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Dislocating Western Feminist-Queer Politics from Bengal: Bhawaiya and the Desire of Sexual Subaltern.[i]

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Abstract

This article examines the possibilities of defiance to the gendered norm through the deviant words expressed in the lyrics of Bangla (Bengali) folk songs, in particular the Bhawaiya folk songs. Bhawaiya is famous for its lyrics of embodied or sensual love, often in the form of deviant and 'illicit' relations beyond marital sexual norms, expressed through the female voice of the songs. When performed, the songs can evoke similar deviant emotions in the performers and the listeners, creating an affective atmosphere and constructing a temporal subjectivity with the emotions of the female subjects of the songs, which I call sexual subaltern. I argue that throughout the colonial and post-colonial nationalist reforms and the emergence of strict reproductive heteropatriarchy in Bengal, the lyrics of Bhawaiya songs remained in the blind spot and therefore kept alive the artifacts of deviant sexual desire of the female subjects of the songs. This article goes further in examining how the temporal and affective subjectivity of sexual subaltern, with deviant and defiant emotions, as constructed through these songs, can provide an alternative conceptual tool to dislocate the West-centric queer-feminist politics and provide a global feminist remapping.

Keywords:

Sexual subaltern, Bhawaiya folk songs, queer feminist alliance, postcolonial critiques, transnational feminist politics.

Introduction

This article examines the possibilities of defiance of marriage as a gendered and sexual norm through the deviant emotions expressed through the lyrics of Bhawaiya folk songs. Bhawaiya is a very popular folk song genre, not only in North Bengal, its place of origin, which transcends the national border between Bangladesh and India (Khandoker 2017), but also among Bangla (Bengali) speaking people worldwide. The genre is famous for its lyrics of embodied or sensual love, often in the form of 'illicit' relations beyond marital sexual norms, expressed through the female point of view (Khandoker 2019). Many indigenous folk traditions reflective of sexual expression beyond the heteropatriarchal purview of sexuality that existed in pre-colonial Bengal (Arondekar 2009; A. Ghosh 2020; Katyal 2013; Khanna 2013; Thadani 2016). Many women folk artists sang songs of female desire and had easy access to inside the houses of the elite women, and Bhawaiya is one of the folk music that they used to sing (Barua 2000). However, the ideal image of the elite Bengali *Bhadramahilas* (ladies) was reshaped through the Bengali nationalist legal and moral reform, in response to the British colonial rule, which required disassociation from the female folk artists. A new form of patriarchy was imposed in which marriage became the most crucial issue for Bengali nationalists in negotiation with colonial intervention (Gupta 2005). Through this historical process, the concept of 'adultery' was criminalised (Sarkar 2001), and the idea of the plurality of sensual desire subsided in the dominant narratives (Arondekar 2009; Gupta 2002). Nevertheless, despite the restriction of female folk artists within the puritan sphere of the *Bhadramahila*, my research findings show that Bhawaiya is one of the folk traditions that remained popular in the blind spot of the sexual norm, constructed through the patriarchal

reforms in Bengal, keeping the artefacts of deviant sexual desire alive, through the voices of the female subjects of the songs.

To examine the female sexual desire expressed through the lyrics constructing sexual subjectivity, I was inspired by queer theory's concept of 'deviance' (Cohen 2004; Love 2015; Rubin 2011) in analysing the fluid subjectivity with defiant possibilities. Deviance in queer theory is a political tool. It entails resistance through acts of nonconformity (Cohen 2004) and the ownership and use of the term queer by sexual deviants, as a political position against heteronormativity (Rubin 2011). However, despite queer literature opening up the conceptual path for analysing the political possibilities of deviant female sexual desire evoked by some Bangla folk songs, it was also severely limiting when situating the (cis)women's heterosexual desire in the songs within the colonial and nationalist history of Bengal. The limitation and exclusion come mainly from two boundaries. Firstly, female heterosexual desires are commonly excluded from contemporary queer studies by re-enforcing "simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything 'queer'" (Cohen 2020, 438). Therefore, it excluded the subject of my research, the marginalised female deviant desire. And second, postcolonial perspectives are severely marginalised in queer theories, just as postcolonial and black feminist critiques have long identified the exclusion of the politics and experience of non-white 'other' women from Western and white feminisms (Anzaldúa 1987; Carby 1982; hooks 1982; C. Mohanty 1988; C. T. Mohanty 2003; Shehabuddin 2021). Anglo-American queer studies have also been criticised for their exclusions of non-white, non-western queer contexts (Cohen 2004; Duggan 2002; Meghani and Saeed 2019; Puar 2005; Rao 2014; 2020). In short, the subject of my enquiry, the female sexual desire expressed through and constructed by Bhawaiya, remains in the excluded sphere of mainstream Western queer and feminist theories. Therefore, from these exclusions, I am proposing a methodological, conceptual and epistemological proposition derived from the ethnographic data of my anthropological research. By examining the lyrics of Bangla folk songs, in particular the Bhawaiya folk songs, and the deviant emotions that

they convey, I provide a conceptual foundation to resist the gendered and sexual norm from/in Asia, in particular from the margin of the postcolonial nation-states of Bangladesh and India.

