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“ANGELS IN THE HOUSE”: GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF “LABOUR” AND “WORK” IN SOME ENGLISH AND INDIAN TEXTS OF NINETEENTH-EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

“In this world the responsibility for our own husband has been placed into the hands of each one of us women. The task that is our duty is to make him happy and to work strenuously to achieve his well being. Is it small responsibility to add the weight of another life to our own lives...still, be it a hard task or an easy one, it is our essential duty.”¹

Speculation on labour has an ancient origin. More than two millennia before the British political economists began working on the subject, the Greeks were trying to distinguish “labour” (*ponos*) and “work” (*ergon*). Hesiod, for example, found work “due to Eris, the goddess of good strife” but labour, according to him, “like all other evils, came out of Pandora’s box”.² This contempt for labour seems to have been all-pervasive among the Greeks: Hesiod, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle were unanimous in their depreciation of labour.³ On the other hand, appreciation of “work” in contrast to “labour” is apparent in several languages – Greece, Latin, French, German – “only the equivalents for ‘labour’ have an unequivocal connotation of pain and trouble.”⁴ The contempt here derives from the conviction that labour necessitated by bodily needs is slavish. As Arendt puts it, “occupations which did not consist in labouring, yet were undertaken not for their own sake but in order to provide the necessities of life, were assimilated to the status of labour”.⁵

¹ Nagendrabala Dasi, “Woman’s Dharma”, Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice*, 1990. 195,

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1998. 83.

³ However, Arendt notes Hesiod’s line: “Work is no disgrace, but laziness is a disgrace.” She notes too, that in the world of Homer, “no work is sordid if it means greater independence; the selfsame activity might well be a sign of slavishness if not personal independence but sheer survival is at stake, if it is not an expression of sovereignty but of subjection to necessity.” Ibid. 82. 83.

⁴ Ibid. 80.

⁵ Ibid. 81. 83.

With the “modern age”, we come to distinctions between “productive and unproductive labour”, “skilled and unskilled work”, and later, manual and intellectual labour.⁶ For political economists, the first distinction was the pivotal one, both Adam Smith and Karl Marx having based the whole structure of their argument upon it. Here too, the labour theory of value highlights the “instinctive aversion to labour”, labour being so “unpleasant a thing” that no one would willingly undertake it.⁷ It’s undertaken either under compulsion or for remuneration. As Gallagher notes, the OED’s first definition of “labour” recognizes its painful connotations – “exertion of the faculties of the body or mind, especially when painful or compulsory”, while “work”, “is more neutral and has a wider variety of meanings: ‘industry’, ‘employment’, ‘task’, ‘operation’, ‘creation’, and ‘finished product’.”⁸ My paper is interested in looking at the question of “work”/ “labour”, specifically as it unfolds in the case of women working in the domestic interiors, in some of the Indian and English novels of the nineteenth/early twentieth century - taking on board *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Chokher Bali* (1903).

This examination will keep in mind the distinction made by Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* where, on the one hand, we have “labour”, seen as “toil” and “trouble”, and on the other “work”, seen as “tasks” and “operations”. In trying to take stock of the varied senses in which the two terms – work/labour – are (strategically) deployed, it is important, in taking from Gallagher’s discussion, to see that the two are defined circumstantially and have no intrinsic attributes. Thus, something can be “play” in one context and “work” in another. Also, and importantly so, when the activity falls within economic relations that make it “work”, then “its emotional valence changes, and it crosses a boundary in the cultural imagination from a realm called freedom to one called necessity.” So, instead of simply and mechanically attributing pain and pleasure to certain activities, or seeing them as “the raw data of a felicific calculation”, these sensations are to be seen as lying dormant in activities which are awakened/obscured in a certain context – economic, domestic, and the like.⁹ When these activities tend to enter the field of (novelistic) representation, then we can see the selective visibilization or invisibilization of certain aspects, thus qualifying them variously as “labour”,

⁶ Ibid. 85.

