

**Wives' Lament and Discourse-making in Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*:
A Formalist and Historicist Re-reading**

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Abstract: This essay is a critical study of Bharatchandra Ray Gunakar's *Annadamangal* (c. 1752) that explores how the genre and form of mangalkavyas—written by a male poet as an encomium on a female god—was extrapolated for social commentary, making possible a dialectical presentation of female expression and agency. The essay combines formalist and historicist criticism with genre studies to unpack how Bharatchandra utilizes the tropes and motifs of the tradition of mangalkavya to not only weave together fantastical elements of anthropomorphized mythology with a vibrant social realism of folklore, but also to underline a critique of the patriarchal society. It reflects upon how the world of *Annadamangal*—populated as it is by narratives of gods, goddesses, men, and women—focalizes through the voice of a complaining wife narrating her grief, grievances, and protestations. It contends that while the wife's voice is the uniting motif in this long poem of many fables, its significance transcends into locating *Annadamangal* within the reformist paradigm of eighteenth-century Bengal. This is a departure from the other feminist inquiries into this poem insofar as it argues against the differential focus that is attributed to the fables involving the divine wives and the human wives. This essay argues that social critique in *Annadamangal* stems from realism as much as mythology, if not more. Later, it argues that Bharatchandra's invested anthropomorphic reimagining of mythology and blending of folklore through the voice of lamenting wives nudge us to interrogate a popular historical watershed.

Keywords: Mangalkavya, wives' discourse, reforms in eighteenth-century Bengal, sati, anthropomorphic mythology, social realism

Situating *Annadamangal*

Mangalkavyas are long narrative poems that were composed between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in Bengal to sing praises of gods and goddesses and invite their benevolence. Each long poem (*kavya*) was dedicated to a local non-pantheon god and built

stories to place him/her in relation with the popular myths of the Puranas. With a primary function to propitiate a local/folk god to ameliorate a related socio-economic predicament of the populace, these long-form poems had an underlying intention to appease the patron and make a case for the poet's craft. Bringing together the worlds of the human and the divine, a mangalkavya weaved a rich tapestry of myth and social realism—a testimony to the poet's rhetorical excellence.¹ The rich content, complex form and vast corpus of mangalkavya that make the bulk of the early-modern vernacular Bengali literature are a force to be reckoned with for any literary and sociological criticism of that period.

Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal* composed around 1752 is no different. An encomium on the patron's guardian-deity Annada, or 'The Giver of Rice', this *kavya* was composed for the court of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray of Nadia district of erstwhile Bengal at a time when the region was miserable with hunger, famine and financial crisis owing to the multiple Maratha invasions and plundering. These contemporary issues find representation through voices like Patuni's who wants a benediction that grants nothing more than nourishment and sustenance for his son. Internally, this was also the time when social reforms were taking shape in colonial Bengal in response to an orthodox and regressive Kulinism, many of which aimed to redeem the condition of married women within a severe Brahminical patriarchy.

As in most other mangalkavyas, women are at the forefront rather than at the margins of *Annadamangal*. The representation of women is simultaneously necessitated by the primacy of a female deity and occasioned by the male poet's engagement with the private sphere of the *samaj* (society) where the goddess has her primary role. However, Bharatchandra's poem is a departure from the tradition of mangalkavya insofar as it does not represent women meant to be incorporated or "appropriated into domesticity while their independent identity was compromised or often subjugated" as in other mangalkavyas (Biswas 463). Instead, one finds here the representation of married women empowered with discourses of complain, self-expression and self-assertion. In fact, it is the voice of the wives narrating their many woes, complaining about loveless polygamous marriages, marital dissatisfaction, and the ills of the sati system, that embeds *Annadamangal* within the reformist debates of eighteenth century as well as in the proto-feminist discourse of the early-modern Bengal. The wives delineate their argument on the inequalities inherent in the institution of marriage itself and, in turn, help revise—indeed, put a precedent to—the colonialist and masculinist reformist discourse that privileged men as heroic saviours and delegated women to being perpetual victims bereft of any discursive subjectivity.

