water came up to their chests. The bearers dipped the palanquin into the water, and then carried it back to the shore. (Hossein, quoted in Das 155)

On one instance worth noting, Kailashbashini travels to a temple maintained by the Raja of Chandrakona with her mother-in-law, despite her husband's explicit instructions against the same. Kishori Chand, as Kailashbashini informs us, was concerned about the Raja's adverse reaction to learning about the Magistrate's young wife's travels. This episode ends with a characteristic romantic interlude between husband and wife, but it is the only explicit episode in Kailashbashini's narrative that underlines the extent to which her travels are unusual in her social context, and the social price that her husband may have had to pay for it.

This cautious negotiation with travel taboos and social stigma surrounding the same is a significant aspect of the text. In the course of her travel narrative, Kailashbashini claims for herself another liberty: the freedom of sensory experience, and the freedom to seek pleasure from the same. It is important to remember that the dictate of *purdah*, demanding a coffin-like

enclosure for an already enclosed vehicle like the *bhadramahila's* palanquin, was not merely about being seen by lustful, prying eyes (as implied in Fig. 1). It was also about witnessing and experiencing things deemed unfit for a *bhadramahila's* eyes, and masculine anxieties about an excess of pleasure that might lead to unbecoming conduct on the part of the *bhadramahila*. Boat rides, as Jayita Das has pointed out, were often the only opportunity for *bhadramahila* to escape the confines of *pardah* –albeit to a limited extent.

Pratima Debi [in *Smritichitra, Rabindranath, o Onyanyo*] tells us, «In those days, travelling by boat was the only opportunity for women to emerge out of *pardah*.» This does not mean they were allowed out in the open spaces of the boat or the steamer. They were only allowed inside the cabin. The ladies of the house gazed upon the outside world from the cabin. They just had to avoid the eyes of the boatmen. (Das 181)

Kailashbashini the traveller speaks with unvarnished joy about the pleasure of seeing new places and things. She speaks of the *tamasha* (performance) put up by the river Padma as she travels with her husband:

I sat near the window and watched the river's *tamasha*. As the day came to an end, the river grew even more beautiful. The waves looked extraordinary. And when the oars cut through the waves, it became a sight to behold. We stopped playing [cards] to simply watch the scene... Soon, the sun turned a shade of red and took on a mighty form over the river. It became a beautiful sight to behold. (Kailashbashini Debi 90)

Sometimes she appreciates the beauty of rural Bengal, with its open fields: «I looked at the beauty of the fields while eating lunch. I cannot describe how it gladdened my heart. Radish fields in full bloom in one direction, blossoming mustard in another, flowering peas in yet another field» (Kailashbashini Debi 94) Sometimes she watches the boats on the Ganges on a full moon light: «The Ganges itself lit up as the boats passed. Some of the boats are occupied by European men and women. Some pleasure boats have courtesans performing, and others have *jatra* [a folk performance tradition] performers singing. The musicians accompanying the courtesans played their instruments» (Kailashbashini Debi 93). Sometimes she listens to the boatmen's song, and opines that their rustic songs sound even lovelier than that of the professional performers. Sometimes, she catalogues the religious sites she visits as their boat travels upstream from Calcutta –the Kali temple at Baidyabati,

the Nistarini temple at Sheoraphuli, the Haneswari temple at Bansheria, and so on. On occasion, when she has female companions, Kailashbashini goes to the bathing *ghats* and the gardens for walks in their company, and revels in the simple pleasure of the same. She writes: «The men had a bigger group, ours was smaller. But we were happy with it. This is because we are women and our lives are small, we are happy with small pleasures. We were happy with our small freedoms» (Kailashbashini Debi 92). This emphasis on the «small pleasures» and «small freedoms» of travel, curtailed by gendered norms, nonetheless lays claim to a range of sensory pleasures frowned upon by the custodians of *bhadralok* society.

5. CONCLUSION

It is perhaps unsurprising the Kailashbashini's narrative ends with the abrupt passing of her husband –her primary travel companion, whose work made her travels possible in the first place. Shubhra Ray, reflecting upon Kailashbashini's portrayal of her companionate marriage in her book, speaks of its unusual nature:

Kailashbashini writing between the years 1847 and 1873 seems to have lived and chronicled the kind of relationship that writers like Saratkumari Chaudhurani espouse as late as 1891. Even toward the last decade of the nineteenth century such relationships would have been a rarity; and during Kailashbashini's times, they were certainly not the norm. (110-111)

Ray remains critical of Kailashbashini's narrative for failing to draw attention to the unusual nature of her marital life by the standards of nineteenth-century Bengal. Kailashbashini's representation of her non-normative marital relationship, Ray argues, might be deemed a part of her larger project to claim a «special» role for herself, wherein she had convinced herself of her entitlement to a finer life than that of her contemporaries. Ray's scepticism, however, is a product of reading Kailashbashini Debi's narrative as a «diary», with a claim to a realist representation of «the existing social conditions», as opposed to a «book» –*her* book– dedicated to the construction of a «model of female heroism» that «embodies female strength without threatening the security of conventional gender roles» (Hackel 30-31).

In Kailashbashini's travels with Kishori Chand, painted in her book in terms of an extended honeymoon, Kailashbashini emerges as an everyday heroine –firmly inscribed within the role of the partner prescribed for her. The triumph of such everyday heroism, as opposed to the dramatic transgression envisioned with horror by the contemporary detractors of women's education and reading practices, lies in its utopian redefinition of the domestic space. There are questions it asks of the companionate marriage, such as whether or not such an idealised marital relationship and intimacy is possible without the freedoms claimed by Kailashbashini in her journeys to the hinterlands, through a physical distance from caste Hindu society, its customs, and prying eyes. The «small freedoms» (Kailashbashini Debi 92) that Kailashbashini claims for herself, from the freedom of self-absorption and leisure to the freedom of sensory experience, appear to be significant departures from the idealised image of the domestic goddess of the time. Such questions and departures however remain implied, leaving the reader to speculate on the same.

In sharp contrast to Kailashbashini's model of female heroism, stands Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* (*My Story*, 1912). A woman of unknown caste origin and born to prostitution, who would eventually rise to be one of the best-known actresses in the public theatre, Binodini Dasi would write her memoirs to inscribe herself into the public memory after being denied the same honour by her mentor and colleagues, who had promised to name a theatre house after her¹¹. Kailashbashini's narrative, however, is marked by a cautious negotiation with custom and couched in privilege, denouncing those aspects of caste Hindu society that she deems oppressive and upholding those that she deems necessary, as opposed to a wholesale rejection of familial-societal ties. The domestic space in Kailashbashini's writing, enlivened by the freedom of travel courtesy of her husband's profession, is not unlike what Swati Chattopadhyay calls –in the context of the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee– «the autonomous space of Bankim's imagination where women loved, played, and ruled as queens of the household, with the loving consent of their husbands» (264). The autonomous space conjured up by Kailashbashini's imagination, made possible by her travels across the

11. See also Chattopadhyay 2005.

riverways of Bengal and the distance that it offered her from the world of custom, restructures the domestic space into one of sovereign self-hood and idealised domestic harmony.

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