The argument of the article is based on my doctoral research in anthropology, which involved ten months of ethnography in different Bhawaiya areas, as well as archival ethnography (Decker and McKinlay 2020). In anthropology, ethnography is more than just a method; it is a process of interplay between theory and empirical context of the lived realities (Biehl 2013; Geertz 2008). Ethnography highlights the fluidity of experiences and the interconnectedness of individuals with their environments, allowing the researcher to capture the dynamic processes of life and the socio-political contexts influencing those lives, leading to new theoretical insight (Vidali and Peterson 2012). For archival ethnography, I looked at the archives—not just as repositories of historical documents—but where I engaged with the past through the lens of ethnography (Decker and McKinlay 2020). Therefore, the ethnographic approach of looking at the songs and performances of the Bhawaiya music encouraged the development of new theoretical insights, by considering the specificities of lived experiences rather than relying solely on abstract concepts. With the findings, I argue that the female desire of the fictional subjects of Bhawaiya, which can instigate and reproduce the emotions and desire beyond the reproductive gendered norm by connecting the emotions with the practitioners and listeners, constructing a *temporal* ‘female’ subjectivity, can be seen as a form of 'sexual subaltern'. My use of sexual subaltern is not as an identity; rather, it is a process of becoming a sexual subaltern through heterogeneous conditions of marginality caused by sexual desire that is deviant from the reproductive heteropatriarchal norm. I used the term 'sexual subaltern' as it suggests a history-specific conceptual tool to understand the postcolonial histories of Bengal provided by the critical debates generated by the Subaltern Studies group (Guha, Spivak, and Said 1988). The term 'sexual subaltern' is used by Ratna Kapur (2000b), to identify the marginalised identities in the hierarchy of sexual orientations and practices, following Gayle Rubin (1984). However, I

want to reconceptualise its subaltern constituent following Spivak's (2008) analysis of the subaltern and its sexual constituent to address sexual desire rather than sexual identity using the idea of the erotic as argued by Audre Lorde (1993).

Hence, in this article, in order to centre the sexual subaltern in the transnational politics of feminist global, I will elaborate in the first section on the defiant possibilities of female sexual deviance evoked by the lyrics of Bhawaiya. I argue that many Bhawaiya songs can evoke deviant and defiant female subjectivities that are brought into negotiation with the idealised notion of Bengali women and are critical to the reproductive marital norm. In the second section, I will elaborate on the theoretical mapping and the exclusions of Western queer and feminist theories and their insufficiencies to analyse the songs, the emotions they evoke and the temporal subjectivities they create that challenge the reproductive heteropatriarchy in a very different context than the West. Following that, before concluding the article, I will discuss how a redefinition of sexual subaltern can provide a feminist political alliance from the global South.

Bhawaiya's deviant and defiant emotions

Bhawaiya historically is a folk song genre of people from very remote and rural areas of North Bengal (Barma 2004; Biswas 1959), yet it remains enormously popular. It emerged in the Rajbongshi community of North Bengal in both Bangladesh and India and became one of the most celebrated folk song genres and cultural symbols in Rangpur Division in Bangladesh and Cooch-Behar (within the state of Bengal) in India and in the surrounding areas. To understand the social history of the emotions that Bhawaiya contains in its lyrics, I searched for the earliest collection of Bhawaiya in the archives.

Historical Context of Bhawaiya's Deviation from Marriage

The first published Bhawaiya song, collected by Sir Grierson and published in 1903 in the 'Linguistic Survey of India' was about a young girl craving the fulfilment of her sexual desire. Part of the lyrics from Grierson's (1903) translation follows:

At dawning youth I was not Hymen favoured,
How long still am I to remain single at home?
O fate marble-hearted!
The full-bloom 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 (Grierson, 1903: 187)

In the first line of the original Bangla version of the song, the term *biya*, that Grierson translates as 'hymen favoured', refers to 'marriage' in a very straightforward way in both Bangla and Rajbongshi language. However, Grierson's translation of the term is not word for word, but it is more accurate than the term marriage because *biya* in this song refers neither to a social nor a sexual contract; rather, it refers to a woman's first sexual experience.

In many other Bhawaiya song lyrics, *biya* is used in the context of oppressive marital situations where the anger/despair of the Bhawaiya woman is directed at her husband who abuses her, and at the in-laws who act as obstacles preventing her from meeting her lover. In these contexts, the passionate feelings of extramarital relations are abundant in the lyrics, to the extent that they cannot be ignored by any of the contemporary commentators or researchers of Bhawaiya songs (Barma 2004). For example, in the following song, the woman, who has both a husband and a baby, desperately desires her lover, even expressing her indifference to the possibility of her husband's death:

My house is on this side and my dear lover's house is on the other side

Khirol river is in the middle

O my dear honeybee, the shepherd

I have a baby on my lap

I cook on the sand, I dish out on the sand

I let the pan float away

I will eat fish and rice when my husband dies

If my lover die, I will lose everything.[1]

