

**Masculinity, Femininity And Servitude: Domestic Workers In Calcutta In The Late
Twentieth Century¹**

Raka Ray

(forthcoming in *Feminist Studies* 26:3, 2000)

In a memorable scene in *Aparajito*, the second film of Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*, the destitute Brahmin widow Sarbajaya watches her son learn to serve. She has recently obtained work as a cook in the household of a rich Brahmin, where her employers are considerate and inconsiderate in the manner of feudal lords. In this scene, she observes from the top of the stairs as the master of the house sends for her son Apu to light his pipe and tells him to pluck gray hairs from his head, rewarding him with a tip. In the next scene we see Sarbajaya and her son on a train, having left the job behind.

Sarbajaya's reaction is entirely different from that recorded by V. Tellis-Nayak in his study of Indian domestic servants, who reports primarily resignation and a surprising lack of stigma attached to the job.² Sarbajaya's face as she looks upon the scene makes it clear that nothing could be worse than watching one's son become a servant. I say "son" here deliberately because it is not clear that Sarbajaya's reaction would be quite as strong in the case of a daughter. Indeed, in the first film of the trilogy, *Pather Panchali*, the daughter Durga (who dies at the end of the film) is shown at the service of her little brother, looking after him, feeding him, and ultimately being responsible for his well being. Durga was born to serve, in one way or another, but not Apu, the Brahmin son. The scene described above is as much a powerful comment on mother-love and gender expectations as it is about the extreme and peculiarly gendered stigma attached to the identity "domestic servant" in India.

How do we understand the humanity of a group of people who get paid to do tasks that no one wants to do? This is a question that lies at the heart of scholarship on domestic servants. Some argue that the humanity of servants develops in a distorted way because of both the nature and the conditions of this work. Servants are reduced to a state of “perpetual infantilism”, which leads to extreme hopelessness, and to a corresponding lack of resistance.³ Others have written movingly about the everyday ways in which domestic workers resist degradation. Both sets of authors, however, see domestic workers primarily through the lens of the power and authority that inhere in relations between the employer and employee.⁴

In recent studies of the working class in India, several scholars have argued that ideologies and practices of gender, caste and religion both shape the contours of the workplace and the trajectory of class identities.⁵ As Gill Hart and Karin Kapadia have argued elsewhere, an analysis of the meanings and relations of gender is necessary to better understand class consciousness.⁶ In this paper, I explore not the social identities underlying worker identities, but how work and the way work is constructed feed into gender identities. In other words, I argue that relations between worker and employer are refracted through the lens of gender and are used by the workers to build and reflect upon their gendered selves. My argument stems from the realization that the fulfillment of gendered expectations framed every conversation I had with domestic servants in Calcutta. This paper, then, is about how domestic servants in India negotiate their identities as men and women and about how they evaluate their embodiment of those identities. It explores the way male and female servants imagine and articulate their lives as gendered beings, given that they perform, on a daily basis, the most undesirable tasks of society.

I turn first to the structure of paid domestic work in India, and then discuss notions of class, masculinity and femininity in the city of Calcutta (where the research was conducted), situating these ideas within the distinctive caste and gendered class culture of Calcutta's middle, or *bhadralok*, classes. Thus I explore the gendered ideology of those who employ servants in Calcutta. For this distinctive class, the *bhadralok*, hegemonic masculinity is defined by the absence of menial labor and the presence of education and cultural capital. There is in addition an idealized notion of independence, though few *bhadralok* achieve it.⁷ Idealized femininity, on the other hand, involves being protected and staying at home. It is virtually impossible for those who do paid domestic work to achieve respected masculinity or femininity when their very definitions seemed designed to exclude them.

The final sections of the paper explore how, under these conditions, domestic servants try to define their masculinity and femininity against their employers, and how they accept, reject, embrace and modify the way others see them as men and as women. I argue that male and female domestic workers seek, on the one hand, to appropriate *bhadralok* ideals and to deny their employers the monopoly of being *bhadralok*. On the other hand, they redefine what it means to be a good man or a good woman, bringing these definitions closer to the lives they lead. The study of both sides of the domestic work relationship allows me to explore the dialectic of employer and employee gender ideologies, to examine how employers build ideas of *bhadralok* masculinity and femininity precisely by excluding servants, as well as to show how servants fight that exclusion with varying degrees of success.

The data for this paper is drawn from a larger study of sixty interviews (thirty employers and thirty workers) conducted in 1998 and 1999. Fifteen of the workers lived in the homes of their

employers. Because live-in work heightens the question of workers' masculinity or femininity, I focus my inquiry on them.⁸

PAID DOMESTIC WORK IN INDIA

Since paid domestic workers in the West, Latin America, and East Asia, are primarily female, domestic service has appeared to be synonymous with women's work in most research.⁹ Yet precisely because the "domestic" is seen as a distinctively female realm, the presence of men questions the taken-for-grantedness of the gendered separation of spheres.¹⁰ While domestic servants in India have historically been both male and female, women and children have begun to dominate the ranks of this occupation in India, which reflects both the secular trend towards more female labor force employment and the worsening of economic inequality.¹¹ The 1971 census showed that there were 675,878 domestic servants in India, of whom only 251,479 were women. A decade later, the picture was quite different, with the 1981 Census of India reporting that there were at least 807,410 people who worked as domestic workers in India, evenly divided between 402,387 men and 405,023 women **(1991 figures will come here)**.¹²

This paper focuses on Calcutta rather than on India as a whole. A focus on one region enables a more grounded reading of the practices of domestic servitude. Calcutta is an ideal site for the investigation of masculinity and femininity in domestic servants for several reasons. First, the region of West Bengal, in which Calcutta is situated, has a rich and elaborate feudal tradition. Second, the 1981 Census shows that the sheer numbers of domestic servants, at 149,100, are far greater in West Bengal than in other more populous states. Finally, the transition from primarily male to primarily female domestic workers has happened relatively recently in Calcutta, rendering the issue

more salient in Calcutta than in other cities where male servants are increasingly invisible.¹³

According to economists the increasing numbers of female servants in Calcutta are due to their expulsion from agriculture and organized sectors of industry (such as jute) and the partition of Bengal, which made refugees out of women who had not previously had to work outside the home. As employment alternatives closed for women, they expanded for men, so that the numbers of women domestic workers slowly increased, while the numbers of men decreased.¹⁴ At the same time, the trend toward smaller apartments and families caused employers to think of women as safer servants around their daughters than men.¹⁵ As in other dual sex occupations, men have the higher status within the ranks of servants, and command higher wages. These changes mean that female domestic servants are becoming the norm, with the more expensive male workers being out of reach for most middle class families today. Yet employers still think male servants are better, even though they no longer can afford nor perhaps would hire a male servant today. At the same time, as it becomes clear that many men have other options than domestic servitude, those who remain in this profession must explain it to themselves and to others.

