

**Love beyond Boundaries:  
Subjectivity and Sexuality through Bhawaiya Folk Song of Bengal**

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**Abstract:**

Boundaries mark limits, and as such the transgression of boundaries is inherently subversive. My research on the Bhawaiya songs of Bengal examines this transgression. Most love songs in Bhawaiya are about 'illicit' love, deviating from social norms and often occur in reaction to oppressive marital circumstances. They are a gateway to exploring female narratives of subjecthood and desire, in which women are the agents of their own sexuality. My focus is on deviance from marriage in the Bhawaiya folk songs as a form of subversion. Understanding Bhawaiya and its subversive existence requires an understanding of political, religious, linguistic and cultural boundaries of the Bhawaiya areas. Cooch Behar, the birthplace of the Bhawaiya genre, has historically been situated on blurred boundaries: between the cultural borders of Bengali and Rajbangshi, the religious borders of Islam and Hinduism, the governmental borders of the British Raj and Hindu kingdom and the borders of the Colonial and Bengali nationalist narratives. Even now, the Bhawaiya areas are divided by the international borders of Bangladesh and India. These blurred boundaries create a space for marginal peoples to develop and create their own cultural products, using the language of affection to resist and subvert patriarchal social rules. In my article, I will explore the subversive existence of female desire within Bhawaiya, and examine its feminist possibilities.

“From your/my lips, several songs, several ways of saying echo each other. For one is never  
seperable from each other. You/I are always several at the same time.”  
(Luce Irigaray 72)

1 In this article I will examine the subversive existence of female/subaltern subjectivity as sexual subject through a genre of Bangla folk songs: Bhawaiya. It emerged within the Rajbangshi community of North Bengal, becoming famous for expressing the (often sensual<sup>1</sup>) desires of women. Performed by both men and women, Bhawaiya lyrics detail youthful and non/extra-marital desire, often in contrast with oppressive marital circumstances. Bhawaiya's subversion unsettles the heteronormative gender roles that emerged in colonial Bengal. The ideal of 'respectable' Bengali women was central to Bengali nationalism, countering colonial tropes of backward customs and female oppression (Chatterjee 627, Banerjee 129). Bengali nationalist narratives strove to create a homogeneous domestic model reflecting nineteenth century British domestic norms of puritan/motherly new Bengali women and stern patriarchs. Non-normative social and domestic practices were excluded from middle-class Bengali society (Chatterjee 628,

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1. Here I define 'sensual' as feelings through body and senses; sensual desire as embodied sexuality, not phallogocentric or linear, rather expressed and embedded through all senses in blurring the binary of mind/body.

Banerjee 129). Bhawaiya nonetheless retained its appeal until now within the norms of Bengali society, despite its explicit language of female sexual desire.

2 In this paper, from my fieldwork experience<sup>2</sup>, I hope to show how blurring borders of language, gender, class and region enables Bhawaiya to straddle the boundaries of decency. First I will discuss the historical context of the genre in relation to the emergence of Bengali nationalism. Second, I will situate Bhawaiya's geographical and political liminality which enables its creativity. And third, I will examine how female sexual subjectivity exists in the lyrics and performances of the folk songs, crossing gender boundaries and providing space for female agency.

### **Blind Spot of Sensuality in Bengali Nationalism**

3 The first Bhawaiya lyrics were published by George Grierson as the example of Rajbangshi dialect for the Linguistic Survey of India in 1904. The song is about a young girl who wants to get married for the fulfilment of her sexual desire. His translation of the lyrics goes:

At dawning youth I was not by Hymen favoured/ How long still am I to remain single at home/ O fate marble-hearted!

The full-blown flower of my golden youth yields to Malaya's softest breeze/ My parents have become my foes in not sending me to another's home bound in ties hymeneal, / O fate marble-hearted

My heart cannot open to my father for shame, my mother I cannot press by maidenly modesty bound/Slowly is love consuming my frame as fire within chaff/ O fate marble-hearted!