The historical context of the colonial era from which *Bhawaiya* was first collected, is the complex ground of the anti-colonial nationalist identity construction in Bengal. Bengali nationalism emerged via the British colonial education policy in the nineteenth century, which aimed to create a new class of *bhadralok* (gentleman) of the middle-class to support British rule. On the one hand, liberal British literature creates the urge for romantic and liberal non-conformist thinking within the elite Bengali literary class; a result of the Bengali Renaissance in the late 19th century. And on the other hand, the reaction to this instigated a revival of Hindu conservative nationalism within the educated Hindu elite, which Tanika Sarkar (2001) termed a 'revivalist-nationalist' cultural resistance. The liberal literary romantics and the religious revivalists eventually came together on the issue of anti-colonial nationalism with a resolution for the division of social spheres: *Ghar*/*Bahir* (Home/Public), between the material and the spiritual sphere (P. Chatterjee 1989). For this, they argue, it is not necessary to imitate all aspects of the West, but only its material elements as they claim that the spiritual aspects of the East are superior to the West. Therefore, the material/spiritual separation was needed. The material world was considered the domain of the male, the public. The home is the essence of the 'spirituality of India,' and woman as its

[1] The song was in Bangla, translated by the author.

representative must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world. The redefinition of public and private in this context shapes the anti-colonial nationalist patriarchal gender relations that aim to homogenise the immensely heterogeneous gender relations. Marriage became the utmost important institution for social coherence. It was not considered a civil contract, but a religious and family tie for life (Gupta 2005). Charu Gupta (2005) argues that although the British colonial intervention in family law was criticised and resisted by revivalist nationalists, the creation of strict laws against adultery and deviance from marriage was encouraged by them. During the construction of this *bhadramohila* (new woman) identity, an emphasis was placed on dissociating from any deviant practices and the songs and lives of poor women.

That was the same era, when in Bengal, the tradition of Sati was abolished by colonial reform, establishing the colonial 'saviour' image, what Spivak famously described as "White men saving brown women from brown men" (G. Spivak 1994, 93). However, to analyse the Sati debate between the white rulers and brown men, Lata Mani (1998) identified two layers of discourse: colonial and indigenous discourse, from which the agency and subjectivity of these women were completely absent. Mani deconstructs the binary images represented in the debate: in indigenous discourse, the image of the women who willingly sacrifice their lives for their purity was that of a 'heroine', and in the colonial narratives they were depicted as 'victims'. However, the lyrics of the Bhawaiya song I studied and translated above shows the invisible and silent existence of the excluded agency and subjectivity of women from these two layers of discourse, women who fearlessly refused to be either a victim or a heroine by sacrificing their lives upon the death of their husbands.

The colonial discourse of Sati severely inflated the wretched conditions of Hindu widows by erasing many layers of historical, class and caste positions, and yet, the sexual agency of Hindu widows is conceived as threatening for the reproductive heteropatriarchal gendered norm to the present-day (Ahmed-Ghosh 2009). To control their sexuality, a widow is

expected not to look attractive, and therefore to give up colourful clothes and jewellery, as well as rich foods, e.g., meat/fish that can increase sexual urges. This was practised to differing extents depending on caste, class and religion (Ahmed-Ghosh 2009; Lamb 2001). Contrary to this norm, the subject of the song lyrics above mentioned declares that she will not give up fish if her husband dies. Moreover, this woman in the lyrics was clearly desiring her lover.

In addition to the oppressive situation of marriage, there are also many Bhawaiya song lyrics that express sexual dissatisfaction even within the marital bond, thus justifying the woman's desire for her lover. For example, the following song lyrics depict the desire for a lover within a sexually unsatisfactory and oppressive marital situation. The female subjects of the Bhawaiya folk songs show the possibilities of deviant female sexual desire defying the reproductive marital norm.

O dear, to whom I will tell the story of my sorrow
Who would have empathy for me?
My parents married me off to a crazy man
The crazy husband stays home, but never even touches my pillow
The scorns of my in-laws are making me sick
O my lover, I was cooking while you were playing the flute
I cry hiding under the smoke that I created with the damp wood.[2]

The lyrics of the song express the desire, not simply for a forbidden lover, but to transcend the oppression and sexual dissatisfaction within marriage; a desire to deviate from the imprisonment of the reproductive marital norm. The above song was collected from the time of the colonial intervention in the nineteenth century from North Bengal when the area was

[2] The song was in Bangla, translated by the author.

not divided between the countries of India and Bangladesh. That was the time when reproductive marital norms combined with the reinvention of a divine Hindu tradition, became a legal institution, over many fluid non-normative, non-monogamous, pre-colonial forms of sexual relations (Banerjee 1987). The Western morality of sexuality was negotiated within the nationalist patriarchal reformation and many of the forms of fluid sexual expression and behaviours were criminalised as 'unnatural intercourse' or 'sodomy' under section 377 . Through colonial intervention and the emergence of Bengali nationalism, the concept of 'adultery' was criminalised, and the idea of the plurality of sensual desire subsided in both colonial and nationalist narratives in parallel with the legalisation of the reproductive heteronormative patriarchal sexual norm: marriage.

The colonial law and Bengali nationalist morality around marriage were not only limited to the elite sphere. Tanika Sarkar (2001) demonstrates that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the emergent 'public sphere' was more inclusive of the lower class, as indicated by the vast number of cheap Bengali publications. Through analysis of these, she argues that 'adultery' became the 'other' of Hindu conjugal sexuality. Although she shows the resisting voices of women against child marriage in various middle-class women’s writings, the issue of adultery remains unmentioned as immoral and taboo. Sarkar (2010) argues that with that emergent public sphere, adultery became the other of marriage, serving as the binary opposition of marriage by presenting it as 'bad' to make marital sex 'good' and the only acceptable form of sexual expression (Sarkar 2001).