BHADRALOK SOCIETY

The masculinity and femininity of servants is judged both by employers and the servants themselves against a complex backdrop of class deprivation, normative ideas of what it means to be male and female, and the actual practice of doing domestic work. Masculinity and femininity are not simply cultural ideal-types, but they are created through practice, and it is through practice that they are weighed, judged and transformed. While there are many ways of being masculine, there is at every moment a masculinity of the powerful, which R.W. Connell terms “hegemonic masculinity”.

Hegemonic masculinity is historically, culturally, and materially specific, as are the masculinities of those excluded from the masterful configuration.¹⁶ While Connell focuses on men of the metropole, how do we best understand hegemonic masculinity in Calcutta, especially the masculinity of men who have few cultural or economic resources? I examine first the particular construction of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic gender ideology in Calcutta, before turning to the way employers and employees understand subaltern masculinities and femininities.

Bengali society today is dominated by the values of the *bhadralok* (which literally means respectable man or gentleman), most of whom belong to the three upper castes. As civil servants, teachers, doctors, lawyers and descendants of absentee landlords, the *bhadralok*, who came into being in the late nineteenth century, were the first products of English education, and the first to intellectually challenge British authority over Indians.¹⁷ *Bhadralok* stand in opposition to both those who own the means of production (landlords and industrialists) and workers. They place a high value on men of letters, high culture, and the intellect. *Bhadralok* are opposed to either *chhotolok* or *gariblok*, who are poor or not “civilized”. They do not do manual labor, though they are associated with skilled and clerical work.¹⁸ Their values have exercised considerable influence on gender and class relations in contemporary Bengal, and they have done so, as Sumanta Banerjee has shown in his study of elite and popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta, at the expense of lower caste popular values.¹⁹

The *bhadralok* are also defined by a distinctive masculinity.²⁰ These men were not warriors, and yet were instrumental in the creation of a nationalist project about the place of men and women in the world.²¹ Their gender ideology was primarily one of respectability. For the *bhadralok* – the gentle-man -- this means not doing menial labor, being educated, having independence of means, and maintaining

a genteel and cultured life-style. Hegemonic masculinity in Bengal has little to do with strength and virility.

For the *bhadramahila* -- the gentle-woman -- respectability is also defined by the absence of menial labor. In addition, a *bhadramahila* is protected, culturally refined and responsible for the inner life of the family.²² The *bhadramahila*'s respectability comes not from independence but the luxury of its opposite. *Bhadramahila* have *lajja* -- shame and modesty, attributes closely connected with virtue and respectability. As Himani Banerjee articulates it, "to be civilized is to have a sense of shame".²³ It is the uncivilized woman (the poor woman or the low caste woman) who does not have shame, is not protected, is sexually powerful and immoral, and is therefore a threat to the moral fabric of society.

Today's *bhadramahila* have to work outside the house (though women's labor force participation in Calcutta is exceedingly low, at 7.04%), but they are supposed to work in genteel professions such as teaching.²⁴ Even when women do work, the assumption that the home is her real world is inviolable, as is the ideology of female dependence upon male kin.²⁵

The employers of domestic workers with whom I spoke were all clearly *bhadralok*, while the employees, by definition, were not. Indeed, from the 1880s onwards, the ability to hire servants became a mark of *bhadralok* status.²⁶ Given this society, how do we understand the relationship between hegemonic and subaltern masculinities and femininities?

EMPLOYERS ON THE MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD OF DOMESTICS ²⁷

If you look at the skill content required in cooking – it is much higher than in say, washing the dishes. Any old person can wash the dishes. The male psyche calls for a

more skilled job. (Male employer, 30)

I prefer male servants. But it's difficult to get them nowadays because they can get jobs elsewhere. You see, men, if they work for eight hours in a factory, they are free after that. If they work for me, they are not free. They are, after all, always at my beck and call. (Female employer, 70)

In Calcutta, both men and women work as domestic servants, but they are not interchangeable. Men are the preferred workers but are increasingly hard to come by. In the imagination of employers, men are by nature less willing to do work that requires them to be at one's beck and call, and are now discovering they don't have to be. While this is considered an occupation with few skills, men are thought to possess more of the skills that the occupation requires. They are also thought to need skilled work more than women do. Their nature dictates that they be independent or *swadhin*, and social structure provides them more opportunities to be so.²⁸ Women, by contrast, are thought to be more used to having to obey. They have access to fewer alternative opportunities, and while they are less desired, are increasingly found in service jobs where they are at the beck and call of their employers and cannot go home at the end of the day.

The middle and upper middle class employers we interviewed in Calcutta consistently revealed a preference for male servants, even though they were not quite as clear about their reasons for this preference.²⁹ Yet not all male servants were the same, and employers frequently contrasted the male servants of today with the male servants of yesterday. One spoke of the old family retainer who was fiercely protective of them. "He brought us up. He was our ayah and our nanny. He would not steal a penny. We knew he had a wife somewhere and some children, but he only visited them once a year

and never wanted to extend his visit. He was intensely loyal, and his life was with us. My brothers took the place of his children". Visible here is a crucial attribute of the male servants of the past -- unswerving loyalty and a willingness to put their employer's family above their own. Today's employees think only of their own families. A certain subservient loyalty then, is the mark of "good" subaltern masculinity.

Yet how do people reconcile male servant preference with a highly sex segregated society like India's? Male servants walk in and out of bedrooms, handle women's clothes, and are present at intimate moments when other men could not be. We asked one elderly conservative woman, who preferred male servants, how she felt about men servants touching her clothes. Her response was immediate. "Doesn't bother me, I'm perfectly happy. A servant isn't really a man; a servant is a servant." We asked her whether it struck her as odd that her male servant did work that her husband would never do or think it possible for men to do. She answered, "the male servant is doing this for money. My husband doesn't think he has to do the work. He earns money and gives it to me -- his wife. As far as he is concerned, either I will do the work or hire someone to do it. It's up to me."