It is not surprising therefore that the corpus of mangalkavya generally and *Annadamangal* in particular have been of critical import to early-modern gender studies scholars. This essay also partakes of that strand of criticism except that it seeks to depart from the ethical hangover that besmirches the gender critique by choosing to privilege the

¹ See Jalil (1986), Curley (2008), Adhikari (2014) and Biswas (2020) for a look at the changing critical perspectives on mangalkavyas. They elaborate on the functions and features of mangalkavyas that range from religious to sociological to personal. This paper takes up a few of these aspects with particular reference to *Annadamangal*.

complain of the divine or upper-caste women while dismissing the voices of other women as lascivious and imprudent. The next section focusses on two formal-thematic mangalkavya tropes/sections—'Devakhanda' and 'Patininda'—to show that what differentiates *Annadamangal* within the mangalkavya tradition is Bharatchandra's use of the mythological and the real, the high and the low, the divine and the human in a strategic and equally emphasized way. The concluding section goes on to suggest that previous critical responses to *Annadamangal* have failed to recognize its unique location within the tradition and with respect to the reformist context, thereby ethically dismissing or overlooking the realism that otherwise deserved equal appraisal.

Lamenting wives, discoursing women: Devakhanda

The 'Devakhanda' (Section on the gods) in mangalkavyas is characteristically reserved for retelling mythological narratives concerning the deities and sometimes their interactions with the humans, but the same in *Annadamangal* is specialized to present an anthropomorphic and social reimagination of myth where Bharatchandra portrays Shiva and Gauri as any other husband and wife from the mortal world.

On their wedding night, Shiva invites Gauri to become one with him. The form of *ardhanarishwar* is evoked in a euphemism that adumbrates Shiva's appeal: "*Shankar kohon tobe eso ek hoi/ Ardha anga tomar amar ardha ange/ Harogaouri ektonu hoye thaki.*" ("Shankar says come then, let us become one/ Half your body merged into half of mine/ Let us, Hara-Gauri, have one body") ('*Harogourir Kathopokathan*', sec. I.51)².

Gauri, however, scoffs at the rhetoric of his appeal. She points out that, given the gender dynamics in the society, a man and a woman who are fundamentally unequal in stature can never conjoin half and half into a proportionate figure. Shiva, the *adideva*, has five heads and ten hands while Gauri has only one and two of them. This reminds us of the practice of hypergamy in the society that 'always already' made the husbands superior to the wives in socio-economic-intellectual ways. Gauri articulates how the Kulin Brahmin society has perpetrated inequality and unfairness for the women mainly through the practices of polygamy and sati. She complains that upon the death of the husbands, the wives are sacrificed to the fire; whereas when a wife dies, the husband simply replaces her by another. The poet carves a final blow with his stylistic wit through Gauri's rhetorical question: "*Ardha anga jodi mor ange milaiba,/ Kuchanir bari tobe kemone jaiba?*" ("If you are to merge half your body with mine,/ How ever would you visit the brothel?") ('*Harogourir Kathopokathan*', sec. I.51). In Gauri's strong-worded response to Shiva, the idealism and sublimity of *Ardhanarishwar* immediately stands shattered in the backdrop of a polygamous patriarchal society.

Other divine women like Rati (Kamdev's wife) and Menaka (Daksha's wife) evince wifely devotion in saving their respective husbands' lives or restoring glory to them by either immolating or threatening to immolate themselves. Even Gauri herself, as Sati in her previous

² This quotation and the next two from the primary text are from Bandopadhyay and Das edited *Bharatchandrer Granthabali*. The translation into English is author's own in all the three cases. These translations, literal more than poetic, aim at elucidating the meanings and contexts.

birth, had willingly embraced the fire when she found her husband being slandered and his respect outraged; but upon finding Shiva having another wife in Ganga or visiting the brothel, she laments that only a woman is expected to show devotion and sacrifice in love. Thus, with a deft touch of situational irony, the poet has Sati herself—animated here as a common wife—decry the practice of sati and present a dialectical critique of the gendered society in eighteenth-century.