However, through my research, it became evident that the extra-marital desire of female subjects of Bhawaiya is not vilified and judged in the same way as in the emergent public sphere, as Sarkar (2001) analysed. The Bhawaiya song lyrics that I mentioned above are among many others that deviated from the newly established idea of 'adultery' that emerged in the late nineteenth century, as argued by Sarkar. Those songs express desires different from the dominant narrative of India/Bengal regarding the normative gender roles and the

notion of conjugality that was built around the late colonial period. Yet, these songs remain popular, and the extra-marital aspect of the songs was at best ignored or silently filtered out of the explicit ones in the process of being recorded and becoming symbolic of authentic Bengali tradition within the middle and elite class audiences. These songs are passionately enjoyed by performers and audiences of all (biological) genders and are celebrated under the cover of national tradition. It shows a different narrative of adultery that is not simply the 'other' of the gendered norm, such as marriage in this context. Marriage in Bhawaiya is mostly either an oppressive situation or a way to fulfil the sexual experience, therefore, adulterous desire is rendered as a logical emotion for women if the marriage is oppressive or not sexually fulfilling. Therefore, this idea of marriage/*biya* in Bhawaiya does not neatly fit into the marriage (good) versus adultery (bad) binary, that was constructed with the emergence of the public sphere, as Sarkar argues.

Deviant Subjects with Bhawaiya

In attempting to understand the sources and impacts of the deviant emotions, my approach moved away from the search for authentic gender identity and voices of the songwriters and instead focused on understanding the voice of Bhawaiya by searching for how the singers, audiences and musicians connect with Bhawaiya's emotions. While the lyrics of Bhawaiya express sensual and often transgressive emotions, I argue that this voice is not representative of any essential sovereign subject, but instead, it signals collective and multiple subjectivities located in between the contemporary subjects (singers, audiences, musicians, researchers) and the fictional subjects of Bhawaiya. The generic style and the popularity of Bhawaiya regulate the female emotions through the subjects of the songs and dictate to authors of all genders how to express a story of a woman in the first person and with a voice of defiance. For example, one of my interlocutors, Sumon, an N.G.O administrator and a Bhawaiya enthusiast, explained that this is the only genre where it is possible to present a woman’s extra-marital affair sympathetically and without being

judgemental. He told me a story about an affair of a woman he knew. While her husband was living elsewhere, she had an affair with a local man, which led to her marriage ending, after she left her home and children to be with her lover. A songwriter Sumon knew wanted to write a puthi[3] about this incident. Sumon encouraged him to write a Bhawaiya song instead. His reason was, as he explained,

> If he writes a puthi about the story, he will have to be judgmental about her, as puthi usually ends with a moral lesson, but with a Bhawaiya, this would be impossible, as the style of Bhawaiya will prevent him from being judgmental. He will have to write from the woman's perspective, creating compassion and sympathy for her and her passion.[4]

As such, Bhawaiya's generic style permits the expressing female desires that are not bound to the gendered moral norm regardless of the gender identity of the songwriter.

The folk songs have served not only as one of the symbols of the authentic essence of Bengali national and cultural identity, both in Bangladesh and North Bengal in India, but also as the blueprint of the emotional architecture that conditions subversive subjectivity and sexuality. The 'illicit' desire of the female subject expressed through the lyrics of Bhawaiya has no acceptance in the normative discourse, but the lyrics containing them as folk tradition have. The passion expressed through the songs, whether it is illicit or not, is rather part of the acceptable emotions of the Bhawaiya people, and Bengalis in general.

[3] Puthi refers to handwritten manuscripts in Bangla, from the pre-print era of old religious or folk tales (Khatun 2012). 'Puthi path' means reading the tale, and generally, it has a special style. They are usually read by the elderly and respected religious people of the village and the stories end with a moral lesson to educate the villagers.

[4] The interviews were in Bangla, translated in English by the author.

Although many Bhawaiya songs are expressive of sexual desire with words, such as *joubon/joibon'* (sensual youth) or *piriter jwala* (the burning desire of love), they are often expressed with metaphors, such as the boiling water of rice, uncontrollable waves of the river, or overgrown plants. These metaphors can be seen as more than sexual, they are the sensual, embodied, material and mundane, entangled with the erotic. Jasmine Buli is a Bhawaiya researcher who described Bhawaiya to me as "the song of the most marginal people and of female despair." She also told me that the 'down to earth' descriptions in Bhawaiya were grounded in the lived experiences of women. The songs include details of their day-to-day lives such as household chores like cooking and cleaning and the professions of their lovers (i.e., *garial* [bull cart driver] or *mahunt* [elephant tamer]). The assorted materials I have collected (books, memoirs, leaflets, newspaper reports and booklets for Bhawaiya festivals) all reconfirm this same idea regarding Bhawaiya's 'down to earth' and material connections towards the sensual emotions of women. The expressions of the women's emotions are linked to their bodies and sensuality, conveying not just sexual feelings, but also, anger, pain and sensorial expression of emotions. Contemporary female songwriters take it as an opportunity to speak out about the inequalities they face, the pain they endure, or the dreams they wish for; that might not represent the reality of their lives but indicates a desire to push the normative boundaries towards their emancipation. The sexual desire expressed through the songs does not fulfil the actual desire, but it can invoke someone to voice that desire and to critique the oppressive marital situation in a way that they otherwise would not do. Moreover, as previously alluded to, the song form dictates to song-writers of all genders how to express a story of a woman in the first person with a voice of resistance and with the metaphors of her day-to-day material reality.