While the male servant appears to embody a less valued masculinity by virtue of performing such menial and heavy labor, he is not always emasculated. Nobody wants a male servant in the house when they have a young daughter. In days past, male servants could serve employers with young daughters because women in the extended or joint families acted as guardians and buffers. In today's nuclear families, however, the threat of the male servant is larger, precisely from the belief that he is not *bhadralok*. The fear of being alone in the house with a male servant, articulated by one widow, stems from her understanding of men of a lower class as having a brute strength, which

employers otherwise want for heavy work.³⁰ Thus the male servant is sometimes more than a man and often less. Ultimately, the masculinity of male servants coexists uneasily with the *bhadra* masculinity and femininity of his employers.

With smaller families and apartment living has grown an increased acceptance of and even preference for women servants. Male servants may be status enhancing, but women are cheaper and more trustworthy. Employers have complex emotions about hiring women and girls. The fear of women's sexuality is such that there is an increasing drive to recruit young pre-pubescent girls from the village and to send them back when they reach puberty. Uppermost in everybody's mind when they hire a young woman is the risk of her potential sexuality, since unprotected women are perceived as sexually dangerous and therefore not respectable.

Issues of respectability and protection loom large in the hiring of women servants. In many families, the husband rarely speaks to the female servants and the female servants seldom speak directly to them. The idea that women should be respected and respectable does not fit well with the hiring of female domestics. One man, who refuses to hire women servants, recalls a moment of extreme embarrassment in his youth when he was riding the bus. Calcutta buses have several seats reserved for "ladies". When there aren't enough women in the bus, those seats are occupied by men, who vacate the seat when a woman comes aboard. On one such occasion, this young man was sitting in the "ladies" seat and vacated the seat when a woman come on board, without glancing up at her face. After she sat down, they both realized to their mutual embarrassment that he had given up his seat for the servant of the house. Confusingly, the notice on the bus, "reserved for ladies," both does and does not apply to her.

No matter their present, often tentative, class location, the *bhadralok* have been weaned on feudal tales and have nostalgic fantasies of servants of the past.³¹ They consistently contrast today's male servants with male servants as they used to be -- selfless and loyal, like fathers to them. Today's male servants are failures precisely because they have alternate aspirations and identities. They do women's work because they need the money, yet they are still men who do heavy work and are potential sexual predators. If male servants possessed *bhadralok* masculinity, they could not be good servants. It is precisely because they will serve and do menial work that the *bhadralok* can afford their masculinity.

Women servants are certainly women, but they are dangerous and endangered precisely because they are not protected, as a *bhadramahila* should be. Women servants complicate life for the *bhadralok*, for how is he to treat them? And yet, if female servants were not considered different, to whom would the *bhadralok* contrast his women? A female servant conscious of *bhadramahila* propriety would be of little use to her employers. Because she cannot afford propriety and protection, the *bhadramahila* can.

SUBALTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The men and women who work as domestic servants are constantly faced with expectations based on hegemonic *bhadralok* readings of their femininity or masculinity. My interviews with them consistently reveal that their work is the experiential world around which they construct gender. How does hegemony work in this context? Does it effectively reproduce social inequalities? Or does it fail to penetrate the daily culture of the dominated classes?³² Karin Kapadia argues that “untouchable” women do not accept upper caste interpretations of their identity, while Kalpana Ram shows how

Mukkuvar fishermen are able to use their relationship to the sea to carve out alternative identities for themselves.³³ Paul Willis, on the other hand, claims that social inequality reproduces itself despite and through resistance.³⁴ I argue that male and female servants idealize and seek to attain some part of *bhadralok* gender ideology, but not the whole of it. They modify it such that they can consider themselves to have achieved a desired masculinity and femininity, but they do not resist *bhadralok* gender ideology wholesale. *Bhadralok* constructions of domesticity and gender act as a powerful master discourse for these domestic servants.

Based on my interviews with servants, I isolate several core themes that servants articulate in evaluating their own gender identities. For male servants, the lack of *swadhinata* or autonomy underpins their sense of failure as men. Yet others counteract this sense of failure with their ability to sacrifice themselves in order to fulfill their responsibilities towards their families. For women, their inability to be protected marks their failure to be *bhadramahila*. Yet some assert their humanity and right to be loved and acknowledged in the face of this lack of protection. While employers judge the masculinity of male servants in terms of their lack of *swadhinata* (which causes their servility) and their female servants because they are not protected, the servants instead foreground the concepts of male responsibility and female relationality as alternative ideologies which legitimate their masculinity or femininity.

In what follows, I present thematic stories from my respondents, highlighting one life story for each theme in order to enable readers to understand each worker's choices and constraints in full context. This use of life histories provides depth and context to the interaction of individual agency and social structure which other methodologies do not illuminate as well.³⁵

SUBALTERN FEMININITIES

As studies of working class women in Bengal have shown, a woman who does not work in a genteel occupation is potentially either a victim or a loose woman.³⁶ Given these choices, women domestic servants long for protection, actively seek it, or explain their misfortunes as due to its lack. Yet, protection is not the only thing they seek, the only standard by which they live. Despite, or perhaps because of, a life in which they have been less loved and nurtured than their brothers, and married off young, some women assert the right to live a more loved life, to be recognized and appreciated, even at the cost of protection.³⁷ This desire for satisfying relationships, often construed as sexual licentiousness on the part of their *bhadralok* employers, may lead them to step outside the protection they otherwise hold so dear.

In Search of Protection

While many young women in India migrate to the city in search of autonomy from their families, the search for protection seemed stronger than the search for autonomy in the women I interviewed.³⁸ These women struggled to survive in a world that they saw as particularly hostile to unprotected women. Respectability was a powerful source of protection and yet respectability was itself premised on already having protection. Thus, some women's pursuit of protection was relentless.

Mitali was born in Naihati and came to Calcutta to seek work after her father died of snakebite when she was eight years old. Her mother died when she was an infant. As an eight-year-old girl, she survived by living on the railroad tracks gathering and selling the coal that fell off the trains that thundered by. An extremely attractive woman today, she realized early that since her

parents were not there to protect her, she had to find a husband who would. Thus as a child, she says, she had two desires. The first was to see many films, and the second was to make sure she found a husband. The narrative of her life follows a search for protection.

She accepted her first job as domestic servant simply because it offered her a roof, even though they paid her pennies a day. As she learnt some skills, she left that household, for a series of jobs. As she went from house to house, husbands and young boys frequently tried to molest her – “they kept getting under my mosquito net,” she says euphemistically. Finally, she convinced a woman employer to let her sleep on her kitchen floor, while continuing to work for other families. She recalls with appreciation her employer’s anxiety when she returned late from a film one night. The relief that somebody was looking out for her more than compensated for her employer’s wrath.