[...]

Stain who will my name, aught do I not care? To the fill of my heart will I enjoy the time in my love's sweet company. O fate marble hearted. (Grierson 186)

4 The song lyrics describe the sensual desire of the woman as newly blossoming. Grierson's translates *biya* (marriage) as 'hymen' to accentuate the sexual connotation of the lyrics, although the word 'marriage' here equally upholds the connotation of sexual union to the native Bangla speakers. This theme is one of the most common trends of Bhawaiya:

O dear, to whom I will tell the story of my sorrow/ Who would have empathy for me? My parents married me to a crazy man/ The scorns of my in-laws are making me sick/ The crazy husband stays home, but never even touches my pillow/ O dear, I was cooking

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<sup>2</sup> As part of my PhD research, I did my fieldwork in various districts of North Bengal in India and Bangladesh. My fieldwork was divided in two parts, first part was in 2016 and the second part was in 2017. I mainly use interviews and focus group discussion with observation. This paper is a part of my ongoing PhD research.

while you were playing the flute/ Smoke covered the sky as I set fire to the damp wood.  
(Song collected from fieldwork and translated by myself)

5 In these lyrics, the sexually frustrated subject desires her lover (the flute player), transgressing marriage and chaste female norms. 'Biya' or marriage is a common theme of the lyrics of Bhawaiya songs, but the meaning of it is flexible. In some lyrics it clearly indicates sexual fulfilment, in others it refers to marital oppression, depending on the relationship with the husband and lovers. Extra-marital desires are usually justified by the female subjects because of their oppressive or sexually unfulfilling husbands. Anam<sup>3</sup>, a research participant, explained that Bhawaiya is the only genre where illicit affairs are not judged by the singers and listeners. Transgressive or not, these sensual passions are framed as transcending sexual normativity. Crossing monogamous marriage in these songs is less of a moral dilemma than a social obstacle.

6 Around the same time as the emergence of Bhawaiya (the late 19th century), terms like polygamy and adultery were emerging in mainstream discourse in the context of British colonialism. British colonialism was partly predicated on orientalist depictions of India's cruelty to women; "white men saving brown women from brown men" in Spivak's famous formula (Spivak 307). Bengali nationalism responded to these depictions by remodelling gender norms to reflect idealised Victorian domesticity and banish the trope of Indian women as 'victims' (Mani 121). This historical process constructs a specific image of decent and sacrificing 'Bengali women' centering around images of motherhood (Bagchi WS65, Banerjee 168). Moreover, the honorable Muslim mother image of Bengali women was free of sexuality (Mookherjee 38). In short, the 'new Bengali woman' was chaste, domestic, and devoted to her family and husband. Not only did this reformulation of womanhood de-personalise and de-sex women, it aimed to replace the multiplicity of sexual practices across Bengal with institutionalised, standardised norms.

7 The 'new women' of this class disassociated from the popular nineteenth century folk cultural products like doggerels, poems, proverbs, and songs (Banerjee 168). Tanika Sarkar shows that in the last half of the nineteenth century the emergent 'public sphere' expanded to include the lower class, through the huge numbers of cheap Bengali publications. She argues that 'adultery' became the 'other' of Hindu conjugal sexuality (69). Although she shows the resisting voices of women against child marriage in various middle-class women's writings, the issue of

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<sup>3</sup> I used pseudo names for all the research participants.

'adultery' remains the unspoken taboo for the women in the formal discourse. If we consider 'adultery' as the 'other' of marriage, then it has no function other than to strengthen the 'self': marriage. However, the adulterous desire expressed through women's voices has agency symbolically existing in the Bhawaiya lyrics, and not morally dismissed by its performances. It shows a different narrative of 'adultery' that is not as the 'other' of marriage, but which transgresses its norms. I want to augment Sarkar's depiction of the Bengali 'public sphere' by situating Bhawaiya lyrics and female desire for 'illicit' relations in the blind spot of that public sphere, where the emotions of love with its sensuality were not scrutinised for their illicitness.