While the generic style of Bhawaiya influences the songwriter to express the deviant and defiant emotions of the female subject of the songs, and the song's popularity keeps these emotions alive, performances of the songs reproduce those emotions by creating an emotional atmosphere. One example of such atmospheric emotions in performance is with

once famous singer Aleya, whose life, success and failure are dramatic and tragic. Aleya is an example of the iconic woman represented in *Bhawaiya*, passionate and stubborn, and who tries to negotiate the gendered norms expected of her. Her life story, expressed by her and by others, seems to show her strong will to negate social expectations and pressure. At the height of her popularity, she fell in love with a songwriter and *dotara* player and married him, going against her family. This action marked the beginning of her tragic life. From then on, with fierce enmity from all of her family members, she struggled to be with the love of her life and also tried to keep her devotion to singing.

When I went to meet with Aleya, after the Ramadan fasting she was practicing with her *dotara* playing song-writer husband and others in a neighbour's house, because she could not afford a harmonium and her sons did not like her playing music at home. She played a famous song about inviting a foreigner to visit northern Bengal and customised the lyrics to welcome me. After a few songs, she started to perform a song about a deserted female lover, who could not get rid of the *maya* (love, caring and illusion) for her lover, which caused her misery. She expressed her suffering and urged her lover to come to see her dead body on her last day. The lyrics of the song are:

Oh my kala (nickname of Krishna) of my soul, what is this maya (illusion/love) that you put in my heart?
With the passion of my love for you, the woman in me and my body shakes
My tears flow down and wet my chest

While she was singing the song, the characteristic longing tune of *Bhawaiya* and the passionate lyrics made her cry, and her tears were flowing down her cheeks. At that moment, she became the woman of the song. These atmospheric emotions affected others too, and I

saw them wiping their eyes. The emotions affected me also, but not only due to this one song, but rather the combination of all the songs, the warm musical welcome and the desperate and tragic situation of hers.

I am aware that the different ways of performing and listening to these songs can create to some extent different emotional effects on different bodies. However, the emotions created by different types of performances in different situations not only connect the intersubjective bodies in a specific moment but are also situated historically. When performed, these emotions stick to the bodies of the audiences and leave a residue of the emotions in their bodies, which creates sympathies for those emotions. By becoming part of and by inheriting the atmospheric emotions through the performances, a form of temporal subjectivity is constructed. This process of temporal and affective subjectivity transcends the biological bodies of the singers, instrument players, or listeners. If the lyrics preserve the voice, it becomes a reality through performances and constructs a subversive and temporal collective subjectivity that consists of deviant desires, love, anger, or pain. Influenced by Sara Ahmed's (2013) argument that emotion is a form of cultural politics and world-making and that emotions are not just contagions but also imagined, I argue that the emotional atmosphere of every song, every performance and every listening affects the bodies of the participants with the emotions of the woman of Bhawaiya and the history and politics of the participants, which creates a state of temporal subjectivity within bodies beyond identity categories and left a form of residue even after the song ends. This subject is not located in a certain body instead it conveys emotions to different and multiple bodies. This subjectivity is, therefore, multiple, collective, and temporal. It is a condition rather than an identity.

Decentring Western feminist-queer frame and Bhawaiya's deviance.

A problem arises when I try to analyse and understand the 'deviance' of the fluid and temporal subject evoked through Bhawaiya songs with Western feminist and queer theories.

Despite 'sexual deviance' as a political position being one of the central focuses of queer theory since it emerged (Cohen 2004; Love 2015; Rubin 1984; 2011), the subject of my research, 'female deviant heterosexual desire' does not fit into the typical subjects of contemporary queer scholarship. However, I do not claim that the heterosexual women's desire expressed through the Bhawaiya lyrics is a queer identity for being deviant to marriage. Instead, my inclination toward queer theory comes from an understanding of queer anthropology, where queer is not necessarily an identity but rather, queering is a politics and method for anti-normativity with possibilities of desire (Weiss 2016). Queer analysis should not be limited to only queer identity categories, as anthropologist Maya Mikshadi situates the regulation of heterosexual relations and heterosexual women at the centre of her queer analysis, arguing that 'queering' the supposedly non-queer categories shows how they are inseparable from the production and regulation of gendered and sexual regimes (Mikdashi 2013, 250).

Therefore, I elaborate on my theoretical ground with two frames. One is focused on *deviance* from the institution of marriage, excluding not only homosexual desire but also non-reproductive (cis)women's heterosexual sexual desire using Michael Warner's idea of reprosexuality and Audre Lorde's idea of erotic. Two is a reconceptualisation of *sexual subaltern* with Gayatri Spivak's idea of subaltern, symbolic 'effacement of the clitoris' and 'uterine social organisation'. Through these concepts, I situate Bhawaiya lyrics critical of marriage with the idea of erotic desire of female subjects of the songs, which aims to challenge and dislocate the conventional Western feminist-queer approach to seeing deviance.