One particular story poignantly reveals what it means to be an unprotected poor woman in urban India. Mitali worked part-time in several houses, sweeping and mopping in one house, cooking in another. Her daily journey from one employer to the next took her past a street corner where a *gonda* (thug) hung out. This man, she says, wanted her for himself and threatened to kidnap her if she did not go to him willingly. She worried about it incessantly. What should she do? “I thought I should maybe give up working in that house so I didn’t have to pass him, but I needed the money, so I couldn’t stop.” Then however, she began wearing *sindur* on her head, the vermilion mark that is the most overt Hindu sign that a woman is married, in order to protect herself, and the plan worked. He stopped harassing her immediately, since she was now under some other man’s protection. The very success of this plan, however, worried her. “I thought, if people see me with *sindur*; they will think I am already married and then how will I really get married? I had no parents to marry me off, so I was

already worried about that, and I was really anxious now.” It was this anxiety that prompted her finally to give up the job in the house to which she could not travel without encountering the thug.

Subsequently, Mitali worked for an older woman who became very fond of her. She called this old lady “Ma” or “mother,” and confesses that she frequently lied to her and went to the movies, much as a daughter would. “I earned 200 rupees, and I thought 'good! 100 for the movies and 100 to be saved for my marriage'.” But when she finally fell in love with a local night watchman, she turned to Ma for help. “I told Ma I have liked this boy, but how do I know he won't take advantage of me and then abandon me?” The employer sent for the man and ensured that he agreed to marry her. She then accompanied them to the court to make sure the marriage was legalized. Mitali had effectively called upon pre-capitalist modes of loyalty and employer responsibility in order to enforce a contract that would guarantee her protection. Now that she has a son, she still works for Ma. She wishes she didn't have to keep working and her husband weren't so poor, but she considers that she has achieved what she had to, given her circumstances. “No one after all wants to make a living working in people's houses. But that is fate. I was so worried that no one would marry me because my parents were dead, but that worked out.”

What strikes one about Mitali's story is the single-mindedness with which she sought protection. If protection is ideally associated with passivity, a being-done-to rather than a doing, it takes on a whole new meaning here. The protection that Mitali sought was symbolic and institutional. She understood that being unprotected implied sexual availability and that this had little to do with her desires. She also understood that the only way for a woman to be considered respectable was to appear to be protected and that while a woman's body is never really safe, it must, at least be

symbolically guarded.

Marriage is a formal system of protection, and parents are often eager to marry their daughter off when they feel incapable of protecting them further. When a young girl has no parents, her relatives are especially anxious to get her married. Thus Sonali (45), whose parents died when she was one year-old, was married when she was eleven, becoming her husband's third wife. She left her husband's home as soon as she could and has been working for the same employer for the past twenty years. There are no alternative protections available for Sonali. Thus she stays with her employers despite their exploitation of her, their refusal to give her new clothes, and the sharp tongue of her mistress.

The failure of patriarchal protection is not limited to parents. Many women work as live-ins despite being married because they wish to escape the violence of their husbands. Rama, who is 56, works to support her five grandchildren, left in her care by her daughter's death. Although her daughter was clearly burnt to death by her husband, Rama spoke of it as suicide. When I challenged her, she told me that she couldn't afford to point a finger at her son-in-law, for who would look after the children if he were in prison? If there was ever a reminder that the ideal of husbandly protection is often not a reality, this surely is it.

Since husbands and families can't always protect them, women workers have learnt to protect themselves. They try to remain indoors as much as possible, and they strictly police their own behavior and the behavior of their daughters. Women domestic workers live in a cultural world where the respected and respectable, protected and protectable *bhadramahila* is the ideal. Yet, their world is filled with real and mythic predators -- from their employers to their own husbands. Often

orphaned young, unable to find a husband or married off to strangers, the workers I spoke with desperately hold on to respectability under circumstances and occupations that are calculated to rob them of it. Protection for these women, is not only a cultural ideal, but it is a very real need.

In Search of Recognition

Lakshmi (40) was born in Calcutta and is relatively new to domestic work, having done it for only the past seven years. She is married and thus technically has protection, but in her eyes, her marriage violates what she considers to be an essential principle of humanity – the right to be loved. Although Lakshmi knew that I was interested in her life as a domestic worker, she did not wait for me to ask the first question. As soon as we sat down she initiated the conversation by talking to me about her marriage. “I married by choice” were her first words. “I married by choice despite resistance from my family. My uncles and aunts asked me repeatedly, ‘Lakshmi, are you sure, are you absolutely sure,’ but I said I was.” Her parents had died when she was young, and she was raised by affectionate and well-meaning relatives. However, her life was not easy after marriage. Her husband sold goods out of a roadside stall, and they could not make ends meet. Once she became pregnant, she started to cook for a family, but could not sustain it because of her pregnancy. She tried her hand at several other jobs – piece-rate sewing, making and selling dung-patties, and so on. That was still not enough to sustain her *sansar* (family, or world). As babies were born, she continued to try various ways to make ends meet. She initiated a move which helped her husband’s store, by buying cooking oil at wholesale prices and selling it retail. She recalls with pride how she was so scared to get on a bus that she would clutch her husband’s shirt as they got on and off the bus. Now, however, she has figured out which the best places are and can manage to bring back 100 liters of oil on her own.

But even as she talks with pride about her new confidence and abilities, she returns continually to her relationship with her husband and to her realization that he never loved her as she thought he did. She repeats the questions her relatives asked her twenty years ago -- “Are you sure, Lakshmi? Are you absolutely sure?” -- to emphasize to me just how wrong she had been. For the love he had, she has now concluded, was for the dowry he thought she would bring. She suspects that he felt cheated when she came to him empty-handed. What else can explain her inability to win his love, or his refusal to give her the *adhikar* (right) to make demands on him. He always wants her subordinated (*parajita*, defeated) to him. “So for these few years now, I have been doing this ayah work” she says. It is as if this work she does is a result of his not loving her.

Lakshmi returns repeatedly to the subject of her husband's failure to love and appreciate her, his jealousy and possessiveness, and his will to dominate. The issue that brings tears to her eyes is that he has never given her a *sari*, not even for the religious festivals.