8 Marital and sexual customs that fell outside these new boundaries were banished to fringes of respectable Bengali society. The area where the Bhawaiya song emerged is Kamrupa, traditionally a centre of devotion to Kamdev Madan (Madan, the God of sex). According to Sukhabilasha Barma, that is the reason why "sex-oriented love, and not the unworldly heavenly love, has been deeply rooted in the songs of this area" (232). While marginalised from respectable moral Bengali discourse and disassociated from the idea of 'new women', sexual expression continued to exist through Bhawaiya and its reproduction in the middle-class/elite musicians with semi-respectability in the early twentieth century. Although the woman speaker/subject of the songs is subaltern, her expression of desire enables her to transgress the boundary between the lower class and the upper class through the popularity of the songs among prominent elite musicians. Rabindranath Tagore, the most important literary guru of Bangla, was also influenced by Bengali folk music. Tagore's songs, which culturally dominated Bangla music for almost a century, were influenced by the Baul genre of folk music. While he was promoting Baul music in his institution, the other legendary poet and songwriter of East Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam, became fond of Bhawaiya and Bhatiali folk music. Bengali folk music began to be adored by mainstream Bangla musicians and audiences, and soon recordings were being made for gramophone records. In this form, in the twentieth century, the Bhawaiya crossed over into the living rooms of the elites, carrying with it, its attitudes to female desire.

### **Subversive Existence on the Border**

9 I argue that female subjectivity in Bhawaiya and its sexual subversive desire could exist because of the ambiguity of Bhawaiya's location between borders. Political or cultural/religious/linguistic borders are important in understanding the 'location' of Bhawaiya and its subversive emergence. Bhawaiya is one of the main cultural signifiers of North Bengal.

‘North Bengal’ cannot be found on the maps of Bangladesh or India but it still exists in Bengali topography. ‘North Bengal’, like its main cultural product, the Bhawaiya musical tradition, transcends the border between Indian and Bangladeshi North Bengal with an imagined geographical community.

10 There are many stories and disputes about the origin of the Bhawaiya which are part of the debates about the identity politics of language and culture of the area. However, Cooch Behar is generally accepted as the genre’s place of origin, by both its residents and most Bhawaiya researchers. It has a historical context of being situated in the blurred political and cultural border between Bengal and Rajbangshi, between Muslim and Hindu communities, between the British Raj and Hindu kingdom. From 1947 to the present, the whole Bhawaiya area has been divided by the international border between Bangladesh and India.

### **Border between Kamrupa Dynasty, Mughal India and British Raj**

11 Cooch Behar was an independent dynasty initially known as Kamrupa. The area was inhabited by the Rajbangshi people, whose language and culture were considered distinct from Bangla. The area remained a sovereign Hindu kingdom throughout the period of Mughal rule in India, and its defeat by the British. In the colonial period, Cooch Behar was governed by a king as a feudal ruler under the indirect control of British commissioner until India's independence from British rule. The Cooch Behar state of that time included almost all the Bhawaiya areas which today are outside of its border. After the end of the British Raj, the king of Cooch Behar handed over the state control to India, and became a mere district of the state of West Bengal (now Bengal). Therefore, for the Rajbangshi, the ‘independence’ of India was not really an ‘independence,’ but rather an acute marginalisation of Cooch Behar and its language and culture. As a result, the anti-colonial sentiment which fueled Indian/Bengali nationalism and its project to create a new kind of Bengali woman was not very strong there. This marginality from the mainstream was a factor in enabling the sensual desires of women to exist in the lyrics of Bhawaiya songs.

