In nationalist representations, the colonial experience of becoming modern is haunted by the fear of looking unoriginal. This is understandable, for some of the founding myths of European imperialisms of the last two hundred years were provided by narratives which, as Meaghan Morris has recently reminded us, always portrayed the modern as something that had already happened somewhere else.\(^1\) Nationalist writings therefore subsume the question of difference within a search of essences, origins, authenticities, which, however, have to be amenable to global-European constructions of modernity so that the quintessentially nationalist claim of being, ‘different but modern’ can be validated.\(^2\) While nationalist thought thus mobilizes for its own ends the cultural field of difference, its resolutions, whether of the ‘woman question’ or that of the ‘nation’ itself, are inherently unstable and require, for their continued survival, much more than just the force of persuasive rhetoric. Differences are too heterodox for the nationalist project of modernity to contain them.

The issue of domesticity helps me to chart the movement of some of these questions in colonial Bengal. That English education often brought in its trail a sense of crisis in Bengali families—a certain degree of waywardness in young men which led to their neglecting their duties towards their families and the elders—was a most commonly voiced

\(^{*}\) Previously published as ‘The Difference–Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal’, in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds), *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 50–88. In the present version, some portions of the essay have been removed and notes rearranged accordingly. For the complete text see the original version.
Limits of the Bourgeois Model?

The British in India pushed the question further by promoting the idea that husbands and wives should be friends/companions in marriage. ‘Friendship’, of course, had a very particular range of meaning in these nineteenth-century discussions on domestic life. It reflected the well-known Victorian patriarchal ideals of ‘companionate marriage’ which the British introduced into India in the nineteenth century and which many Bengali male and female reformers embraced with great zeal.3

It is the debates around this question—in particular, those around the ideals of the Bengali housewife—that act as my starting point. What interests me, however, is a particular problem. Hidden in these debates were statements about how the personal/domestic were to be distinguished from the communal/public, the distinction itself reflecting some of the compulsions that modern colonial rule brought with itself. This essay is an effort to understand the many contradictory and heterodox moves through which the Bengali modern has negotiated this distinction in (re)constituting itself within a world-system fashioned by imperialism. My aim is to attend carefully to nineteenth-century Bengali contestations over received bourgeois models for relating the personal to the public world of civil and political life.

The British instituted some kind of a civil society in colonial Bengal. The modern civil society carries with itself the distinction of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’. This distinction, in turn, raises the question of the state. As Philippe Ariés says, the modern public/private split fundamentally relates to the positioning of the individual with regard to the (modern) state, that is, the casting of the individual into the role of the citizen.4 Since the colonial relationship was one that denied the colonized the status of the citizen, Bengali engagements with ‘modernizing’ the domestic cannot be discussed in separation from nationalism, the ideology that promised citizenship and the nation-state, and thus the ideal civil-political society that the domestic order would have the duty of servicing. What I discuss, however, are the ways the project of creating citizen-subjects for Bengal/India was/is continually disrupted by other imaginations of family, personhood, and the domestic.

The debates about domesticity that I examine here took place within what I would call ‘public narratives of the nature of social life in the family’. I emphasize of the word ‘public’ because the documents
on which I base this essay are both products as well as constituents of a modern print-culture or the public sphere—in the European, or even Habermasian, sense—that arose in Bengal (and elsewhere in India) as a result of our encounter with a post-Enlightenment European imperial nation. [...] What these documents capture are fragments of Bengali self-fashioning in the context of the formation of a modern public life, for these writings were definitely subject to a growing body of conventions about desirable forms and topics of speech in public. This entailed, as it has elsewhere, the development of rules for representing, within this so-called public, aspects of life seen as constituting its opposite—the private, the personal, the domestic. Bengali modernity has thus produced its own share of artefacts that narrate ‘the private’ in ‘public’, for example, novels, autobiographies, diaries, letters, and other forms.

This history, then, tells us very little about what went on in the everyday lives of actual, empirical, bhadralok families. Something of those lives can indeed be traced in my documents—and there is evidence to suggest the existence of relatively autonomous domains for women which the coming of a print-culture may have significantly eroded. But what I focus on is primarily a conflict of attitudes that marked what was said in print, within the emergent conventions of bookish writings, about the ideals of the housewife and about desirable forms of marriage and domestic life.

I should also explain as part of these preliminaries that it is a small group of people whose history is discussed in this essay. I write about the so-called Hindu bhadralok, the respectable people of the middle classes. It is partly my lived, intimate knowledge of this group that informs the questions I discuss here.

In many ways, the expression ‘domestic life’ as it is used here was a European category of thought. The assumption that cultures were not properly understood until the ‘domestic’ had been opened up to scholarly (or governmental) scrutiny, itself belonged to an intellectual tradition that objectified the idea of ‘culture’ and that seems to have marked much European writing and thinking on India in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. James Mill in *The History of British India* (1817) quotes Bentinck, then the Governor of Fort St George, Madras, as expressing the opinion that the Europeans knew ‘little or nothing of the customs and manners of the Hindus...their manner of thinking; their domestic habits and ceremonies, in which circumstances a knowledge of the people consists. [...]’
Mill, as is widely known, was to erect upon this concern with the domestic and ‘women’s question’ an entire edifice, his voluminous History, that condemned India as an inferior civilization. The concern with ‘domesticity’ was very much a part of this civilization critique of India. The idea of ‘civilization’, a product, as Lucien Febvre has shown, of European thought in the 1760s, saw the world as both united as well as hierarchical. The hierarchy was defined by a scale of civilization that constructed the world as one—why else would a single scale be universally valid?—while dividing it up into more and less civilized countries.8

The universalist indictment of this civilizing discourse aroused in Bengali (male) social reformers of the nineteenth century a strong desire to participate in what was now seen as a world-community of countries, peoples or nations (these words being used in this period some-what interchangeably). […]

As this civilizing-cum-nationalist body of thought proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century to incorporate influences coming out of Victorian England, the personal and the domestic came to be tied ever more closely to the idea of the nation. Bengali books on education of the young now argued, following the likes of Samuel Smiles that ‘the individual was a physical embodiment of the nation’ and the latter improved ‘only if the individual had undergone all-round improvement’.9 The Victorian fetishes of ‘discipline’, ‘routine’, and ‘order’ became some of the most privileged elements in Bengali writings on domestic and personal arrangements, constituting in themselves objects of desire and beauty.