⁷ Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy in the Victorian novel*, 2006. 24.

⁸ Ibid. 58.

⁹ Ibid. 79.

“work”, “duties”, “occupations”, “employments”, and so on. As this paper will observe, the distinctions between these terms are often collapsed and they are used interchangeably to suit the purpose at hand – thus in the domestic context we have all household labour dubbed as “duties” and “tasks”, divesting them of all traces of dreariness and trouble they, inevitably, entail. divesting them of all signs of dreariness and trouble they entail.

The invisibilization/visibilization of certain kinds of labour, and the absence of scenes in the English and Indian novels depicting a woman sweating and slaving in the kitchen and engaging in other domestic drudgeries/“duties”, and despising this “labour” too, will be examined in the light of the globally hegemonic discourse on domesticity in the nineteenth century, which was a result of naturalization of a collection of middle-class European ideas and practices. As Judith E. Walsh points out, this is clearly visible in the prescriptive domestic literatures from England, America, and India, which led to a reshaping of domestic and gender relations. According to Walsh, the nineteenth century global domesticity was a result of the reflexive interaction between colony and metropole. Thus, be it *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (England, 1861), Catherine Beecher’s American manuals (1841-1869), or Indian domestic manuals such as *The Duties of Women* (1890) - all were “hybrids” combining the transnational domestic discourse and the local/indigenous ideas and practices about domestic life, and all naturalized domesticity as the “civilized orthodoxy of home and family life”.¹⁰ While in the English context we have the palpable influence of the “courtesy books” for women, in the Indian context too we see proliferating advice manuals and the “new” woman being subjected to a “new patriarchy”¹¹. The proposition that Gallagher makes, drawing on the political economists, that if “one delighted in labour itself – as, for example, a mode of self-expression, an experience of mastery, or a means of self-realization – we would not be counting the hours and trying to make them pay”, is precisely what seems to come alive in the representation of labour in a text like

¹⁰ Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*. 114. It is evident that all the advice manuals discussed concern themselves with the “well-ordered home”, the watchword being “a place for everything, and everything in its place.” The focus thus is on intimate details of domestic life, the house, its furnishings and decoration, and on the housewife and the skills and abilities she needs to manage it. Ibid. 113-114.

¹¹ As Judith Walsh explains, “new” because it challenged traditional patriarchy by allowing women access to education and literacy, and even encouraged travel, but patriarchal nonetheless because it held women in a dependent and subordinate position. Ibid. 4.

Chokher Bali.¹² In the context of the Indian novel in the nineteenth century, one notes how work, taken out of the “labour” context, is seen as a representation of an extension of femininity, with this “work”, in several cases, being transformed into hospitality. Here, then, the concern is not with labour, but with pleasure. Housework (domestic skills) in this case does not function as a sign of status, but rather functions as an extension of sexuality. What we have is a naturalization of labour, where the economic implications are completely elided. The ideology of the novel erases labour and inculcates it into an economy of love. This screening of all toil which domestic labour entails is also evident in *Mansfield Park*, the politics of which the paper will attempt to lay bare.

In England, most conduct books at the end of the seventeenth century were devoted to the male of the dominant class. However, in the eighteenth century we find innumerable conduct books and instructional works for women which emphasized a domestic education – in household management, regulation of servants, supervision of children, etc., and the need for the “efficient housewife” to complement her husband’s role “as earner and producer with hers as a wise spender and tasteful consumer.”¹³ Armstrong importantly points out, that the decrease in the number of conduct books towards the end of the eighteenth century was not a sign of the obsolescence of the “female ideal”. Rather, “there is every reason to think that by this time the ideal had passed into the domain of common sense where it provided the frame of reference for other kinds of writings, among them the novel.” Austen’s minimalist representation, as against