### **Border between Bangla and Rajbangshi**

12 The language of Bhawaiya remains a mixture of Rajbangshi and Bangla (there is little difference between the two languages, one can understand the other). There is however, a tension between these two cultures. The rise of Bengali nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century marginalised

Rajbangshi culture and practices. Although Bhawaiya is now considered a genre of Bangla folk song, it is actually situated in the blurred border between Bangla and Rajbangshi language and culture. According to the linguist George Grierson, Rajbangshi is just another dialect of Bangla, a view that many in the Rajbangshi community disagree with. On the other hand, Azim and Roy show that, the sanskritization and modernization of Bangla through the colonial influence marginalised many ethnic, 'non-proper' words. This came about through the educational scheme proposed by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, which was visible in the curriculum of Sanskrit colleges (Azim and Roy 18). It can be assumed that, the various words and dialects (like Rajbangshi) have been excluded from that standardization process. The rise of Indian/Bengali nationalism in response to colonialism therefore, did not influence political and cultural identity in North Bengal. This blurred borderland between Bengali and Rajbangshi is one of the central factors that allowed the subversive or deviant sexual elements to exist in Bhawaiya song lyrics. According to one of the research participants, "since they weren't controlled by the British colony, they were not civilized. People didn't have the proper identity of the father", Men could have more than one wife. At the same time women could have a 'supplementary husband' (*thekna swami*) if her husband left her. It was possible that this situation created space for non-monogamous and flexible/blurred conjugal relations for both men and women in flexible marital and family laws of that situation. With the rise of Bengali nationalism imposing a new normative sexuality in the twentieth century, the marginal areas of North Bengal continued to allow space for crossing the normative sexual bond by marriage.

### **Border between Center and Margin**

13 In the contemporary situation, the 'centers' of Bhawaiya spread through the wider Bengali population through being recorded in the capital cities: Kolkata and Dhaka. The people associated with Bhawaiya, living in those two capital cities, are the most elite Bhawaiya people, and they possess the knowledge and power of being the representatives of Bhawaiya to the outside world (greater Bengal and abroad). However, since it is the folk tradition of the poorest peoples who reside in the rural areas, the areas around Cooch Behar and Rangpur are considered to be more authentic Bhawaiya areas. For example, Jalpaiguri, Dinhata in Bengal, Gauripur in Assam, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Chilmari in Bangladesh are considered as important rural breeding grounds for this musical tradition. The tension between center and margins complicates the idea of authenticity and recognition. The more marginal the songs are, the more authentic

they appear. However, this authenticity negotiates with the recognition from the center. The rural Bhawaiya, using its authenticity, negotiates with the urban representative form and with the nation state that produces, regulates and protects this as a national tradition (Fillitz and Saris 16). However, within this negotiation, there remains room for creativity in the margins (Das and Poole 30). The marginality of Bhawaiya and its indeterminacy allows for creativity and for strategies of engaging the state, thus their normative and dominant narratives.

### **Female Subjectivity Crossing the Gendered Border**

14 Considering lyrics which articulate female desire for a sexually fulfilling lover as feminist subjectivity could be viewed by many as an over ambitious project. However, if we consider those lyrics as cultural products which have the ability to shape the attitudes towards constructing the agency of women, they can definitely be worthy of exploration, as female subjectivity can be the starting point of a feminist political agenda. Here my enquiry is influenced by Rosi Braidotti's arguments on constructing feminist subjectivity. For her,

the feminist project encompasses both the level of subjectivity in the sense of historical agency, including political and social entitlement, and the level of identity, which is linked to consciousness, desire, and the politics of the personal; it covers both the conscious and the unconscious levels. (Braidotti 7)

Starting from the sexual difference theory, Braidotti suggests that in the search for a feminist subject we need to deconstruct the phallogentric, linear idea of woman and to reconstruct lived experiences of women, using the myth of woman as a vacant lot where different women can play with their subjectivity (9). I want to examine whether or not the lyrics and performace of Bhawaiya can become the sphere in which female subjectivity can be constructed.