A lady gave me a watch the other day. She said her husband had given it to her and that he had given her another watch before that. Do you know, he also buys all her *saris* for her! When she told me that, I went home and cried that night and thought ‘how fortunate she is, to have the love of her husband, a husband who loves enough to buy her these things.’ Had my husband bought me so much as a blouse-piece, I would be the happiest woman.

“What do you want from your future?” I ask. She is silent for a moment, and then says “Just some love. There is much I did not understand when I was younger. One can't live without love. Just like a plant or a tree, one withers and dies. There is a man who loves me now and does a lot for

me, but he is not my husband.” She looks away, and then turns to me again. “But tell me this, am I wrong to accept love from someone else when my husband has refused it to me for so long? If a thief steals, are you going to beat him up or find out what the circumstances were that led him to commit this act.”

What she means by “love” is many things. Love represents, on the one hand, a fulfillment of all that is missing, and on the other, it represents responsibility, recognition, and appreciation. It is her husband's failure to give her recognition that leaves her feeling unfulfilled. It is the absence of his “confirming response” as Jessica Benjamin would say, and the absence of his acknowledgment that she is important to him or affects him, that Lakshmi finds unbearable.³⁹ Because he has never shown her that she matters to him, he has lost the right to keep her. The minute her duties towards her daughters are fulfilled (i.e. they are married), she says, she will leave her husband. She will move into the home of her employer's daughter and work as a live-in. If her husband gives her no love, at least her employer and her family do. She does not expect the same sort of love from her husband as from an employer. However, her employers love her as employers can, while her husband does not love her as husbands could or should.⁴⁰ Lakshmi will, in other words, give up a culturally accepted form of protection, under these conditions.

Economic logic would not predict a move from live-out to live-in work. While most servants want nothing more than to be able to move out of their employer's home and out from their power twenty four hours a day, Lakshmi's search for a satisfying relationship propels her in a different direction. Her employer appreciates her and her abilities, but her husband does not.

When she asked me whether I thought she was wrong to accept love from a man who was not

her husband, she was asking me to understand the conditions under which she had come to this decision. She had come to a moral position based on her husband's failure to give her the affection and recognition which should have been her right. It was important to Lakshmi that I think of her decision in that light and not think of her as a woman committing adultery. She seeks to give her decision respectability by assuring me that the man who loves her has "no dirty-ness in him" – he does not simply want sex from her, and he has given her two blouses for her *saris*. She recognizes and has every intention of fulfilling her responsibility towards her children, but no longer recognizes her obligation towards her husband. She is willing to defy his patriarchal authority, but she will do so by opting for a benevolent paternalistic or maternalistic relationship with her employer. Here domestic service provides Lakshmi with the opportunity to trade protections – a failed one for one that just might work. While it could be argued that Lakshmi's actions were in fact an assertion of an alternative, non-*bhadramahila* morality, I suggest that her deliberate desexualization of her relationship with her lover indicates that she is in fact steeped in that morality.

Lakshmi is not alone in emphasizing her employer's affection for her. The search for a decent caring relationship is often uppermost in women servants' minds, and when they don't find it with their husbands, some turn to their employers, often pulling their female employers into their lives. Pushpa recalled her first employers with great fondness: "I was fortunate when I worked for them. I was so young and irresponsible, but they were a good and loving family." Many of these women have been denied parental love and often the love of a husband. They long therefore not just for a romantic love, but also for the parent-like figure that they never had.

And yet, the failure to win one's husband's love is a bitter pill to swallow. "What does it

matter what work I do when my own husband does not love me,” says one woman. While another says, “I don't like this work. What will it take for me to be free from this life? If my husband were better, then life would be tolerable. I don't get love from anybody -- not parents and not my husband. And now my children resent me because I am not there for them.” In many of these women's stories, the hostile encounters they describe with their employers have much less emotion in them than the encounters with those who are supposed to love them. In their already deprived lives, they are unwilling to give up the right to be loved.

Manisha Ray has documented the way that upper middle class Bengali women are almost schooled in romantic fantasy and expectation, taught to daydream about the man they will one day marry (often a stranger they barely know).⁴¹ These fantasies are not restricted to women of the upper classes. Indeed, through novels, folk-tales, folk songs, television and films, Indian women of all classes are steeped in a culture of longing.⁴² These desires do not belong simply to the realm of unattainable fantasy for poor women. Lakshmi for one has transformed the desire to be loved into a source of strength. She has made it her right, transformed it into a requirement for humanity, and can therefore use the violation of this right as a justification for her subsequent actions. She uses her employment as a lever to enable her to leave her marriage, just as Mitali used her employment to enter it. If Mitali pursued protection because she had never had it, Lakshmi can walk away from it because the protection of marriage costs too much for her.

SUBALTERN MASCULINITIES

If the essence of domestic service is subservience if it is less about the completion of tasks than about being at the beck and call of the employer, then it is also a job that runs counter to

hegemonic ideas of masculinity, both *bhadralok* and other.⁴³ There is a clear awareness on the part of male domestics that this is a bad job. Given the recent transition to a majority female occupation, there is also regret among some in the older generation of male servants that the job is being progressively de-skilled and is therefore even less desirable for men than it previously was.⁴⁴ Further, those men who work as domestics today have failed to find a better job when popular opinion maintains that men can easily find less demeaning jobs. Given the increasing association of women with this already low prestige occupation, how do male domestics manage their gender identity? How do they negotiate their daily presence in a space that is demarcated for women?

When the ideal is *bhadralok* society, male domestic workers -- men who work as cooks, factotums and sweepers -- have failed to be men on several counts. *Bhadralok* are men of culture and education, and they do white collar jobs. If they are successful, they are professionals and if unsuccessful, clerks, but *bhadralok* never work with their hands. Because of the caste system, many forms of menial labor are steadfastly associated with servitude. In addition, *Bhadralok* have jobs which allow them to be patriarchs of their homes at the end of the work day. For live-in male domestics, this is not a possibility. So it is that in the domestic workers' eyes, what prevents them from being men of the *bhadralok* classes is both that they do menial work and that they do dependent (*paradhin*) not independent (*swadhin*) work. Finally, *bhadralok* earn enough to support an establishment, so their wives can remain protected and not have to work.

These are standards few working class men can live up to. Factory work, which meets two out of the three criteria, is the prized working class job, but not easy to find. There are many informal sector jobs that allow men to be more *swadhin*, but do not provide security. There is no other job that

fails to meet the first two criteria as profoundly as domestic service, and thus the men engaged in this work are often bitter and frustrated with themselves.