¹² This argument of Gallagher’s (that the *telos* of production – pleasure – would be achieved in the production itself) is embodied in the representation of domestic labour in the Indian novels. Thus, a straightforward equation of “work”/“labour” with unhappiness, industriousness with “working continuously” and hence with a sustained state of melancholy, and being “willingly industrious” with choosing to be melancholy and “mad”, would apply to some extent to a work like Gaskell’s, but not at all to the Indian novels. Even McCulloch’s reasoning, that labour is inevitably unpleasant, and people work for the “pleasurable anticipation...which in itself implied that one would not be industrious merely for the sake of industriousness” is disproved by several cases of people working without any “pleasurable anticipation”, but simply as a fulfillment of their “duties”. Gallagher, *The Body Economic*. 59. 66.

¹³ Countless conduct books addressing a female readership were circulating in the eighteenth century, their popularity having increased after their abandonment of the aristocratic model, and despite a decline after the 1820s, many books continued in print well into the nineteenth century. The authors of such books included men (Halifax, Rochester, Defoe) and women (Catherine E. Beecher, Sarah Tyler, Mary Wollstonecraft); pedagogues (Timothy Rogers, T.S. Arthur) and clergymen (Rev. Thomas Broadhurst, Dr. Gregory). Conduct books and ladies’ magazines championed the same feminine ideal and the same objective of “ensuring a happy household”. Proposals for institutions for educating women were accompanied by the development of programs for instructing women at home. Erasmus Darwin’s *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1798) and Edgeworth’s *Practical Education* were two famous efforts at institutionalizing the curriculum proposed by conduct-book literature. Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, 1987. 61-63.

Richardson's "tediously protracted descriptions" of the household, as in *Pamela*, were possible "precisely because the rules governing sexual relations laid out in the conduct books could be taken for granted."¹⁴ As female virtue now became linked to "work", earlier ideas of the aristocratic woman (featuring for instance family name and social connections) vanished from the conduct books. These books also compared "labour" and "leisure", placing them on a moral continuum.¹⁵ The "ideal woman's" essence was to be located, not superficially at the level of the material body/external "adornments"/labour¹⁶, but "underneath her surface"; ensuring a subordination of the body to a "set of mental processes that guaranteed domesticity." It is the production of female subjectivity that is prioritized here. It should not be surprising then that even though the conduct books elaborate on all the "tasks" that comprise "domestic duty", the woman of the house nevertheless appears to "have nothing to do." This ideal, apart from acknowledging that servants would do most of the work, owes much to the relocation of the domestic woman's "power" from bodily labour to her mental labour, applied in domestic supervision and management. It is in this context that Nancy Armstrong finds "self-regulation" a "form of labour that was superior to labour."¹⁷

Mansfield Park, focusing on a small section of the gentry, completely screens laborious toil, though Portsmouth does offer us a glimpse of middle class drudgery. Austen revealingly refuses to "dwell on guilt and misery...quit(ting) such odious subjects" in favour of "tolerable comfort". The politics of visibilization are evident here: what Austen would have her readers read, and the principle of exclusion/inclusion. Contrary to the Indian novels, labour does not here function as a motor for the individuation of women. This difference in the representation of labour is immediately obvious in *Mansfield Park*'s sanitization/ homogenization of labour, shrouding the toil it entails in reality. Lady Bertram has no time for any "cares", including her daughters' education, and spends her days in idleness, dressing well, or "doing needlework, of little use and

¹⁴ Ibid. 63.

¹⁵ Here, the domestic woman, with her "female virtues", is the opposite of certain practices attributed to women at both extremes of the social scale – the idle aristocratic woman, amusing herself or "displaying" her body, and the labouring woman, considered "unfit" for domestic duties because "she too located value in the material body." Ibid. 75. 76.

¹⁶ Despite representing aristocratic behavior as the antithesis of domesticity, conduct books never once exalted labour, since women working for their living were seen as morally bankrupt. In taking on domestic "duties" for money, the governess "blurred a distinction on which the very notion of gender appeared to depend", and thus, prostitution imagery is freely invoked to describe any woman who "dared to labour for money." Ibid. 78-79.