The internal ‘discipline’ of ‘the European home’ was now seen as a key to European prosperity and political power. Bengali books on ‘domestic science’ extolled the ‘attractive’ qualities of ‘the house of any civilized European’ which was now compared to ‘the abode of gods’. It was a place where srinkhala (discipline) reigned, things were clean, attractive, and placed in order. The Bengali/Indian home—itself a colonial construct, as we shall see—suffered badly in comparison. It was said to be like hell—dirty, smelly, disorderly, unclean, and unhealthy.10 […]

Order was thus linked to notions of cleanliness, hygiene, health, and a certain regimentation of time expressed in the ‘virtue’ of punctuality. The question of health, in turn, reflected the relations of power under colonial rule, the idiom of gender (the imperial theme of the emasculation of the colonized) in which it was often manifested, and
the extent to which the male body itself had become a signifier for these relationships.\textsuperscript{11} [...] 

[...] Nationalism was [...] also at work in redefining childhood. Anukulchandra Datta, one of the early writers on ‘domestic science’, wrote: ‘well-trained children are the pride of the country. With bad training and corrupt morals, they only bring grace to the family and [become] the scum of the nation.’\textsuperscript{12} A regimen of routine regulating children’s eating habits, games, work, and manners, was what the housewife was now being called upon to administer.\textsuperscript{13} 

[...] 

The civilizing discourse that propelled both imperialist and nationalist thought thus produced the figure of the ‘uneducated housewife/mother’ as one of the central problems that the project of making Bengalis into citizen-subjects had to negotiate. The lack of books in Bengali on the subject of ‘domestic science’ was now deplored by authors who came forward, with a sense of patriotic duty, to fill in this perceived void. [...] 

It was thus that the idea of the ‘new woman’ came to be written into the techniques of the self that nationalism evolved, which looked on the domestic as an inseparable part of the national. The public sphere could not be erected without reconstructing the private. 

II 

My attempt to understand how the question of difference was played out in this (re) construction of the domestic realm in bhadralok life will take as its point of departure a generally accepted observation often made about this history: that in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Bengali tracts supporting women’s education and even the idea of ‘friendship’ between husbands and wives, the ideal of the ‘modern’, educated housewife was almost always tied to another ideal, ‘the older patriarchal imagination of the mythical divine figure of the goddess Lakshmi.’\textsuperscript{14} 

Lakshmi, regarded as Vishnu’s wife by c. AD 400, has for long been upheld in puranic Hinduism as the model Hindu wife, united in complete harmony with her husband in a spirit that combined submission with loyalty, devotion, and fidelity. [...] 

Lakshmi, however, has a reverse side, Alakshmi (Not-Lakshmi), her dark and malevolent Other. The innately heterogeneous puranic
literature ascribes the origins of this malicious mythical woman to diverse sources. [...]

However she originated, Alakshmi came to embody a gendered conception of inauspiciousness and the opposite of all that the Hindu lawgivers upheld as the dharma (proper moral conduct) of the householder. When she entered a household, she brought jealousy and malice in her trail, brothers fell out with one another, families and their (patri) lineages (kula) faced ruin and destruction, the highest misfortune that Hindu patriarchal minds could ever imagine. [...]

[...]

Lakshmi and Alakshmi were mutually exclusive categories. A house where the spirit of Alakshmi prevailed was said to be unbearable for Lakshmi, who always left such a household and bestowed her favour on others who, and in particular whose women, did not flout the rules and rituals that made them auspicious. The Lakshmi–Alakshmi cycle has often been used in pre-British and folk literature to explain family (mis)fortunes and social mobility.¹⁵

What kind of women would be termed ‘Alakshmi’s in our nineteenth-century tracts on new domesticity? Two kinds, of which the first were women without any formal education for it was they who were bringing the nation into disrepute. [...] One important argument often advanced in favour of educating women was that education of the right kind would help to get rid of the poison of jealousy that ignorance produced and would thus help to restore in women their true Lakshmi-like nature.

Clearly then the invocation of Lakshmi was not an instance of a ‘tradition’ fighting ‘modernity’. The ‘modern’ Lakshmi, to be produced through education, was an indispensable part of a nationalist, and self-consciously articulated, search for domestic ‘happiness’. [...] Converting women into gribalakshmis (Lakshmi of the household) through the novel means of formal education was the self-appointed task of a civilizing nationalism. [...]

But a ‘lack of education’ was not the only factor that made some women behave in an Alakshmi-like spirit. Education itself could also be dangerous. It could produce its own variety of Alakshmis, women who were allegedly arrogant, lazy, immodest, defiant of authority, and neglectful of domestic duties. As one author of a textbook on ‘domestic science’ put it: ‘In today’s women, education produces an [inordinate] fondness for luxury and comfort. They do not have much sympathy
for others in the family, nor much modesty, and unlike [women] in the past, do not look on their husbands as divine beings. ...The proper aim of women’s education is to correct these faults.  