Most men who work as domestic servants cannot afford to have wives who do not work. However, some men redefine masculinity such that even if a man is not the sole support of his family, he is a good man if he is financially responsible. It is a masculinity of duty, both filial and paternal, a masculinity that resists the image of the failed and ineffective man. By being financially responsible for the family, by being, in other words, a “good family man,” these men defy the images that the *bhadralok* have of the *chhotolok* class. Unlike the good subaltern of the past, these men do not put their employees’ families first; they swear undying loyalty not to the families of their employers, but to their own.

Swadhin versus Paradhin Work

We are not free, and therefore we are not men.

Arun

Arun is the oldest domestic servant in his apartment building. While he has worked with the same family for over twenty years as their cook, they pay him little, and he has little affection for his employers. When, fresh from interviewing women domestic workers, I ask him if his employers are fond of him, he shrugs. “Sure, but not enough to give me more money or new clothes, or even money for medicines when I am sick!”

Arun was the youngest son of eight children, born in the district of Medinipur to poor farmers who had a little land themselves, but had to farm other people’s land to make ends meet. Because he was the youngest, he was at least able to study until the fourth grade. Just as Lakshmi was more

interested in talking to me about her marriage than her work, Arun wanted to tell me about his childhood and adolescence, when his life was really worth living. Arun told me about life in the village (which he left when he was 14), and about the time he was a soldier in the underground struggle for Indian independence. His tired eyes and lined face brightened as he described his participation in the resistance against the British, the cooperation of the neighboring villagers together, and the conch-shell alarm blowing when British soldiers came looking for them. After several years of guerilla warfare, his father, increasingly afraid for his son's safety, helped him escape to Calcutta where he joined his older brother. Arun's summary of the next fifty years of his life is an account of his failure to keep a succession of jobs through lack of skill, illness or sheer bad luck. Finally, he began work as a cook. Today, twenty-six years later, he still works for the same family.

I suppose I am OK here. I say sometimes that I will leave. They [the employers] say, where will you go, you have no other skills. Do what you can here. And they are right.

As I grow older, they will forgive me if I do less than acceptable work. But who else will forgive me? Sometimes, if I forget to put salt in the food, they still eat it. Others won't let me get away with it.

He believes, as his employers have repeatedly told him, that he does not have the ability to find a less demeaning job. His lack of skill keeps him dependent, and his dependence on this particular family has grown in years he has been with them. He knows that his mind and body have slowed down. Thus today, he dare not leave. Arun's narration of his participation in the struggle for Indian independence contrasts particularly with his assessment of the lack of freedom in his later life. He realizes that his sons are not going to support him when he can no longer work.

My sons are useless. They will give me nothing. So I have decided what will happen to me when I am old. I will kill myself. I have lived my life with my head bowed but I will not bow my head at the end of my life. I have lived *paradhin*, but I will take some sleeping pills and that will be the end of it.

Arun can hope only to die like a man – freely and independently.

Hegemonic masculinity is unkind to those who fail to pass muster. Almost without exception the men with whom I spoke blamed themselves for not attaining the status of an independent man. The word *paradhin* is usually applied to subjected peoples (as India was *paradhin* under the British). There was no male domestic servant who did not use this word, which confirms the degree of subservience and lack of control this work implies. There seems, at least on this ground, to be agreement between employer and male servant about the nature of this work and its effect on men. This is not a job for adult and independent men because they have to ask permission to go out for an hour, they are often closely monitored, and ultimately because they are dependent on the employer's charity and whims. One man told me how he had served his former employer well and was stunned when he was left with nothing when his employer moved to another city, his expectations of feudal relations of servitude betrayed.

Raghu, a young servant in his thirties who originally came to Calcutta as an adventure, has been working as a domestic for several years now. While he didn't think doing domestic work was a problem when he was single, he believes this work should not be done after one is married. Yet this presents a no-win situation. On the one hand, a man doesn't want to **look** *paradhin* to his wife. On the other hand, he needs security more once he has a family. His job is *paradhin*, but it seems secure; he

struggles to maintain his self-respect while doing it. For example, he refuses to accept old clothes from his employer, and so maintains some semblance of being *swadhin*.

Since the key to the *swadhin bhadralok* world is education, the men voice regret at not achieving enough education to have a clerical job. Achin, whose father frequently abandoned his family for months at a time, speaks bitterly about begging his father to allow him and his brother to go to school, and about his refusal to do so. Shibu, who has two daughters, constantly worries about their future, and considers himself weak because his wife has to work.

There is shame involved in not being independent as well as not being able to support one's family. Some male servants regret that their wives have to work, and some lie to their in-laws about their employment. Achin's in-laws, for example, do not know that their daughter works outside the home and they think he is a chauffeur – a job that has more dignity and more independence. Chauffeurs (or drivers, as they are called in India) occupy an intermediary space between *paradhin* and *swadhin* work. They are skilled, and they work outside the home. He knows that his daughter tells her friends that he is a chauffeur as well. He is embarrassed, but understands his daughter's need to tell her friends her father does more *bhadra* (civilized) work than he does.

On Responsibility and Sacrifice

Not all male servants accept that they are less than men because they do *paradhin* work, and because their wives work. Rather than accepting failure by the standards of upper caste Bengali *bhadralok* masculinity, Kamal, and others like him, actively counter the disparagement of their work and life by redefining the notion of a good man.

About forty years of age, Kamal has been working for the same family for over twenty years.

When his male employer died, the widow became increasingly dependent on him. Today, he says, he does everything from washing dishes to bank-related errands. His wife works part time for the same family. He earns well compared to the other male domestics I spoke with, and his employer helps his daughter with her homework in her apartment. He appeared both confident and resigned and spoke calmly about the decisions he had made about his life. “What does it matter what work I do as long as I can carry out my responsibilities to my family? There is no good work or bad work, just well paid work and badly paid work.” Here he effectively bypasses the caste system and the *bhadralok* disparagement of menial labor. What matters is not the substance of the work, but whether it enables one to put food on the table. Kamal thus sees himself as the worker of capitalism, the contractual worker.

When I asked him what troubled him most about his life, he quickly responded that he didn't feel troubled.

Many think ‘there is no dignity in this work.’ I don't have that attitude at all. If I can do it well and earn enough to support my family, then I am willing to do anything.... I don't agree that there is a difference between this work and others. Some feel revulsion (*ghenna*) that a man should do “domestic work” but not me. People think sweeping, mopping, dishes and washing dishes are women's work. But why shouldn't all people do everything? I find that 99 out of 100 people feel *ghenna*, but I am not like this.