Deviance

Deviation from sexual and gendered norms as the politics of anti-normativity is what I take from queer theories (Love 2015; Cohen 2004). Gayle Rubin's (1984) the essay 'Thinking

Sex' was intended to reflect on oppression situating sexual deviance at the centre of sexuality studies through sexual stratification rather than the binary gender or a simple hetero-homo opposition (Butler and Rubin 1997). In that sense, if marriage is the legal unit of normative and acceptable sexual practice, an institution devoted to heteronormative reproduction and challenging it should be considered a form of deviation and therefore, Rubin's chart of sexual hierarchy is relevant for my argument to analyse the 'deviation' from reproductive heteronormativity, i.e marriage, as a political possibility in the context of Bengal. However, despite using queer theories' idea of deviance, here, I do not claim the temporal female subjectivity with deviant (heterosexual) emotions as queer subjects, instead propose a different terminology, such as ‘sexual subaltern’ to deal with the exclusion and a common ground for feminism and queer theories from a global perspective which I am going to elaborate in the next subsection.

My inclination to use queer theories comes from the interest to have a common ground between feminist and queer theories to foreground the deviance of Bhawiaya. In the Anglo-American context, reversing its negative connotation to confront heteronormativity and to turn the table on normative thinking, 'queer' emerged as a political term among many queer and feminist academics and activists (Duggan and Hunter, 2006: 149), which influenced and disseminated to other Western societies. Going beyond Western societies, for me, queer, in that sense, can be a tool to dismantle reproductive heteronormativity, therefore, the biggest normative sexual institution, marriage. For this, queer analysis needs to go beyond the conventional queer subjects and beyond the critique of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 2003) to the critique of normative sexuality (Warner 1993). For Warner, the enemy of queer is not the 'straights', but rather the reproductive heterosexuality or reprosexuality, as he proposed to call it, that linked heterosexuality with institutions of generational transmission of capital and culture (1991, 9). Following Warner's logic, 'queer' can be seen as being against reproductive heteronormativity that marginalises other sexual desires and practices. It can also be the other forms of sexual desire that transgress that reproductive part of

heterosexuality and the institution of marriage that normalises it making it heteronormative. Going beyond the heterosexuality-homosexuality binary, Warner's 'queer' also provides to be critical of the new homonormativity, which is "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2002, 179).

However, despite Warner's and many others' fierce postcolonial, transnational and anti-imperialist academic queer critiques (Cohen, 2011; Rao, 2020), by the turn of the century, the term 'queer' was used mostly to identify gay and non-heterosexual or non-cisgender persons as an identity. This identification not only became a part of the norm but also remained aloof from other politics, including, racism, colonial power relations and even feminism. Going beyond the gay and non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity, I want to expand queer theories to examine the deviation of marriage by heterosexual (cis)women challenging the institution of marriage in the context of Bengal, which is part of the reproductive heteronormativity. By broadening the scope of queer theories, it neither deny nor blunted its strength to challenge the heteronormative cisgender norm, instead, it expands queer critique towards marriage as the institution upholding reproductive heteronormativity that denies and suppresses erotic desire of (cis)women, as well as gays and transgender people. Bhawaiya women's desire for deviance from marriage and sexual fulfilment, therefore, can be analysed by the concept of deviance in queer theories, which provides an expansion of queer theories without denying its subjects.

For this expansion, Audre Lorde's exploration of the 'erotic' offers a useful alternative conceptual anchoring. Lorde argues, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde et al. 1993, 87) and therefore, "our erotic knowledge empowers us" (Lorde 1993: 90). The desire to have a lover outside of marriage in the context of sexual

dissatisfaction and marital oppression, as articulated in the above-mentioned Bhawaiya lyrics, can be such an empowering emotion when expressed. Lorde's erotic is a source of knowledge and power for women to reclaim (Ward 2022). The feeling of a desire that 'feels right', even though it might not be socially accepted, can provide knowledge of the self, leading towards becoming the subject and finding the voice to express this. Lorde's idea of the erotic is not only sexual but also entangled with spirituality and sensuality and deeply feminine in a way that exists beyond the female biological body and identity categories. Bhawaiya's deviant emotions, sensuality, and materiality open up how unexpressed feelings evoke those female emotions beyond the gendered body. Audre Lorde's idea of the erotic broadens the idea of sexuality by including sensuality and spirituality, which can also be helpful in understanding erotic desire as a core of subjectivity that challenges the Western-modern idea of the sovereign subject. Therefore, I see that erotic desire can be an element of feeling and becoming, discovering sensual, spiritual and embodied joy and pleasure, a sense of knowing oneself that can be defiant to the oppressive gendered norm. The subject of my research, Bhawaiya women, might then have an epistemological place to belong.

Sexual Subaltern

To name the epistemological place of the fictional subject Bhawaiya women the term 'sexual subaltern' catches my attention for moving away from Western queer politics to subaltern politics. I first encountered the term in Ratna Kapur's (2013) work, although I preferred to use it differently. The sexual part of 'sexual subaltern' as engaged by Ratna Kapur is followed by Gayle Rubin's idea of the hierarchy of sexuality (Rubin 1984). Rubin, in her diagram of sexual hierarchy, categorised the Western sexual value system. She showed that good, normal and natural sexual practices are,

> [i]deally … heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It

> should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial (Rubin, 1984: 152).

Rubin’s sexual value system was history-specific. Still, it is interesting that her list of 'deviant’ behaviours included non-marital and non-monogamous sexual practices that dismantle the simple hetero-homo binary. Following Rubin, Ratna Kapur used the term sexual subaltern,

> [T]o bring together, the disparate range of sexual minorities within postcolonial India, without suggesting that it is either a homogenized or stable category. Indeed, the location and politics of the sexual subaltern in postcolonial India is mediated by class, caste and religion, producing a complex and at times even contradictory politics (Kapur 2000a, 16).