Several negative terms were used to describe such women or their behaviour: bibi (the feminine form for babu, a dandy), memsahib (European women), boubabu (a housewife who behaves like a babu), beshya (slut), and such others. [...] These imaginary ‘ultra-modern’ women were portrayed in fiction and non-fiction as selfish and self-indulgent people who had overturned the domestic order by their disrespectful attitude towards the grihini of the household, the mother-in-law. [...] The alleged neglect of grihakarma (domestic work or duties) by ‘(over) educated’ women was the subject of complaint and banter in Manmohan Bosu’s book on Hindu rituals. Speaking of ‘the effort to destroy’ the Hindu home now apparently at work in the antahpur (the inner apartments or women’s quarters), he said.

On all sides we hear the cry: Be civilized, learn manners, don’t touch cow-dung [traditional purifier/cleanser] or dirty cooking pots, don’t handle the broomstick, and don’t even go near the hearth! After all, you are the ladies of the household, does it suit you to do the work of the maidservant? If you spend the whole day in the Kitchen, when will you apply yourselves to the cultivation of the mind? [...]  

Bosu’s reference to the maidservant is a reminder that what was at issue was not the question or even the quantum of actual physical exertion by middle-class women. The physically harder part of domestic labour, one could reasonably assume, would have been performed by hired servants (or retainers) in many bhadralok families—subaltern groups whose histories we have not even begun to imagine. The invocation of ‘household duties’ or grihakarma/grihakarya worked rather as a cryptic cultural code for the qualities of person hood that made a woman both ‘modern’ and desirable. Education was essential to the production of this desirability, for an ‘an uneducated woman’, as a book on naridharma (women’s dharma) put it: ‘cannot be skilled in grihakarya [domestic work]. At the same time, a woman who neglects grihakarya for the sake of learning, will find her learning to be useless. The most successful wife is she who combines education with skills in household tasks.’ Grihakarya or household work was a culturally shared way of referring to the qualities of grace/modesty and obedience which were described in this literature as the two signs of Lakshmi-like auspiciousness in a woman. The attainment of both required modern education. [...]
Students of the social history of the bhadralok will know that it was not only the male writers of the period who wrote in this vein. Very similar points of view, in different forms, were often expressed by women (which is not to deny the dissimilarities that could distinguish women’s writings from men’s). I will also take for granted the by-now familiar point that the literature discussed originated as part of the historical process through which a modern patriarchal discourse was fashioned by the Hindu Bengali bhadralok under the twin pressure of colonial rule and emerging nationalist sentiments. The very interchangeable use made in these writings of words such as *beshya* (whore) and *memsahib* (European woman) suggest a nationalist insistence on cultural stereotypes in a gesture of creating and maintaining boundaries that were patently false. Nor is there much intellectual mileage to be had from regarding the use of the Lakshmi-figure as an instance of the so-called ‘modernity of tradition’, for that only leaves all modernities looking the same.

For the purpose of this analysis, I will also take for granted another obvious point: that Alakshmi, *beshya*, *boubabu*, *memsahib*, and other such words were terms that stood for individual assertiveness on the part of women and its undesirability. They were the figures of imagination that helped demonize the ‘free’ and ‘private’ (female) individual whom the European writers on conjugality idealized. ‘Friendship’ between husbands and wives, grown in the privacy and freedom of bourgeois patriarchy, appear here to have run into opposition from the patriarchal structures that already existed. ‘Freedom’ in the West, several authors argued, meant *jathechhachar*, to do as one pleased, to be self-indulgent and selfish. In India, it was said, ‘freedom’ meant freedom from the self, the free person being one who could serve and obey voluntarily.

[...]

To read this conflict over the ideals of the Bengali housewife (the *sugrihini*)—grihalakshmi versus the *memsahib*—as a debate about the ‘freedom’ of the autonomous bourgeois self on the one hand, and the idea of subordinating the individual to the will of the clan or the extended family on the other, is not so much to misread it as to stay completely within the very terms of these colonial texts themselves. After all, as is known, for nationalist and imperial historians alike, the ‘woman question’ has often acted as a measure of ‘freedom’ and quality of civilization.
‘Freedom’, undoubtedly, was a key idea that shaped the Bengali modern. The emergent and new (bourgeois) individuality in Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was deeply embroiled in the question of defining personal ‘freedom’ in the context of the norms of the extended family. Debates over ‘free will’ versus ‘determination’ or ‘necessity’ (sometimes read as ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’), for example, provided some of the central motifs in quite a few of Bankimchandra’s novels, an early edition of *Kapalkundala*, in fact, carrying a whole essay on the subject of ‘freedom versus destiny’.22 [...]

It is not my purpose here to sit in judgement over the nineteenth-century question of whether or not Bengali lives were ‘free’. I do not want to essentialize or fetishize the idea. Investigations into ‘unfreedoms’ are obviously a matter of investigating concrete contexts that cannot be contained by the merely textual. Here, however, as I have already said, I am concerned with the textual alone. I want to read these texts—in particular, the debate over the ideals of the grihalakshmi—as illustrations of the different possible, and often non-commensurable, worlds we created for ourselves as we embraced our (colonial-nationalist) modernity. What I read in the terms in which the Bengali debates over new forms of domesticity were conducted are two radically different, though not unconnected, constructions of the social life of the family as narrated in public. They are both constitutive of our ‘modernity’, yet each of them posits a relationship between domesticity and civil-political life that is contradicted by the other. They can come together only by bringing each other into crisis. I do not claim that my reading of these texts exhausts the possibilities created in our modernity. But it may enable us to question the narratological closures that give this ‘modernity’, or its ‘history’, a semblance of homogeneous unity.