¹⁷ Ibid. 81.

no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children...” (emphasis added). Even Fanny’s domestic usefulness lies merely in being “handy and quick” in fetching and carrying.¹⁸ The only labours frequently mentioned are the “imaginary” and often exaggerated “toils” Mrs. Norris complains of.¹⁹ “Work” and “labour” get completely redefined in this genteel existence. Further, we often have labour for the sake of labour, such as when “economical” Mrs. Norris manufactures useless errands for Fanny to prevent her “idling”, and overtires her to illness.

Notably, servants in *Mansfield Park* are invisibilized, appearing not as characters but in cursory references to their job - housemaids, labourers, grooms, carriage drivers. Elaborate meals are directly depicted, but the kitchen and its myriad activities are allowed no entry into this discursive space. In contrast, the Indian novel visibilizes the immense labour of cookery, though here too we have an avoidance of the implications of “toil” and “trouble”.

Fanny’s life at *Mansfield Park*, including the “comforts” (presumably of excellent servants) is thrown into relief by “noisy, disorderly, improper” Portsmouth, to which the incompetent housemaid, Rebecca, contributes.²⁰ Austen’s focus is the gentry and not the middle-class, and thus the chaotic domestic life in Portsmouth gets little discursive space (though the drudgery of such households is obvious, by contrast, in Gaskell). There is an evident discursive manoeuvre by Austen towards a neat and happy conclusion, even reforming Tom, Julia, Yates, and Mr. Bertram, and settling Fanny at Thornton Lacey, while her place in Mansfield Park is filled by the “useful” Susan. Dr. Grant’s death gives Edmund and Fanny a larger income and moves them back to Mansfield, the “home of affection and comfort”, while, not surprisingly, dreary, toilsome Portsmouth makes no further appearance.

The representation of domestic labour/work in the Indian novels is to be examined against nationalist ideology’s handling of the “women question”, which was one of the most controversial debates over social reform in nineteenth-century Bengal. As Partha Chatterjee states, the “resolution” which nationalist ideology offered in its struggle against colonialism was

¹⁸ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 1992. 15.

¹⁹ Mrs. Norris, the “poor desolate widow” perpetually moans about being “deprived of the best of husbands”, as well as of her health, her low spirits and her narrow means. Though eager that Fanny be adopted, she refuses to take on the responsibility. Ibid. 21.

²⁰ The Portsmouth passages do mention domestic chores, though the effect is lightened by the emphasis on Mrs. Price’s ineptness and indolence. She is a “dawdle” who spends her days “in a kind of slow bustle; always busy without getting on, always behindhand and lamenting it, without altering her ways; wishing to be an economist, without contrivance or regularity; dissatisfied with her servants, without skill to make them better, and whether helping, or reprimanding, or indulging them, without any power of engaging their respect.” Ibid. 279.

built around separating the domain of culture into material and spiritual spheres. The material domain comprised modern techniques of organizing material life (science, technology, modern methods of statecraft, etc.), which had helped European domination, and which the colonized peoples would have to learn to overthrow this subjugation.²¹ However, nationalist ideology warned against this co-option of European material superiority becoming imitative of the West to the point of sacrificing national culture. Further, such loss of self-identity was deemed unnecessary, given the premise that the East was superior in the spiritual domain. As Chatterjee points out, this material/spiritual dichotomy was collapsed into an “analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy, that between the outer and the inner.” Thus, social space gets separated into, “ghar” and “bahir”, “the home and the world”. The world, “treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests”, was seen as a typically male domain, while the home, untouched by the material profanities at large outside, came to be associated with the woman. As compensation for the innumerable surrenders men had to make to the pressures of the material world, this inner sanctum, with its “spiritual essence”, was to be kept uncorrupted by any encroachment of the colonizer.²² Much of nineteenth-century literature on women focused on the threatened westernization of Bengali women. Caricatures of Bengali women trying to imitate a “memsahib” showed them neglecting household duties and hankering after wealth, luxury, and useless pastimes. In the second half of the century, the social and moral principles which would underlie women’s position in the “modern” nation were spelt out.²³ The home was to be the spiritual centre of national culture, and the woman’s main responsibility was to nurture and protect its sanctity and preserve her essentially spiritual (feminine) virtues. It is thus that we can