Without reducing the women to a passive victimhood or without traversing the inexhaustive debate about whether sati existed by choice or by coercion, Bharatchandra portrays the society as inherently unfair and hypocritical where the lofty ideals of equality and companionate marriage represented by the image of *ardhanarishwar* are never actuated.

In a later section of the poem, where an ordinary human must cross path with the goddess by divine design, Ishwari Patuni meets Annada/Gauri in disguise of a human wife fleeing her household. Finding a wife unchaperoned, the ferryman naively asks her identity and situation be explained. This allows Annada to present and yet conceal her divine identity in an exalted rhetorical equivocation, which, in turn, occasions another representation of a wife's tribulations. The extolled Adideva becomes a debauched drunken commoner husband who keeps his caste but jettisons all the ethics.

The Patuni is easily convinced that she is just another victim of the polygamous Kulin-brahmin society, running away from the daily strife in her marital home. Without mincing words, he retorts "*Bujhinu sakal, jekhane kulin jati sekhane kondal*" ("I understand it all: wherever there is Kulinism, there is strife.") (*'Annadar Bhavananda Bhabane Jatra'*, sec. I.157). Thus, the god-human encounter episode is also manoeuvred by Bharatchandra to present an articulation that emerges as a strong and precise critique of the Kulin society. From the river's bank poor Patuni is a witness to all that is unjust in the upper-caste society on the land. Despite his insecurities, Patuni exercises his agency and allows the wife (Annada in disguise) to cross the river on his ferry to help her in fleeing the torments of her husband's home.

Both the Hara-Gauri episode and the Annada-Patuni episode go on to evince how *Annadamngal's* mythological world is depicted through anthropomorphic reimagination of the goddess. Bharatchandra's portrayal of Annada as a wife more than as a goddess helps him etch the social critique.

Lamenting wives, discoursing women: *Patininda*

Another section of the poem depicts Sundar, a sapient foreign prince, being paraded in heavy chains through the city roads for the 'theft' (*chor'*) of the royal princess' modesty; but other women not belonging to the royal echelon find their hearts purloined by this handsome 'thief'. His decimating beauty evokes the indignation of the women towards their respective husbands, and this sketches the *Patininda* (sec. III.12) that we must read against the grain.

Women indulging in strictures of their own husbands as they see another handsome young man is a characteristic motif noticeable in all mangalkavyas with *Annadamangal* following suit. Strategically, such a section called '*Patininda*' ('Insult of the husbands') was incorporated to delineate the superiority of the hero over the ordinary men. In Mukundaram's

Chandimangal, for instance, a short '*Patininda*' was included in the *Devakhanda* itself to heighten Shiva's eternal charm (despite his eccentric attire) against the ordinary earthly husbands fraught with diseases and deformities. However, a closer look at Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal* reveals that Sundar's beauty does not occupy the poet as he pens down the longest '*Patininda*' in the mangalkavya tradition. Running into several elaborately crafted lines, it becomes the repository of the wives' account of their deep marital dissatisfaction and sexual deprivation. A rhetorical set piece is turned into the most realistic and uninhibited space for animating female desire and sexuality.

More importantly, this section is set in juxtaposition to the frame narrative of Vidya-Sundar's love story in the third book of the poem where Vidya—an educated royal princess—can choose Sundar, a suitably educated prince, to fall in love with and eventually win her family's approval. The common women—unprivileged and uneducated—were on the other hand propelled into early marriages with elderly husbands without any choice of their own. It is them and their dissatisfaction that we get to hear in Bharatchandra's '*Patininda*'.