III

At the heart of the grihalakshmi/memsahib debate, then, were at least two contradictory articulations of the public/private distinction, both called into being by the exigencies of our colonial modernity. I have explained the way this relationship was conceived within the view that took as its task the ‘civilizing’ of Bengal/India. I will now demonstrate the structure of the second articulation by moving to an earlier period in the history of British colonialism in Bengal and begin by considering two documents from the year 1823. I choose these
documents simply because they help me to lay bare the structure of a practice which, over time, got routinized and hence all too codified.

Both of these documents involved the prominent resident, journalist, and social commentator of early colonial Calcutta, Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay. One […] documents is a well-known tract that he authored in 1823: Kalikata Kamalalaya (literally, Calcutta: The Abode of Kamala [Lakshmi]). The other one, a relatively obscure pamphlet published in the same year from Calcutta and now held in the British Library, is entitled: Gauradeshiya samaj sangsthapanartha pratham sabhar bibaran (literally: Minutes of the first meeting held in connection with the establishment/foundation of Gauradeshiya samaj [society/association]). Bhabanicharan was one of the founders of this association. The other organizers were such contemporary Bengali stalwarts as Dwarkanath Tagore, Radhakanta Deb, Ramkamal Sen, Tarachand Chakrabarti, Ramdulal De, and Kashinath Mullick.

Gauradeshiya Samaj, one should remember, was itself part of a fledging civil society already visible in the schools, offices, workshops, press, voluntary associations in Calcutta of the 1820s. As the editor of the magazine Samachar Chandrika, Bhabanicharan was a luminary of the ‘public sphere’ that was emerging in Calcutta in this period. The published minutes of the Samaj themselves constitute interesting historical evidence of this […]. More importantly, what makes this text a witness to the emergence of a ‘public life’ for the Bengali middle classes in Calcutta is the main subject that was discussed at the meeting. It was nothing other than ‘the state of the country’ and the possibilities of ‘improvement’.

The country […] is described in this document as being in a state of misery brought about by a combination of factors including the following: (a) lack of unity among ‘us’ [Hindus], and (b) declining status of scriptures and Brahmins, all compounded by ignorance on the part of the rulers (the British) of the dharma (moral order, proper action) of the land. The appeal that this document makes to a dharmic code in discussing a political and social order will not surprise students of Bengali history. Books written early in the first decade of the nineteenth century by Bengali intellectuals patronized by the British interpreted the coming of the Raj by invoking this code. Mrityunjay Vidyalankar, ‘for many years the Chief Pundit in the college of Fort William’, saw the restoration of dharma, that is, the practice of rajdharma (the dharma of the king) as the divine purpose behind British rule.24 […]

There is no doubt a significant trace of this language in the way the minutes of Gauradeshiya Samaj use dharma as a shorthand for both
land/country as well as for order/rule, that is, for a moral community. However, while [...] Mrityunjay’s prose dharma does not speak to any idea of ‘nation’ or ‘civilization’, the minutes of the Samaj are interestingly different. In the language of the minutes, dharma is made to work in tandem with the hierarchical and competitive European discourse of ‘civilization’. One aim of the Samaj’s resolve to ‘protect Hindu dharma’ was to prevent ‘the humiliation of...the country, scriptures, and dharma’ by especially the European missionaries. The theme of the decline of the country, though expressed in terms of dharma, differed from Mrityunjaya’s [...] treatment of the subject in that it now included explicit comparison with European countries and their histories. [...] ‘In the very distant past’, the minutes continue: the people of India [Bharat] were superior to the inhabitants of other islands. [...] They have become dependent and have been humiliated [and are now] immersed in abject misery. The unspeakable degree of our degradation can be comprehended if we compare our current state with the way intelligence and knowledge have influenced [other people]. But a combination of vanity and [our] current customs...prevents us from either acknowledging our sad circumstances or from making any effort to overcome them.25

The premise of this whole discussion was the idea of ‘improvement’ that we have already recognized as central to the idea of ‘civilization’. The first requirement, Ramkamal Sen argued at this meeting, was unity and this was to be achieved by forming voluntary associations[...]. It was resolved at this meeting that the new ‘Gauradeshiya Sabha of the bhadralok’ would strive to eradicate the evil customs of the country by publishing Bengali translations of informative books from other countries, by promoting discussions among the scholars and pundits, by starting a school, and by acquiring European machinery to help the cause of knowledge, for, as it was observed in the minutes, ‘a country lacking in printing presses and printed material...[to help disseminate] advice on conduct and rituals, will find the spread of harmful behaviour impossible to check, far less stop’.26

These minutes thus anticipate many of the features of that which came to characterize nationalist thought as the century wore on: the desire for a ‘national’ (still unclear in its outlines) unity, the desire for improvement in the state of the country, and the desire, finally, for a vigorous ‘public sphere’—voluntary associations, presses and printed material promoting discussion on matters of public interest, formal meetings with all the rituals of ‘public’ life—elections, votes, resolutions, the recording of minutes, and other related practices—
built into them. There is not yet an explicit desire for the modern nation-state here, but words like ‘humiliation’ and ‘dependence’ do refer back to a proto-national spirit that runs through this document and that distinguishes it from the texts of [...] Mrityunjay Vidyalankar who wrote in the early 1800s.