²¹ Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. 2006. 237

²² Domesticity is to be seen as the discourse of the nineteenth-century European middle classes, linked with the beginnings of industrialization, industrial capitalism, and new modes of production of late eighteenth-early nineteenth century. The gendered separation of spaces follows - men going out for work, and women, “angel(s) of the house”/ *grha lakshmi(s)*, staying back to manage the household. So, home comes to figure as a “refuge” for the husband from the public world of employment and the wife is to be best friend, companion, and constant source of solace and comfort to the husbands. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*. 12.

²³ Bhudev Mukhopadhyay’s *Paribarik Prabandha* is a good example, which highlights the utter chaos in a home where women abandon their household “responsibilities”: “The house and furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of the family is ruined; children are born weak and rickety”. Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”. 241.

see the “new” woman being subjected to a “new patriarchy”, which inverts the power relation between the sexes while adulating the woman as mother or goddess.²⁴

The Bengali language domestic manuals, such as *Conversations with the Wife, or A Husband's Advice to His Wife*, written between 1860 and 1900, offered practical and theoretical guidance to women in domestic life, apprising women of the family *dharma*/duties, and it was through print that the reading Indian women were exposed to nineteenth-century domesticity.²⁵ The ideal of these varied discourses was a model housewife, with the skills and characteristics ensuring excellent domestic management. This model, as Walsh tells us, was at the end of the nineteenth century a staple of the Calcutta print media, from periodicals to essay contests to novels. *The Duties of Women* pictures her as working cheerfully, sometimes without food or rest, to produce a house so “neat and ...artistically arranged” that it is “soothing to the eye.”²⁶ Moreover, *The Duties of Women* stresses that women do not perform all this household work as “servants” of their families; rather, “a woman’s love and affection transforms the work she does”. For instance, the woman of the house cooking for her family is lauded, primarily because alienated labour by servants who only work for salaries can never equal the transformative power of the woman’s loving devotion to the task of cooking.²⁷

²⁴ Formal education became a requirement for the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman), imparting the cultural refinements of modern education *without* jeopardizing her place at home. Such education would aim at inculcating domestic “virtues” – thrift, orderliness, cleanliness, etc. The early generation of educated women themselves propagated the nationalist idea of this “new” woman. Hence, much to the embarrassment of liberal historians, there is ample evidence of women writers of the nineteenth century justifying the significance of “feminine virtues”. So, while Radharani Lahiri would talk about the importance of proficiency in housework, there were others who emphasized the need for other “virtues” – chastity, obedience, self-sacrifice, patience and the “labours of love”. However, while this ‘new patriarchy’ generalized itself among the new middle class, it was irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes. Ibid. 247. 251.

²⁵ During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, an Indian advice literature specifically addressed to women appeared in many vernaculars and genres throughout India. In Bengal alone, there were more than forty domestic manuals for women between 1860 and 1900, and thirty-seven women’s magazines and journals between 1860 and 1910. Ibid. 22. So, in late nineteenth-century India, housework and cooking became newly charged metonyms for a woman’s love for her family. Love acquired a new definition, not referring to Bhalobasa, romantic, or exclusive love, but to subordination of personal happiness and choice to household *dharma*. As we have in *The Lakshmi of the Home*: “The Hindu wife must become her husband’s co-practicer of *dharma*. How can you women even call a thing “love” when it leads to the destruction of your husband’s dutiful work?...” Ibid. 97.

²⁶ Ibid. 135.