Well aware the image of men doing women's work stirs feelings of revulsion in many people, he steadfastly refuses to participate in a culture of shame. Instead, he has made the idea of supporting his

family central to his sense of self.

Kamal knows full well that his is not *swadhin* work and that he is dependent on his employer. However, he has schooled himself to react not as a man who is being made to serve but as a man who has a responsibility towards his family who depend on him, and who therefore controls traditionally male reflexes. While many male servants spoke wistfully about their desire to be drivers, and regretted their continued domestic work, Kamal was firm about his choices.

As a father, he feels that his daughter is safer in the apartment building where he works than she would be in the slum in which they would otherwise live. Without delusion and with some resignation, Kamal has thought carefully about his life circumstances. He is socially ambitious but knows that the most likely candidate to escape this life is not himself or his wife, but their daughter. He urges her to be serious about her studies and scrapes together money for her dance lessons. He compares himself with other fathers in the building and knows that he is a better father than most, despite his financial constraints. Employers in the apartment building talk about his daughter with some admiration, and he sees in their eyes an expectation that she will make it. That is Kamal's source of pride. He is a good man because he has succeeded in being a good father. Indeed, by a sleight of hand, he manages to conflate fatherhood with manhood.

For several male domestics, the feeling of pride comes from having done their duty. By doing *paradhin* work, they have ensured that nobody else in their family ever will again. Dipu says:

I have been working since I was 12, not as *swadhin*, but in other's houses. Naturally I have had to take the employers' wrath. I told my sons that as long as I am alive, they can study, and then could get [white-collar jobs]. They want it and I want it for them.

I do not want that my son should work in your house.

His sons are in college, his brothers work in the local government offices, and his daughter is married.

He was able to pay for funeral ceremonies after his father died, and he sends money home to his mother.

Thus the admirable man sacrifices his masculinity in order to ensure the survival of his charges. While the warrior who sacrifices his life so his people may live is considered a man and a hero, one who lives to ensure that his people survive is commonly not. But Kamal, Dipu, and others like them consider what they have done heroic. They have swallowed their pride and the shame of their *paradhin* work so that their families will not tread that path. Unlike the male servants of the past, they sacrifice their lives not for their employers' families but for their own.

CONCLUSION

The men and women whose life stories appear here often work twelve to sixteen hour days, cooking and cleaning, sweeping and mopping, dusting twice a day to remove the layers of dust that cover every item of furniture in the tropics, running errands, polishing silver, grinding spices, washing clothes by hand, wringing them out to dry, and taking care of other people's children while praying that their own will be spared this life. They are the workers that the lives of the middle classes are built on, yet they are the workers that no one wants to be.

I have argued in this paper that domestic workers judge themselves by the extent to which they have achieved or failed to achieve hegemonic gender norms. Domestic work in Calcutta, and indeed, in India, is individualized, unorganized, and made familial. Unions are either not interested in organizing these workers or give up after initial attempts because the dispersed work places make

collective action difficult. This is particularly true of those who do live-in work. Given this, and the extreme stigmatization of this occupation, it is not surprising that these domestic workers minimize their identities as workers and instead think of themselves as men and women, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, daughters and sons. These are not, however, the only alternate identities that domestic servants can choose. In other parts of India, where there are powerful political parties and organizations representing lower castes (such as in the state of Bihar), domestic workers could make their caste identities primary. In Calcutta, however, domestic workers, by and large, lack caste or class representation.

I have also argued that while the workers do focus on gendered identities, it would be a mistake to romanticize these constructions as resistance for they do not invent the content of these identities as they please. Their identities are constituted through their class location, the work they do, and their particular relationship to a domestic space, which is also their place of work. Unlike the Mukkuvar fishermen and women, or factory workers, live-in domestic workers have little autonomous space outside *bhadralok* culture.⁴⁵ Unlike part-time workers, they have no homes to which to return at the end of the day. They are therefore materially and discursively constrained within a universe that is not of their own making.

Yet, if there is a common thread between Mitali, Lakshmi and Kamal's narratives, it lies in the way in which they represent themselves. None has had the chance to tell "their story" before this, and they are not interested in a story of victimhood, though it is against that backdrop that they want others to understand their tales. They want their agency, their ability to exercise choice in the midst of lives usually bereft of choice, to be appreciated. As I return to my

question then, I choose neither structure nor agency then, but rather, end with partial failures, defeats and victories.

While *Bhadralok* society can idealize particular notions of masculinity and femininity precisely because the subaltern classes cannot attain them, live-in domestic workers struggle with these ideals and try to fit their lives within them. Whether or not they ultimately accept or reject the *bhadralok* evaluation of themselves, they judge their lives by the very ideals which were designed to be out of their reach. Yet they also reach out to ideas culled from popular discourse and classic myth – ideas of love and responsibility. They hold on to ideas about manhood and womanhood that allow them hope and pride, which *bhadralok* ideology does not do. And in this process, male and female domestic workers are simultaneously defeated by and partially victorious over hegemonic gender ideologies.

¹ Research for this study was partially funded by the Chancellor's Research Grant, University of California—Berkeley. I'd like to thank Seemin Qayum with whom the larger project is conceived and conducted, for the many conversations and insights which helped shape this paper; Barrie Thorne and Michael Burawoy for reading earlier drafts of this paper, Nirmala Banerjee and Gautam Bhadra for their time and ideas, Bharati Ray and Ashok Bardhan for adding clarity, and my research assistant Roya Razaghian. I'm also grateful to the *Feminist Studies* reviewers and to Judith Gardiner for their thoughtful comments.

² V. Tellis-Nayak, "Power and Solidarity: Clientage in Domestic Service," *Current Anthropology* 24 (February 1983):

³ Michael Taussig and Ann Rubbo. "Up Off their Knees: Servanthood in South-West Columbia" *Latin American Perspectives* 39(1983): 2-23.

⁴ See for example, Julia Wrigley, *Other People's Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Carole Turbin, "Domestic Service Revisited: Private Household Workers and Employers in a Shifting Economic Environment" in *International Labor and Working Class History* 47 (1995): 91-100; Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domestic and their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cristina Riegos, "Sin Organizacion, No Hay Solucion: Latina Domestic Workers And Non-Traditional Labor Organizing" in *Latino Studies Journal* 8(1997):54-83. Evelyn Nakano Glenn's book, *Issei, Nissei War Bride. Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press: 1986) is a powerful exception. More recently, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila address the ways in which migrant domestic workers try to mother their children from afar. See "I'm Here, But I'm There': The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood" in *Gender and Society* 11(1997): 548-571.