It is instructive, in this context, to consider Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay’s tract *Kalikata kamalalaya* (hereafter *KK*) published in the same year as the minutes of the Samaj, 1823, as a guide to ‘good conduct’ in the urban life of Calcutta. Bhabanicharan, readers will recall, was one of the architects of Gauradeshiya Samaj and was an important editor in the emergent world of Bengali journalism. He had also worked in various capacities for a number of European business firms in the city. In other words, his participation in what we would now categorize as Bengali ‘public life’ was by no means negligible. Yet, as his book *KK* shows, public/private, home/world, or domestic/official were not the distinctions that he would have applied to his own life. *KK* is an interesting instance of the dharmic code being used to produce and organize an articulation of the relationship between domestic and civil-political life which was quite antithetical to that produced under the sign of ‘civilization’.

*KK* is written in the form of a dialogue between an ‘urban dweller’, a Brahmin who lives and works in Calcutta, and a ‘stranger’, a newcomer from the country, who handles the city a certain degree of anxiety and trepidation and who is therefore eager to find out about its ways. It is a book written very much in the colonial context and shares some of the sentiments expressed by [...] Mrityunjay Vidyalankar on the one hand, and Gauradeshiya samaj on the other. [...] Unlike the texts of the Fort William College pundits, however *KK* displays an inherent anxiety over the changes brought about by social mobility in Calcutta, in particular the role that ‘new’ money could play in undermining the ‘proper’ model of social order and the place of the Brahmins within it.27 The word *kamalalaya* describing Calcutta as the abode of the goddess of wealth, Kamala (or Lakshmi), betrays this concern. This dissolution of kinship bonds in the city is mourned by the ‘urban dweller’ in *KK*, for it allowed people to engage in ‘shameful acts’. Even religious ceremonies, he says, were not being observed in the proper spirit, ostentatious displays of money and wealth often being more important than any sacred intent. The celebration of Durga Puja (worshipping of Goddess Durga) in Calcutta, said Bhabanicharan, had already acquired a bad name among many who
called it, mockingly, ‘chandelier puja’, ‘festival of baijis [dancing girls]’, ‘occasion for the worship of one’s wife’s jewellery and sarees’, etc. One sees why Bhabanicharan ‘participated in the efforts of Gauradeshiya Samaj: constructing proper rules of proper conduct for the residents of colonial Calcutta is a concern shared by KK and the minutes of the Samaj.

‘I hear that in Calcutta a large number of people have given up the right codes of conduct’, the stranger says in KK. […]

[ […] Among the] charges brought against the Calcutta bhadralok are […]: salaried (or paid) work demanding long and fixed hours (‘the whole day’), impurity of language, food and clothes; neglect of daily, sacred observances.

The ‘urban dweller’ in KK begins by conceding the validity of these charges. ‘What you have heard is true,’ he says, and adds, ‘…but a Hindu who behaves like that is a Hindu only in appearance [Hindubeshdhari: one dressed as a Hindu].’ In spite of the new structuring of the day that the colonial civil-political society required, the true Hindu strove to maintain a critical symbolic boundary between the three spheres of action (karma) that defined life: daivakarma (action to do with the realm of gods), pitrikarma (actions pertaining to the realm of one’s ancestors), and vishaykarma (action to do with the realm of worldly interests, that is, undertaken in pursuit of wealth, livelihood, fame, power, and other such interests). The most commendable of the vishayi bhadralok (that is, bhadralok with worldly interests) were always able to separate the self-in-world from a transcendental, higher self:

People with important occupations such as diwani or mutasuddiship wake up early and meet with and talk to different kinds of people [visitors] after completing their morning ablutions. …Later on they rub their bodies with oil…Before eating, they engage in [different] puja [worship] ceremonies [including] homa sacrifice, valivashya, etc. […] Middle-class people who are not wealthy…follow the same pattern, with the difference that they work harder, have less to give away in charity and can afford to entertain only a smaller number of [importunate] visitors. The more indigent bhadralok also live by the same ideas. But they have to work even harder and have even less to eat or give away.

Of particular interest to us is how Bhabanicharan handled the question of the polluting effects of using foreign languages. […] But ‘what should we do,’ he asked, ‘when dealing with words that do not translate into Bengali or Sanskrit?’ Bhabanicharan actually produces a list of such unavoidable words of which the following are in English. The list speaks for itself: ‘non-suit, summons, common law, company,
It is clear that these words belonged to the sordid domain of vishaykarma, the realm of worldly interests, which is where (British) rule was and Bhabanicharan’s ideal was to prevent words from polluting the purer domains of daivakarma and pitrikarma. Using clothes, Ganga water, and other such items to mark the boundaries between the domains seems to have been a common practice among the upper castes in Calcutta in the early part of the nineteenth century. [...] KK thus does not share the (later) nationalist urge to translate into Indian languages English words that had to do with modern statecraft or modern technology. An unmistakable expression of the nationalist and civic desire to appropriate the instruments of ‘modern’ rule is absent from this text. KK instead marginalizes the state (and by implication, the nation) by separating it from the purer aspects of personhood, by looking on it as a contingency and an external constraint, one of the many one has to negotiate in the domain of vishaykarma. [...] The serious business of ‘nationalism—or indeed the all-consuming conception of the nation itself that one day, by dint of its sacredness, would demand the sacrifice of life at its alter—could not be born of such a spirit.

This separation of the purer part of the self from the more polluting proceedings of public life and of the civil society had implications for Bhabanicharan’s understanding of domesticity. He does not even mention women or children, their existence is contained within the definition of the life of the male, upper-caste, patriarchal householder. Nor does griha or home play any part in his thought as a spatial entity. There is no conception here of the ‘home’ being the man’s castle, his personal refuge in love from the competitive world of the public sphere. The grihini, the housewife is not a separate subject of discussion here, presumably because it was assumed that she was only a derived aspect of the male grihi.[...]