²⁷ Walsh attempts to answer the anomaly in the nineteenth-century Indian woman question: on the one hand, ample accounts of women’s courageous challenges to indigenous customs, such as *purdah* and the literacy ban, and on the other, these very women speaking of their devotion to their husbands. Walsh sees this hyperbole of women’s self-described devotion “not as evidence of false consciousness, or as an aesthetic survival from the past or as femininity, but rather as evidence of choice.” Ibid. 145. These women opted for the “new patriarchy”, attempting to use its concepts and practices to gain greater freedom. Ibid. 143.

Chokher Bali, strips labour of toil and trouble, alluding to it only elliptically, or, paradoxically, visibilizing it in its absence. More common is the imagery of cares and caresses, like the wife “tenderly caressing her husband’s feet”. We see Mahendra, raised by his mother and absolutely dependant on her, and Asha being trained in household affairs by her mother-in-law.²⁸ Though Mahendra dislikes his wife’s absence, Annapurna thinks it necessary that a wife learn domestic duties rather than idling her time away.²⁹

Here, (as also in a text like Bankim’s *Indira*), domestic labour is translated into an important signifier which contributes to the individuation of characters, and becomes a scale as it were, for their subsequent valuation, provided they are “good” or “bad” at it. Thus, Binodini (a widow, and thus marginalized) earns central importance in the story by her skilful housework, while Asha’s own “prodigious” ineptness divests her of all her “wifely” significance.³⁰ Binodini – “never idle...supremely efficient...an excellent cook” – impresses Rajlakshmi so much that she takes the widow home.³¹ It is Binodini’s work which “from behind the scenes” then agreeably transforms people’s (such as Bihari’s) life at home. Here, we never hear of any melancholy or fatigue induced by the myriad household chores. Interestingly, while domestic work is seldom directly represented, it is immediately visibilized if the “workers” are removed from the home. As also observed by Gallagher in her analysis of *Hard Times*, while a competent worker’s (in Dickens’ case the entertainer’s) labour appears effortless and felicitous, it is only incompetence and failures, such as Asha’s in *Chokher Bali*, or a complete absence of the people who do all the work, that visibilizes the immense care, toil, and trouble that such “work” generally requires. The utter chaos and mismanagement that reign supreme in Rajlakshmi’s absence attest to the fact that household management, with the trouble and care it entails, is no child’s play, and hence beyond the spoilt Mahendra and the incompetent Asha. While the unsupervised domestic staff relaxes and takes life easy, and the cook on a drunken bout remains traceless, Asha is completely

²⁸ However, the primary motive of engaging Asha in this “hard grind” is something else: Rajlakshmi’s fear that she will distract her husband from his examinations.

²⁹ Here, we get a distinction between “useful work” and “useless pastimes”; the former, obviously, being household work, and the latter (typical of the “modern” woman) being reading frivolous romances or idle needlework. Ibid. 18.

³⁰ The management of “work” also serves to distinguish Bihari and Mahendra. Unlike the “spoilt” Mahendra, Bihari is hardworking and given to tireless and selfless care (of Rajlakshmi, and of impoverished clerks) and thus, not surprisingly, emerges as the “friend and protector of everyone”. 280.

³¹ Here, we do see glimmers of the self-sacrificing “duties” so much at play in the advice manuals. Binodini, “scrupulously conscious of her duties and responsibilities”, works tirelessly for Rajlakshmi during her stay, and later, nurses her. Bihari’s regard for Binodini also develops from her care of Rajlakshmi. Rabindranath Tagore, *Chokher Bali*. Trans. Sukhendu Ray, 2004. 85.

at sea, not knowing how to cope, and Mahendra goes about innovating “many exotic, but inedible dishes.” And then follow more instances of mismanagement and wayward state of affairs.