The wives talk of the physical deformities in their husbands, their senility, impotency, as well as of the unflattering traits like misery, avariciousness, and self-imposed celibacy, among others. In such a context of loveless and unequally arranged marriages, marital satisfaction remains a myth, which only gets highlighted when compared to Sundar's splendour and Vidya's luck. However, even if Sundar had not been there to evoke the mood of indignation in the wives and inspire them to speak up collectively, their plight would not become untrue. The insult of the husbands should therefore rather be read as a collective self-expression of the ordinary women who are doubly oppressed by gender and class.

If the '*Devakhanda*' made bare the condition of married women in the upper-caste Kulin society, the '*Patininda*' brings out the predicament of the lower-caste wives, while Vidya-Sundar's tale tangentially suggests that only education of women can slightly change the social dynamics.

Critical paternalism and newer directions

Having adumbrated on how Bharatchandra readjusted the mangalkavya norms, it is now imperative to return to the methodological issue that was pointed out in the beginning. Failing to recognize the uniqueness of the *Devakhanda* and *Patininda* of this poem—and therefore overlooking the significance of the wives' lamenting voice in *Annadamangal* as engendering a proto-feminist discourse that dialectically responds to other contemporary discourses like the reformist one—is to read it in the same vein as other mangalkavyas, in turn, leading to ethical censuring that misses the very point and privileges myth over reality. Some well-known literary and sociological criticism of that period had left these assumptions unprobed while choosing to be ethical.

Several critics like Abdul Jalil denounced the '*Patininda*' of the poem as the most immoral. They thought that Bharatchandra's rendering of the Vidyasundar tale was especially libidinous and incommensurate with the gravity of the religious character of a mangalkavya. Jalil mentions how the depiction of women in Gunakar's '*Patininda*', discussing their personal and sexual lives, indicates slackening self-constraint and ethical downfall among the women

in that age. In drawing a trajectory of Bharatchandra's criticism, Sankariprasad Bose notes how, even in 1850, when reformism was gaining new momentum, an English critic Wengar would remark that the "instinct in this part of the poem is basically and majorly unethical" (Bose 47). Wengar was even anxious that a perusal of this section of the poem would spawn immorality among its female readers. This paternalistic anxiety on the part of the native and orientalist critics proceeded from an ethical vantage point and chose to stifle the expression of female sexuality. However, goddess Gauri's jibes at Shiva are well-taken because the 'Hara-Gauri' couple remains, despite all, an image of eternal marriage, whereas the ordinary women's eloquence pushes at the limits of the institution of marriage. My contention is that to favour the former (Gauri's jibes) while dismissing the latter (ordinary women's strictures) would be to enfeeble the critique of marriage and reproduce the co-opting framework of earlier mangalkavyas as well as the inconsistencies intrinsic in the reformist discourses. This essay argues against such a lopsided reading that has majorly guided critical appreciations of *Annadamangal*.

In the last couple of decades, critics like Lata Mani (1998) and David L. Curley (2008) have engaged with the problems in reformist, nationalist and colonial discourses, with Curley going to the extent of saying that these discourses produced more binaries than they loosened. Raja Rammohan Roy is a case in point: though he enthusiastically endeavoured to ban sati, he did not endorse Vidyasagar in his campaign for widow remarriage because he thought that was not permitted by traditions. *Annadamangal* goes beyond this narrow reformism insofar as it presents a critique of those very traditions through the unheard or scarcely heard voices of the wives of all sections of the society. It is therefore that we must engage in alternate readings of this *kavya* and make the wives' lament our focus even as we probe its mythological re-imagination.