15 In discussing female subjectivity, I will consider the expression of female desire in the lyrics and 'becoming the woman' through performances. In considering the voices of women as the desiring subject of the songs, I will first examine the authorships of the songs in order to discover who gave the language of subversive desire to the female subject. Second, I will examine whether Bhawaiya as a cultural product, is influential in constructing the agency of women or not. And third, I will look at how the emotions inscribed in the songs became instrumental in crossing the gendered border and creating female subjectivity through the singer becoming the woman of the songs.

### Voice and Authorship of the Lyrics

16 When I was discussing authorship with the participants, initially most of them said that the creators of the songs were mostly men. Nihar Barua from Assam, a key ethnomusicologist of the early-twentieth century, offers a contrasting interpretation, which was quite different from this assumption. Nihar was one of the first self-taught ethnomusicologists from the prestigious Jamindar family.<sup>4</sup> For her, it was the village poets who were able to bridge the gap between men and women and brought out the most secret and passionate desires of women. The poets from whom she collected those songs were both men and women. According to Nihar, the poets who devised the songs were ‘psychologists’ who can understand and express female desire (in Bangla, *joibon*, which refers desire with a strong sexual connotation). *Joibon* here is expressed as the erotic form of matured womanhood that is difficult to repress. Nihar gives one female poet’s song as an example<sup>5</sup>:

How can I repress (tie up) my new lusty youth? It’s neither gold, nor silver that I can make into a necklace to wear on my neck. It’s neither money, nor penny that I put into the locker. It’s neither gem, nor jewel that I tie up in the *anchol*<sup>6</sup> (68).

17 This sentiment is central to Bhawaiya. According to Nihar, the songs are created (written is not the correct term, as the poets were not literate) by both male and female poets. Although the lives of men and women were different because of the coercive patriarchal systems, the songs came from the poets who transcended gender with compassion, expressing the feelings of women as sexual subjects rather than male objects of desire (Barua 67). The characteristics of Bhawaiya tradition contribute more than the individual author. Therefore, it is more collective than individual. Sara Ahmed’s concept of collective feelings explains how “to align individuals with collectives.....can construct intercorporeal encounters creates the impression of a collective body” (25-26). These collective emotions can construct the intercorporeal female subjectivity, which transcends biological individual gender identity, and is not bound to the physical female body or sexual orientation, but rather can be identified through the sexual desire and vital emotions inscribed in the songs. My fieldwork experiences of the performances of the songs were invaluable to me in understanding this.

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<sup>4</sup> Considered the royal family, it was then part of the greater Rangpur of undivided Bengal, it is now within the Assam state of India.

<sup>5</sup> This song is translated by myself from the writing of Nihar Barua.

<sup>6</sup> *Anchol* is the spare hanging part of the *shari* in which women tie up valuable objects, along with its many other uses

### **Bhawaiya as a Sphere of Women's Agency**

18 Lyrics about female desire and sexuality in Bhawaiya do not automatically create a space for women as the agents of their own sexuality. There is a clear gap between what acceptable desire is in a women's real life and what is acceptable in the fictional context of the song. For Bhawaiya performers, discussing their own sexuality is not acceptable in formal discussion. When conducting interviews, in keeping with the social norm of a good woman, I did not even bring up the topic. Most of the interview participants avoided drawing connections between the lyrical expression of love and their own experiences.

19 However, I wanted to examine whether the lyrics are a form through which these women can voice their emotions. Although the majority of contemporary songwriters are male, many of the female singers write their own songs, despite receiving little recognition as song writers. In spite of this, their agency and satisfaction at being able to express their words through the songs was clear. For example, Laila, a middle-aged female singer, continues to sing despite strong opposition from her husband. Her story of fighting obstacles shows how strong-willed she is. While taking me to her room where she sings and writes, she told me: "Let me introduce you to my closest friend: this harmonium. I talk with it in the language of my soul". She did not give me the permission to record her interview and songs, but gave me her published poetry book, where according to her, she wrote about her passion, in her own voice. She also played me some songs that she wrote, full of rage, sorrow and desperation. She amazed me with her strong will and ability to transcend the borders imposed upon her by social norms.