Binodini’s work, on the other hand, has an additional valence. Her bedecking Asha to meet her husband helps carry her subconscious fantasies and “repressed yearnings” into the sacrosanct realm of conjugal bliss, from which she is otherwise excluded.³² Interestingly, it is through labour again (allocated by Binodini to Asha to detain her from Mahendra) that she gets a “diabolical pleasure” from the thought of Mahendra’s impatience. Another instance of such “indirect” labour that helps the widow to poach on otherwise banned terrain – the marital realm – is that which is invested in writing letters under Asha’s signature, through which she can express her own feelings to Mahendra. Here too, Asha given her incompetence fares badly, and being only capable of ill-composed letters has little incentive to correspond with Mahendra. As one can see, it is Asha’s domestic ineptness, coupled with a lack of wit and humour, which creates a rift between her and Mahendra, quenching their earlier ardour. As the frenzied love life of Asha and Mahendra tends to flag, and a “sense of fatigue” seems to take over, the “intoxicant” needed is not to be provided by Asha. Rather, it is Binodini who enters at this crucial juncture and helps Asha with “fresh and bracing recipes to revive Mahendra’s spirit.”³³

The novel pivots on Binodini’s unjust fate, contrasting her with the married woman who cannot maintain the husband’s home or his love, while the more deserving Binodini is barred from conjugal happiness. Binodini, understandably, resents the “lifeless doll” whom Mahendra loves instead of her. The author endows Binodini with (by the prevalent standards) every womanly virtue, making the point that it is only society’s marginalization of widows which denies this worthy woman happiness. However, one should note that this “worthiness” is rooted primarily in the possession of the qualities of a “good dutiful wife”, and it is only by striving to be that, that the widow is to be given importance. We also observe, that while Binodini’s care is constantly called for, people rarely inquire after her own health. The flipside of the “duties”

³² Ibid. 49.

³³ Ibid. 65. Cooking, as we also witness in the elaborate lunch cooked by Rajlakshmi for Bihari, is as an expression of love and affection, and while these are emphasized, the labour involved is screened from our view. A later example is the magical, refreshing transformation of Mahendra’s room by Binodini (though the “long and loving hours of work” are barely visibilized). Mahendra’s room is so transformed by pleasant aromas, aids to comfort and tasteful decoration that he falls asleep with “the sensation of being caressed by the delicate fingers that had so skilfully embroidered the cushion covers.” Ibid. 134-135.

Binodini so scrupulously performs is that when she wants to abstain from them for reasons of her own, it only irks others. For instance, Rajlakshmi “perceives...a hint of socially unacceptable conduct” in her refusal to look after Mahendra. Evidently, while a woman may willingly engage in certain kinds of domestic “duties”/labour and be praised for them (so, Rajlakshmi can speak lovingly about Binodini – “This angelic girl of ours lives only for her work.”), she cannot willingly abstain from the same “duties”, for that will only get her reprimanded.

As we go on to see, it is again (‘good’) labour/work itself that helps finally redeem the figures of Asha, and even Mahendra. At the end, we have a completely transformed Asha, confidently taking charge of the house, having “matured into a responsible housewife”, and having become worthy, as it were, of a happy married life. Mahendra too, in deciding to join Bihari’s social work³⁴ can be seen moving away from his earlier “existence of idle pleasures” to engage in “meaningful toils”. Though the text, having imbued Binodini with myriad skills and talents, certainly helps in bringing the figure of the widow centre stage and thus gives her ample importance, nevertheless she does not marry Bihari, as one may have expected, and instead retires with Annapurna.

Taking an overview of the works considered – *Mansfield Park* and *Chokher Bali*, we see how a sense of “duty being paramount to pleasure” is intricately threaded into them, and women represented as selfless “angels in the house” and it is the gendered metamorphosis of domestic ‘labour’ into ‘work – one that is voluntarily and happily done - which leads, inevitably so, to the ‘happy’ and ‘content’ unions of the (loving) husband and wife at the end. Not only is domestic labour naturalized for the middle class woman, the labour of working class men and women is completely erased in the production of middleclass domesticity

³⁴ Work of another kind outside the domestic sphere, but “work” nonetheless.

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