Yet, she clarified the term to refer to the stable categories of "gays, lesbians and sex workers" (Kapur 2000a, 16). Kapur's use of the term goes beyond the homo-hetero binary, and her idea of the sexual subaltern remains as a legal entity marginalised by state power and a subject with political agency.

Following Kapur, many Indian scholars used the term 'sexual subaltern' to refer to the subjects "whose existence troubles the terms of mainstream discourse around sexual and gender identity and practice" (Turner 2014, 132). Whereas, for Spivak, the subaltern is without identity, but brings with it an enormous possibility for making a space where their agency could lead to their subject formation (G. C. Spivak 2005). For Spivak, gendered subalterns are those who are not heard in the biggest global institution: reproductive heteronormativity and are therefore, not sovereign subjects. However, Spivak's concept of subaltern has been criticised for not being a political subject situated in relational,

intersectional and dynamic axes of power (Nilson and Roy, 2015). Therefore, despite opening up the possibilities of new subject formation of queer-feminist politics in India, the uses of sexual subalterns refers to essential identity boundaries. For example, Roy and Kapur's use of the term 'sexual subaltern' is a "referent for any marginality from which resistance can emerge.… without seeming to engage with other characteristics that determined the subaltern", which often makes it an empty category, "because non-heterosexuality or queerness cannot become the only marker of marginality or a subaltern position" (S. Chatterjee 2018, 110). On the contrary, my use of the term 'sexual subaltern' is closer to Spivak's concept of subaltern. What Spivak describes as 'gendered subaltern', I refer to as sexual subaltern, as the position from which to express deviant erotic desire from reproductive heteronormativity, including (cis)women's heterosexual desires that are not recognised independently from the reproductive heteronormative marriage in the context of Bengal. With this non-identitarian meaning of subaltern, I aim to see sexual subalterns as non-identity and as a form of *temporal* subjectivity. This *temporal* subjectivity cannot be used as an identity category; instead, it is a condition of the subaltern with sexual desire deviant from the reproductive heteronormativity or marriage. Therefore, although there is a growing body of literature examining the queer lives of Indians using the term 'sexual subaltern', in this article, I rather propose a detour for the term to return it to questioning those categories with a radical re-reading of queer theories.

When marriage is an oppressive and reproductive heteropatriarchal institution, erasing (cis)women's sexual pleasure, I see (cis)women's heterosexual and erotic desire to transgress this marital norm in response to this erasure and oppression as the excluded desires of the sexual subalterns alongside gays, lesbians, sex workers, transsexuals and queers. These female emotions of desire cannot be articulated in the dominant discourse. Not only because of Spivak's famous argument that the subaltern cannot speak in the dominant language, but also because the desire has no place in this reproductive heteronormative discourse in Bengal, both in India and Bangladesh. Female sexual desire, if

it is beyond marriage, could be expressed only through folk songs like Bhawaiya, with a veil of anonymity for the songwriter and with an emotional permissiveness. Yet, when performed, the deviant emotions of the subjects of the songs can be transfused to the body of the singers and the listeners, which I call *temporal* subjectivity. Since this *temporal* subjectivity is evoked by the deviant emotions of Bhawaiya and leaves a residue of those emotions in the bodies that experience it, I situate this *temporal* subjectivity within the 'deviant' others of the reproductive heteronormativity.

The Politics and Alliance of Sexual Subaltern

The *temporal* subjectivity of sexual subaltern and its non-identitarian meaning then raises the old question of politics. Here on the question of the subject of politics, I go with Butler's formulations, "[t]he foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a "doer behind the deed", but that the doer "is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler 1990, 181). To clarify, I argue that the female desire expressed by Bhawaiya creates a path for a person of any gender to feel deviant female emotions. The emotions stick to the body and leave a residue. The residue creates obstacles for the listener to vilify the emotion as 'immoral', despite them remaining outside of the normative and permissible gendered emotions. I see that the process could be seen as the construction of the doer; through the deed. In agreement with Sara Ahmed (2013), I want to add that emotions are not only generative from politics, they can also generate politics, a politics that centres the intersection of feminist and queer subjects. When the female subjects of Bhawaiya songs evoke deviant emotions that are excluded from the 'uterine social organisation' by reproductive heteronormativity, it opens up many possibilities for folk songs as the emotional artefact connecting bodies to *temporal* subjectivity. That subjectivity is not queer as an identity but can queer as a politics to go against the normative gender role. This subjectivity is neither concrete nor singular: it is fluid and transcendental and defies the normative

boundaries of gendered emotion. The sexual subalterns are multiple and fluid and therefore, even though they are in opposition to the accepted and celebrated sexual norm, they are not located in the binary opposition. This female sexual desire as a sexual subaltern does not create a male-female binary, instead, it joins with the desire of other sexual subalterns. Therefore, my use of sexual subaltern can provide more possibilities to create a space of inclusive alliances of many different forms of excluded sexual subalterns between those desires that are denied by the hetero-patriarchal reproductive gendered norm.