20 In the interviews, the responses and reactions of female singers and song writers vary when asked how they connect lyrics with their own lives. Some expressed their sufferings and struggles as singers, and some did not. A subtle, 'silent' agreement of the difficulties that they are facing and struggling with, was evident. However, the idea of the subjugation of women in the past, when the lyrics were written, was commonly agreed upon.

21 When I explained to informants the focus of my research was female passion, feelings, desires, they often translated this as 'sufferings of women'. It was common to depict women as victims of the social system without mentioning patriarchy, especially from the middle-class, formally educated male informants. The 'subjugation of women' trope is present in the formal conversation of the interviews with this group of informants. But it is depicted as something 'out there', in an abstract form, never presented as connected to their lives. Maloti, the newly married singer living with her mother in-law and husband, spoke about how she is treated by everyone

with respect as she never performs songs that are socially inappropriate, thus upholding social norms and her role as a 'respectable woman'. However, her role changed once her husband left the room, leaving us alone together. Upon discovering that I was divorced, she suggested that I should get a new man in my life. "Why should women have to suffer to uphold the image of the good woman? You are young and pretty, why would you waste it?" This formal to informal code switching illustrates her conscious performance as a 'good woman' while also questioning it when appropriate.

22 Maloti did not connect her life with the song lyrics, but for her, performing the songs meant performing the voice and stories of the characters of the songs. The 'being the woman' of the song became visible when she was explaining her thoughts on the meaning of the songs and performance. For Maloti, the women in the songs are not so far from her own self: "If the story doesn't match with me, I imagine someone I know, with this type of story and go there, and become them." The sufferings, despair or desire of the women in songs are common to her and easy to relate to.

23 This inter-discursive situation of overlapping interview and performance, showed not only the performing of the self in specific social situations, but showed the kind of situation from which subversion can be forged. Female agency is absent from the 'suffering woman' trope, but agency, sometimes very conscious and shared, sometimes subtle, is present and salient to the middle and lower middle-class female singers. Being 'good women' is central to their self-representation, assuming the generalized discourse of subjugation of women, while subtly trying to transcend it. This can be examined through Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency as not just the ability to subvert patriarchal norms, but also in which women work to become willing subjects to negotiate the historical and cultural situation through which a subject is formed (203). This is where I see the formation of subjectivity negotiating with patriarchal norms. For Maloti, her agency meant accommodating social norms, while retaining the wish to transcend them.

### **Becoming the Woman**

24 Performers becoming the women of the songs was clearly visible in two performances that I recorded, where the singers started to cry by leaning on the sorrow of the women. In the first case, it was a female singer and in the second case, it was a male singer who began weeping along with his accompanying musicians. The respondents explain that weeping while performing the songs is a very common occurrence.

25 In the first case, the performer was Asha, a once famous singer who has lived a dramatic life of success and tragic failure. She is currently living in extreme poverty with her husband. The first day I went to meet her while she was practicing music in a neighbour's house with her husband, who is a songwriter and plays the '*dotara*', a vital instrument for Bhawaiya. She cannot practice music in her own home, as she cannot afford the harmonium and her sons do not like her to play for Islamic religious reasons. While performing a song of a departed female lover, she wept and her voice trembled with emotion. The song concerned a woman who was unable to rid herself of the *maya* (illusionary, worldly love and passion) for her lover. She expressed her suffering and urged her lover to come to see her dead body, as she was now living out her last days. The other respondent, Amin, who brought me to her, was also crying at that time and explained to me later that, it is impossible for Asha not to cry while performing, as her life is very similar to the lives of the women in the Bhawaiya songs. The details of Asha's tragic life became clear by the second interview. Being a member of a religious minority, being stubborn and passionate and following her heart were identified by Amin as the causes of her tragedy.