There is in addition, nothing in Bhabanicharan’s text that suggested any attraction to the idea that the time of the household should keep pace with the time of the civil-political society. The themes of discipline, routine, punctuality, all those particular constructions of
human sociality that the themes of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ made both desirable and necessary and that so characterize what later nationalists wrote on domestic life, do not resonate through KK. If anything, there was an emphasis to the contrary. In the world that KK depicts, the ideal householder never spent more time at work than was minimally needed and concentrated on the higher levels of pitri and daiva karma. The self, in its highest from, was visualized as a part of the kula, the self-conception of the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal extended family, a self-conception that was more tied to a mytho-religious idea of time than to the temporality of secular history. The civil society here was a matter of compulsion, of unfreedom, a forced interruption of more important/purer acts.

IV
Let me then highlight the nature of the opposition between the two articulations of the domestic and the civil-political that Bengali modernity entailed, an opposition that I read into the neologism grihalakshmi, the two horizons as it were to which this compound word (griha=house+Lakshmi) points us. One is the horizon of the nineteenth-century European imagination of progress which was predicated on a split structure of consciousness, a consciousness that always perceived the present as ‘unhappy’ and therefore defined its worldly engagement as a struggle for ‘happiness’ (treated as synonymous with ‘freedom’) which was to be achieved within a historicized future. [...]

Discipline in public and personal life called for a dislodgment of the self from the mytho-religious time of the kula and its insertion into the historical narrative of ‘freedom/happiness’. The Bengali modern, to the extent that’s/he was the subject of this fable, was the embodiment of this unhappy consciousness struggling to transform itself. ‘We become very sad,’ wrote Krishnabhabini Das in the 1880s in her account of her travels in England, ‘when we realize how unhappy the couples of our country are...Very few persons in our country know how the ideal husband-wife relationship should be. This is the reason why...Indian [couples] prove to be extremely unhappy.’31 [...]

Yet Bengali public narratives of the social life of the family were replete at the same time with the opposite theme, that of ‘degeneration’, a view of the nineteenth century as ‘the dark ages’ or kaliyuga, a feature to which Sumit Sarkar has recently drawn our attention.32 This was a theme that articulated the personal/domestic with the national...
in such a way that the civil-political society itself came to be seen as the site, if not the source, of unhappiness. To a degree, this was the flip-side of the narrative of improvement. It followed the civilizing discourse in picturing the present as unhappy and therefore in need of reform anyway. We also see the same use of ‘woman’ as a signifier of the quality of the times with the difference, however, that the value of the sign was changed from positive to negative.

[...]

What was heard in the compound word grihalakshmi in the nineteenth century, then, were at least these two contrary ways of bringing together the domestic and the national in public narratives of the social life of the family. One way was to subordinate domesticity and personhood to the project of the citizen-subject and the goals of the civil-political sphere which, in turn, were seen as the site of work for the acquisition of improvement and happiness. The other was to imagine a connection between the domestic and a mytho-religious social—often equated in conscious nationalist writing with ‘community’ or the ‘nation’—whereby the civil society itself became a problem, a constraint whose coercive nature was to be tolerated but never enjoyed.

V

What all this amounts to saying, it seems to me, is that the Bengali modern, implicated as it is in the structures and relationships of power that produce the social-justice narratives of the public sphere, is constituted by tensions that relate to each other asymptomatically. There cannot therefore be any one unitary history of its becoming. This ‘history’, that is ceaselessly gathered up as one by the exigencies of the historian’s profession and by the needs of the state and governmentality, is always already not-one. Questions of this history/modernity have to be situated within a recognition of its ‘not-oneness’.

This produces a fundamental problem for the construction of historical narratives, for if this subject is, at one and the same time, both historicist and hot, how can the historicist imagination of the historian speak for it (except by subordinating the whole to what is in effect a only a part of it)? This is where I cannot agree with Sumit Sarkar’s reduction, for instance, of the bhadralok critique of chakri (waged/salaried work) and civil society to a problem of historical time without in any way problematizing that very conception of time itself.
The precise nature and implications of this [bhadralok] aversion to chakri...needs some analysis,’ comments Sarkar in his valuable essay on Ramakrishna, and then adds the following:

What made chakri intolerable was—its connotation of impersonal cash nexus and authority, embodied above all in the new rigorous discipline of work regulated by clock-time. Disciplinary time was a particularly abrupt and imposed innovation in colonial India. Europe had gone through a much slower, and phased, transition spanning some five hundred years...Colonial rule telescoped the entire process for India within one or two generations... Chakri thus became a 'chronotype' [sic] of alienated time and space.33

It is unfortunate that Sarkar buries the question/histories of personhood in a phrasing that he does not himself contemplate: ‘What made chakri intolerable was...its connotation of impersonal [emphasis added] cash nexus and authority.’ The sociologese of this sentence, its use of ‘impersonal’, ‘cash nexus’, and ‘authority’, bespeaks a familiar narrative of transition to capitalist-modernity which renders all ‘pre-capitalist’ relations the same—‘personal’, ‘face-to-face’, embedded in kinship, and so-and-so forth. The modern or capitalist, then, is precisely its other—and therefore the same again the world over—and the transition is best understood by essentializing, hence sociologizing, the difference between the two!