However, it is important to mention that by proposing 'sexual subaltern' as a common ground for the political alliances between 'others' I am not going back to the problematic universalising subject by replacing 'woman' with sexual subaltern, an issue that many black and third world feminists correctly problematised about the western feminisms (Davis 1983; hooks 1982; 1984; C. Mohanty 1988). It also does not claim to provide a synonym for ‘queer’, but rather provides a different way of analysing sexual deviations in non-Western contexts. The difference is important for gender and sexual politics; however, we also need to be critical of the way that 'difference' is capitalised upon by the normative forces With a critical understanding of 'differences' (Brah 2022; C. T. Mohanty 2003; 2013). A feminist and queer political alliance must, therefore, simultaneously build a common ground while being particular about the different ways the gender and sexual norms oppress and exclude different forms of sexual and erotic desires.

Conclusion:

This article emerges from a theoretical gap in examining the temporal, erotic, and deviant desires of Bhawaiya women through Western feminist and queer lenses. Bhawaiya song lyrics frequently depict themes of women's sexual dissatisfaction and extramarital desires, which contrast with the colonial and nationalist ideas of marriage constructed in the late 19th century that emphasised strict fidelity and the suppression of female sexual desire. During this period, both British colonial rule and Bengali nationalist narratives reinforced patriarchal

norms, criminalised adultery, and promoted marriage as the foundation of social stability. However, Bhawaiya music subverts these norms by providing a space for expressing marginalised female emotions and erotic desires. The sexual desire in the songs doesn't satisfy the actual longing but encourages voicing that desire and critiquing oppressive marital conditions. The genre's unique style allows for a sympathetic portrayal of these defiant emotions, irrespective of the songwriter's gender, therefore providing a space for a form of deviant desires excluded from the idea of marriage as a reproductive heteropatriarchal institution. Bhawaiya when performed, often creates a shared emotional atmosphere between the people present in the moment, transcending individual identities. The songs create a collective and temporal subjectivity, connecting singers, musicians, and audiences through the defiant emotions of the songs' female subjects. This collective emotion and temporal subjectivity transcends the gendered emotions and provides a subversive space for expression that deviates from the gendered norm of marriage.

Western queer theories have illustrated how deviance from sexual and gender norms can serve as a political stance. However, the heterosexual (cis) women’s desires expressed through Bhawaiya song lyrics, which exist independently of reproductive heteronormativity in Bengal, do not traditionally fit within the framework of queer studies. Therefore, by emphasising queer not only as an identity but as a politics against anti-normativity, I argue that Bhawaiya women’s deviance can queer reproductive heteronormativity. Here, I am not claiming that the heterosexual (cis)women’s desire is a queer subject; instead, I analyse the exclusion of desires of reproductive heterosexuality and queering it with the help of queer theories outside of the Western canon. To do that, I needed to find a new concept, as the meaning of queer as identity does not fit the temporal subjectivity combined with the fictional character of the song lyrics and the temporal subjectivity it creates. Therefore, a non-subject, non-identity meaning of subaltern can accommodate that fluid and temporal subjectivity. The concept of the sexual subaltern, which provides a possible conceptual frame for the deviance of Bhawaiya women by transcending the gender binary, is instrumental in

understanding this unique temporal subject. This opens a path to departure from Western queer theories and fosters a global perspective for feminist and queer alliances. However, the concept of ‘sexual subaltern’ also needs to be revised from its current scholarly uses. For the sexual subaltern to have analytical space for the deviation of Bhawaiya, it needs to include the desires of not only gays, lesbians, and sex workers but also the erotic desires of women excluded from the reproductive heteropatriarchal institution of marriage in Bengal. To achieve this, I reconceptualise the term ‘sexual subaltern’ in two ways: first, by emphasising its non-subject, beyond-gender meaning, and second, by including cis women’s erotic heterosexual desire as one of the excluded desires from sexual norms. I propose that the non-subject formation of sexual subalterns, inspired by Bhawaiya songs, evokes female emotions that transcend the gender binary and create a platform for marginalised desires and deviations from gendered and sexual norms upheld by the institution of marriage. The sexual subaltern, as a temporal subject evoked through Bhawaiya's lyrics and performances, becomes a site of deviant and defiant emotions. This challenges and dislocates Western queer-feminist politics and lays the groundwork for a politics of queer-feminist solidarity emerging from Bengal with a global South perspective. It advocates for a redefinition of the sexual subaltern to encompass the complexities of female desire in a postcolonial context, thus contributing to a global feminist discourse that recognises different cultural expressions of sexuality. Therefore, the article proposes a transnational rather than West-centric feminist-queer approach because its theorisation arises from Bhawaiya women's erotic desire and emotions in Bengal, emphasising the need for a global understanding of gender and sexuality.

The article dislocates West-centric queer feminist politics in threfold ways. First, it provided the theoretical contribution to subverting patriarchal norms and the reproductive institution of marriage that emerged from Bengal in Bangladesh and India. Second, it provides the idea of a temporal and collective subjectivity that emerged from a shared emotional atmosphere, transcending individual identities and gendered norms, offering a subversive space for

expression. And third, it expands the West-centric queer theories with female deviant emotions and erotic desires by reconceptualising the term ‘sexual subaltern’ as a fluid, non-identity subjectivity that transcends the gender binary and includes desires excluded from reproductive hetero-patriarchal norms. Through these arguments, the article advocates for a transnational feminist-queer approach, challenging the Western-centric perspective and contributing to a global understanding of gender and sexuality.

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