26 Asha herself is the iconic woman represented in Bhawaiya; passionate and stubborn, who tried to negotiate with the gendered norms of 'womanhood'. Her life story expressed by her and by others seems to show her strong will to negate the social norms too. Being a Muslim girl, she became accepted in the society by singing *gazzal* (considered the high standard of music of the Islamic sufi tradition), but she became popular as a Bhawaiya singer, and most of her popular songs express the sensual desires of women. However, when she was at the height of her popularity, she fell in love with a songwriter and *Dotara* player and married him against the will of her family. This was the beginning of tragedy in her life. From that point on, while enduring fierce enmity from all of her family members, she struggled to be with the love of her life and also tried to continue singing. Asha does not speak much, but her moody, proud and passionate expression is very significant. She is a woman who did not compromise her passion. This caused suffering and poverty, but she remains dedicated to her musical expression. Her agony is expressed in the song performance and coincides with the 'suffering' image of women, but she also transcends it with her agency.

27 In the second case, I went to an establishment similar to an orphanage in which children were being trained as folk singers. The organization is run by the Bhawaiya singer Badol and funded by some Norwegian artists. The children live in an extension of Badol's house, which also contains a studio. After the interview, three female children (from aged 10 to 16), sat

together in the studio with the musicians and songwriters of the organization for their regular practice session. They all sang and were expecting me to record their songs. Badol performed last, and during his performance tears came from his eyes. In the song, the first person female protagonist is lamenting to an elderly woman (*obo*; a word which often refers to the grandmother) that her husband has married a second wife and brought her into their home. Before beginning the performance, he explained the story of the song, which concerned child marriage and the polygamy of men, and how it was and still remains an exploitative situation for women. While performing the song, he wept, performing as her, and feeling the sorrow that she feels.

28 I wanted to examine the performance of the man becoming a ‘suffering woman’. For these two cases, I locate the possibilities of agency in the constitutive performativity by the reiteration of gender norms (Butler 2, Mahmud 210). If gender is a performing act that we “put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure”, the deviance from the normative gender role in a performative act can be understood as a subversion of these norms (Butler 531). Here, the man performing a woman’s song carries this subversive possibility. This process can be seen as ‘becoming woman’, by the idea of ‘becoming’ of Deleuze appropriated by Rosi Braidotti, as the process of constructing multiple subjectivities through it. For her, “the reference to ‘woman’ in the process of ‘becoming-woman’, does not refer to empirical females, but rather to socio-symbolic constructions” and “on the other hand, the becoming-woman is a fundamental step in the process of becoming, for both sexes” (Braidotti 45). Therefore, this notion of becoming woman through musical performance can be considered a first step towards the construction of temporal female subjectivity. In an atmosphere created by the temporal emotions felt by women, I experience that process of becoming-woman for both sexes, transcending the border of male/female binary by internalising the female musical emotions. That experience of ‘becoming-woman’ shows a process of constructing female subjectivity that is neither bound to the individual female body, nor the fixed sexual orientation. It is created by the emotional atmosphere inscribed in the songs.

29 Borders and margins demarcate and define normativity, but being between borders potentially subverts this norm. Bhawaiya, produced and reproduced by both men and women, bears the elements of subverting Bengali gender norms. This folk musical genre can merge both men and women in an atmosphere that transcends biological limits and combines a collective emotion of female subject. As the women in the Bhawaiya lyrics express sexual desire, sorrow, rage and resistance, contemporary female Bhawaiya singers also use it to voice their agency in

negotiating patriarchy. Emerging in the margins of a new Bengali patriarchal public sphere, Bhawaiya's mobility between the border and social centre enable the popularisation of lyrical 'illicit' passion. By crossing the geographical, linguistic, cultural and gendered borders, It's liminal existence nurtures this subversive feminine subject. I believe that this feminine subject has the potentiality to construct the temporal feminist subjectivity that cross the individual and gendered body/mind binary with collective emotions of love.

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