Yet, this ‘difference’ is what has been at issue in my reading of Bengali public narratives of the social life of the family. The Bengali modern is not an ‘incomplete’ modern or even a ‘bad’ colonial one compared to some ‘good’ metropolitan model. The grihalakshmi is not a Rousseauvian solution of the question of ‘womanhood’ in phallocratic bourgeois modernity—the model of Sophy, educated and companionable but modest and obedient at the same time.34 True, colonial rule introduced this model into bhadralok lives and the expression grihalakshmi partakes of it. But the concept of grihalakshmi, being tied to the mytho-religious time of the kula, also escapes and exceeds bourgeois time in all the three different senses that Lyotard has read into the word ‘exceed’ in a different context: to pass beyond, to fall outside of, to excise.35 The expression ‘grihalakshmi’ shares in ideas of personhood that do not owe their existence to the bourgeois projects that European imperialism brought to India. Nor are these ideas mere historical residues, remnants of a past, left there only because the colonial-Bengali transition to modernity did not
afford us the allegedly leisurely pace of the transformation in Europe. To say this is not to deny the cruelties of the patriarchal orders that this neologism of Bengali modernity, grihalakshmi, entails; it is, however, to claim that no adequate critique of this modernity can be mounted or practised from within secular-historicist narratives alone, which, by their very nature, are incapable of re-presencing what is not secular-historicist, except in an anthropologizing mode.

Let me elaborate a little further on this by discussing an obscure but by no means untypical text from the nineteenth century: a booklet called *Patibrata dharma* (with the English title: *A Treatise on Female Chastity*) written around 1870 by a Bengali woman called Dayamayi Dasi. The stamp of the bourgeois project of European modernity, of educating women to be both companies to their husbands as well as being devoted to them, is unmistakably present here. The very title of the book speaks of its concern with such feelings of devotion and its given English title places it firmly within the tradition of Bengali Victoriana. Encouraged by her husband to learn to read and write, Dayamayi Dasi wrote this tract on *kulakaminir kartabya* (duties of the woman of the Kula) which her husband published after her death. [...] In that sense, kula here was a term that tied the domestic to the national. As Dayamayi Dasi said, quoting from the *Brahmavaivartapurana*, to express her sense of nationalism: ‘The land blessed with women of such nature [i.e. devoted to their husbands] is comparable to heaven, and the people of that country should treat their women as goddesses’.

Yet the ideology of the patriarchy of the kula drips out of every word of what Dayamayi wrote in praise of this friendship and intimacy. A woman has no better friend than her husband. It is because he helps cover [woman’s shame] that he is called *bharta*. He is *pati* because he nurtures. He is *swami* because it is to him that the body belongs, he is the lord of the body. He fulfills [woman’s] desires, that is why he is [called] *kanta*. He is a *bandhu* as he shares happiness, *parampriya* as he gives affection, and *raman* because he gives...
pleasure. It is he who, through his own semen, returns as the son, and that is why the son is valued. But for a *kulasree*, the husband is dearer than even a hundred sons.38

How would we understand this speech if we were not to classify it as some specimen of a ‘low’ or ‘false’ consciousness waiting to be ‘raised’ by the political subject? What kind of a modern was Dayamayi Dasi? To be sure, the project of bourgeois individuality was a strong factor in her modernity, the idea of the autonomous individual existing for her own ends was something that animated this modern. But *kula*, *grihalakshmi*, etc., for all their undeniable phallocentrism, were also ways of talking about formations of pleasure, emotions, and ideas of good life that associated themselves with models of non-autonomous, non-bourgeois, and non-secular personhood. [...] This is a recurrent theme in modern Indian public life—worked out here in public narratives of the social life of the family—that the highest form of personhood was one constituted by the idea of self-sacrifice, the idea of living for others, not in the secular spirit of civic virtue that Rousseau would have applauded but in a spirit of subordination to the non-secular and parochial principle of dharma. The idea, as I have argued elsewhere, was not at all innocent of power, domination, and even cruelty and violence but, whatever else it may have been, it was never merely a ruse for staging the secular-historicist project of the citizen-subject.39

The *kula*, then, was an integral part of the categories with which the patriarchal Bengali modern consolidated its ideology of new domesticity in the context of a growing public sphere that colonialism had instituted. I want to make two points relating to Dayamayi Dasi’s and others’ affectionate description of the patriarchy of the *kula*.

My first point is that an irreducible category of ‘beauty’, a non-secular and non-universalistic sense of aesthetics circulates in these writings, pointing us to a certain subject of pleasure/emotion that speaks through these documents. These texts on modern Bengali domesticity harp on the association between ‘womanhood’ and ‘pleasantness’. Alakshmi was not only inauspicious, she was unpleasant as well, or, correspondingly, what was unpleasant in a woman was also inauspicious. [...] That is why, our author explained, all the Sanskrit terms for ‘wife’ were meant to sound pleasant, all significantly ending with a long vowel—*jaya*, *bharya*, *grihalakshmi*, *ankalakshmi*, *grihini*, *sahadharminii*, *ardhangarupini*.
Even a five-year old child will be able to tell these names that the Hindu woman is not a slave even if she is skilled in domestic work. She is not a maidservant. Serving her husband does not make her a kept woman...The Hindu woman is an object of great affection, care and pride.40

My second point follows from this. The connection between these pleasures and the ideology of the auspicious grihalakshmi, which is intimately tied to the concern for well-being of the kula, always exceeds a straightforward bourgeois project of domesticating women in order to allow them into the modern and male public sphere. For the conception of mangal associated with the idea of ‘auspiciousness’, on which the survival of the line of the kula depends, can be only very inadequately translated as ‘material prosperity’ or simply ‘well-being’. It is not a concept embedded in the secular time of the historicist imagination. An idea celebrated in the so-called ‘medieval’ Bengali texts, the Mangalkavyas (Mangal poems), where the human realm is never separated from the realms of gods and spirits, the word ‘mangal’ is a matter of everyday performance, clichéd no doubt but rooted deep in (chronologically pre-British) narratives/practices of kinship and family where Christian or historicist distinctions between the divine and the human do not apply. [...]