This is not to say that Bharatchandra radicalised a social critique or reworked the precincts of the mangalkavya genre. Much of the third book of *Annadamangal* in fact goes on to celebrate Bhavananda, a bigamous caste-Hindu, as the ancestor of Raja Krishnachandra, patron of the poem. Krishnachandra's court was known to be particularly conservative: Vidyasagar, in his monograph *Hindu Widow Remarriage*, noted how Krishnachandra's court had opposed and stalled a second ruling in support of widow remarriage citing scriptures and customs. David L. Curley opines that the overarching intention behind Krishnachandra's patronizing a work like *Annadamangal* was to foreground an "unitary Hinduism" and its superiority over other contemporary socio-religious discourses, while making his court and lineage the cynosure of the debates.

Annadamangal embodies all the contradictions of a patronized art form and a pre-existing genre framework but its primary reference to a female deity and its locus within the eighteenth-century Bengal allows the poet to extrapolate. That which *Annadamangal* inaugurated through its proto-feminist literary discourse got reflected in the public sphere discourse only an entire century later, when the first edition of *The Calcutta Review* in 1844 popularized the critique of polygamy in terms of injustice and inequality: "system which

allots to her [a woman] but a share, sometimes a very inconsiderable share, of her husband's affections, and which virtually decoys him away from her company" (325).

A commonplace understanding of history still obviates and privileges the colonial last part of 18th century and the 19th century as the historical space where radicalism sprouted in Bengal. Indeed, under the colonial apparatus, the practice of upper-class Kulinism - the ideology to foster the dignity and superiority of a particular race or caste - did begin to wane and an ambience of reformism replaced it, formulating new discourses on caste and gender. Indian reformists like Raja Rammohan Ray (1772-1833) and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) fought orthodoxy and spearheaded movements for abolition of the Kulin *sati-pratha* and encouraged remarriage instead of rigorous widowhood especially for the young widows. The East India Company government did crown their efforts by passing the Bengal Sati Regulation Act and Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1829 and 1856 respectively that outlawed sati and legalised widow marriage in all parts of the British Dominion. However, this kind of a colonialist reading conveniently sunders history into the traditional and the modern with English victory in the calamitous battleground of Plassey serving as the watershed moment.

As a departure, this essay reads into the women's subversive, emancipatory articulations against gender inequality and social injustice to argue for a reimagination of historical timeline. As a literary text from pre-British Bengal, *Annadamangal* urges us to look at the whole of 18th and 19th century Bengal as an undivided realm of the 'pre-modern' when a critique of the contemporary orthodoxy and new ideas of change began to take shape from within the society.

Conclusion

This essay thus offers a different reading of *Annadamangal* in the light of its parallels with the reformist history. It attributes equal sympathy and seriousness to the poem's divine wives and human wives, because together they construct a holistic critique of the system of marriage in a Kulin *samaj*. Additionally, it contends that early-modern texts from colonial India have been the subject of certain forms of conventional scrutiny that reinforce the colonial and masculinist perspectives more often than not; but when studied within the specificity of regional history and formalist innovation, the same texts lend themselves to contrastive and more democratic readings.

Glossary

Annada: Goddess of victuals, a folk manifestation of Goddess Parvati. Other manifestations include Sati, Uma, Gauri, Kali, and Annapurna.

Ardhanarishwar: The androgynous god whose right half is male, Shiv and the left female, Parvati. It represents the perfect union that enables the creation and sustenance of life.

Haragourir Kathopokathan: Conversation between Hara and Gauri (Shiva and Parvati).

Kulinism: Popular caste and marriage practices prevalent among the upper castes of Bengal that ensure the superiority of certain lineages (*kul*). Dictates the observance of endogamy, hypergamy, sati and widowhood austerities.

Mangalkavya: Literally, long poems—written and orally recited in episodes—to invoke divine auspiciousness and general well-being.

Patuni: A ferryman, in rural Bengali dialect.

Sati: The practice of immolation of widows on their husbands' funeral pyre; popular among the upper castes of Bengal. In this essay, sati (with a lower-case 's') denotes this practice, while Sati (with an upper-case 's') denotes a manifestation of Goddess Parvati.

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