Needless to say, this imagination was at work in the nationalist aesthetics that marked the texts on domesticity that I have discussed here. Grihalakshmi signified a conception of the nationalist sublime which made the country (‘not an object of the senses’, as Kant would remind us41) ‘comparable to heaven’ (to return to the language of Dayamayi Dasi). And it was nationalism which used the term Alakshmi interchangeably with memsahib, European woman, a negative word charged with the impossible task of policing a false boundary between cultures.

But even this does not wrap up the Bengali modern. Dayamayi Dasi’s own text provides us with a critical example of how even in these public narratives of domesticity and personhood, caught between the asymptomatic perspectives of the citizen-subject and of the grihalakshmi, there remained possibilities of other manoeuvres creating speaking positions that looked far beyond the patriarchy of the Bengali modern. Her book, which is a paean to the patriarchy of the kula, breaks completely out of its own framework at one point in the preface where she records the exhilarating sense of liberation that literacy brought to her: ‘I had never entertained the thought that I would learn to recognise the alphabet or to read books. [...] But, in
the end, I developed such a thirst for prose and poetry that I began to neglect my duties towards *samsar* (the world, the household, the family) and my husband'.

This statement, which survives the patriarchy of the Bengali modern that speaks through the rest of Dayamayi’s book, reminds us of the other struggles that modernity helped unleash. But it is also a statement that, in its uncompromising resistance to duty (whether modern or ancient, civic, or familial) is not assimilable to the emancipatory visions that Eurocentric imaginations of civil-political life have bequeathed to us.

This conclusion cannot offer a closure, far less an explanation for a modernity that, as I have said, is itself not one. The modern, no doubt, is a myth in that it naturalizes history. The ‘true’ bourgeois does not exist except in representations of power and domination. Colonizing relationships, however, are not created through the complex attention to ‘truth’ that is often in evidence in academic debates. European imperialists would not have been able either to legitimize their colonial domination by using the idea of ‘progress’ or to sell this idea to the colonized, if their own representations of ‘progress’ were explicitly riddled with self-doubt. The certitudes that constitute the colonial theatre have not vanished with the demise of formal imperialism. The compulsion (and the temptation, as Heidegger once said) to think and translate the world through the categories of the European imperial-modern, is real and deeply rooted in institutional practices, both within and outside the university. One cannot simply opt out of this problem, nor suffer, by a sheer act of will, the ‘epistemic violence’ that has been a necessary part of nation-and empire-making drives of the last two-and-a-half centuries. History therefore cannot be a ‘talking cure’ from ‘modernity’; the analyst is not the addressee of this story of colonial Bengal. I think of it, as Barthes once said with reference to Shaharazad of the *Arabian Nights*, more as a merchandize, a narrative traded ‘for one more day of life’. To attempt to write difference into the history of our modernity in a mode that resists the assimilation of this history to the political imaginary of the European-derived institutions—the very idea of the civil—political, for instance—which dominate our lives, is to learn from Shaharazad’s technique of survival. It is to say, to every perpetrator or epistemic violence and in the voice of the woman-subject Shaharazad: ‘Don’t fuck me yet, for I still have (an) other story to tell’.
NOTES

1. This is an idea forcefully and illuminatingly argued in Meaghan Morris, ‘Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower’, New Formations, Summer, 1990, p. 10.


5. For examples of the way (male) reviewers controlled and regulated literary output of women, see Yogendranath Gupta, Bange mahila kabi (Calcutta, 1953), pp. 33–4, 58–9, 65–71, 125–8, 139, 220–1.

6. See Sukumar Sen, Women’s Dialect in Bengali (1928) (Calcutta, 1979). Sen shows the prevalence in women’s speech (of the 1920s) older words that had gone out of use in male speech and writing.


9. Somnath Mukhopadhyay, Sikshapaddhati (Dhaka, 1870), pp. 4, 33. This was one of the many books that self-consciously borrowed from Samuel Smiles.


11. Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism (Delhi, 1987), has a stimulating discussion of this problem.


13. Ibid., pp. 3–4, 34–9, 78, 80.

14. Both Borthwick and Murshid document this.


18. Anon., Naridharma [in Bengali] (Calcutta, 1877), p. 27, puts this gloss on a sloka from the Mahabharata which says: ‘[Only] she is [the true] wife who is skilled in domestic work, who bears children and who lives for and is devoted to her husband’.

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21. Thus Altekar’s nationalist study of Hindu women begins with a statement that could have come from Mill: ‘One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excel-lences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.’ A.S. Altekar, The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day (Banaras, 1956), p. 1. For a statement typically seeing the extended family as an institution inimical to the growth of individuality, see Margaret M. Urquhart, Women of Bengal: A Study of the Hindu Pardanashins of Calcutta (Calcutta, 1926), pp. 33, 43–4.

22. See Amitrasudan Bhattacharya, Bankimehandrajibani [in Bengali] (Calcutta, 1991), pp. 90–1, and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ‘Bankimchandra and the Subjection of Women: Kapalkundala’s Destiny’. I am grateful to Professor Bhattacharya for allowing me access to this manuscript.


29. Ibid., pp. 8, 10–13.

30. Ibid., p. 22. [...]


45. I have borrowed the idea of ‘epistemic violence’ from the work of Gayatri Spivak.