⁵ See for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 1989); Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); and Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ Gillian Hart, "Engendering Everyday Resistance: Gender, Patronage and Production Politics in Rural Java" *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19(1991):93-121; and Karin Kapadia, *Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁷ In the late nineteenth century in Colonial Bengal, the Bengali elite lost their power over their land, and had to turn increasingly to professional, administrative and clerical employment. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995) and Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁸ Of the fifteen servants, eight are women and seven men. They are all first generation domestic workers, who came to Calcutta from the rural areas of Bengal either because their land could not sustain them or, in the case of the women, because they were married. Most are lower castes, two are Brahmin (a married couple) and one man is Christian. Three women are separated from their husbands, one is widowed, and the others are married. All of the men are married, though two do not live with their wives. They range in age from thirty to sixty-six and have been working between seven and thirty years.

The employers are primarily upper middle class, upper caste, and Bengali. They live in old bungalows and apartment buildings, and work in the corporate world and the professions. The youngest employer was thirty and the oldest, eighty. All of them grew up with servants, and none has been without servants for a long stretch of time. All interviews were open-ended conversations. The interviews with employers were conducted jointly by Seemin Qayum (from the University of London) and myself and lasted from one to four hours, with the average being two and a half.

I interviewed live-in workers at the sites they chose, usually their "quarters" in the apartment buildings of their employers. It was more difficult to interview the workers than employers for several reasons. Because they are live-in workers, they are constantly at the beck and call of their employers and have little time to spare. Most workers have between one and three hours off in the afternoon. This is the time they use to shower, eat their lunch, sleep, or do their own errands. They were rarely free at night before 10 p.m. Thus I often started conversations in the afternoon and completed them at night. Worker interviews were conducted in Bengali.

Why would domestic servants agree to speak with me, since I am clearly of the employer class? There is no simple answer to this question. I entered the "field" with the help of a domestic servant I have known and talked with for many years. He introduced me to my first three interviewees who, in turn, led me to others. Because I was recommended to them by people they trusted, were they initially more open to me? Or was it the substance of the questions that convinced them that I was safe? Perhaps it is the intensity of their desire to speak and the lack of opportunity to do so, that made the barriers fall. While most interviews with employees started out slowly, soon, I could barely keep up with note-taking, as the workers, especially the women, spilled out their life stories. One woman said that my intentions were good, but the people who really needed to read my book (such as her employer) would not. "You see," she said, "They probably think 'Why would anyone write a book about *those* people?' Such people have no conscience. Can you really reach them?"

³ See for example, Lesley Gill, *Precarious Dependencies: Gender, Class and Domestic Service in Bolivia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Elsa Chaney and Mary Garcia Castro, *Muchachas No More: Household Workers in Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Christine B. N. Chin, "Walls of Silence and Late Twentieth Century Representations of the Foreign Female Domestic Worker: The Case of Filipina and Indonesian Female Servants in Malaysia" in *International Migration Review* 31(2): 353-85. Indeed,

despite the fact that their own data shows that there are many thousands of male domestic servants in India, a study sponsored by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India declares "[i]n Indian tradition, females are most often involved in domestic chores" and claims that in most cases employers prefer female servants because of the idea that women are more "submissive, polite and loyal" CBCI, 1980, 31.

¹⁰ Domestic servants have historically been male in Africa. See Karen Hansen, African *Encounters with Domesticity*.

¹¹ As Ruth Milkman and her colleagues have persuasively argued, "a crucial determinant of the extent of employment in paid domestic labor in a given location is the degree of economic inequality there." See Ruth Milkman, Ellen Reese and Benita Roth, "The Macrosociology of Paid Domestic Labor" forthcoming in *Work and Occupations*.

¹² See the *Census of India* 1971 and 1981. However, this is a vastly undercounted number since the census includes only maids and other house cleaners (531) but not cooks, ayahs (nannies) or any other category of domestic worker. In addition to men and women, this class comprises thousands of children, both girls and boys, who work as domestic servants, whom the Census leaves out. According to a study commissioned by the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India, 16.65% of the domestic servants interviewed were under the age of fifteen. See Catholic Bishop's Conference of India, A *National Socio-economic Survey of Domestic Workers* (Madras: Catholic Bishop's Conference of India Commission for Labour, 1980): 36.

¹³ Census of India, 1981, Tamil Nadu Series 20, part III A&B[ii], Census of India, 1981, Maharashtra, Series 12, part III A&B[iii], Census of India, 1981, Uttar Pradesh, Series 22, part III A&B[v], Census of India, 1981, West Bengal, Series 23, part III A&B[ii].

¹⁴ Nirmala Banerjee, *Women Workers In The Unorganized Sector : The Calcutta Experience* (Hyderabad, India: Sangam Books, 1985) and Bela Bandopadhyay, personal communication, January 22, 1998.

¹⁵ Gautam Bhadra, personal communication, January 7, 1998.

¹⁶ Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, pg. 170.

¹⁸ For other writings on the *bhadralok* see Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989) and Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*.

²⁰ Perhaps because they resisted the British through the intellect rather than the sword, the British defined the *bhadralok* as effete, the opposite of both the British gentleman and the loyal Pathan warriors. This charge of effeminacy applied specifically to the Bengali elite and not to Bengali workers or peasants. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 16. The British wondered at these "soft-bodied little people" who could nonetheless compete successfully against the British in the Civil Service exams and become the salaried workers, professionals and civil servants that form the core of the Bengali post-colonial elite. See John Rosselli, "The Self Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Past and Present* 86(1980): 121-148.

²¹ Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question" in *Recasting Women*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

²² Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question".

²³ Himani Banerjee, "Attired in Virtue: The Discourse on Shame (lajja) and Clothing of the Bhadramahila in Colonial Bengal," in *From the Seams of History* edited by Bharati Ray (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995): 81.

²⁴ Census of India, 1991.

²⁵ Hilary Standing, *Dependence and Autonomy*.

²⁶ Hilary Standing, *Dependence and Autonomy*, and Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905*. For a fascinating study of the advice given to middle class women hiring servants at the turn of the century, see Swapna Banerjee, 1996. "Exploring the World of Domestic Manuals: Bengali Middle-Class Women and Servants in Colonial Calcutta" in *Sagar: South Asia Graduate Research Journal* 3(1).

²⁷ The interviews with employers were conducted jointly by my colleague and collaborator Seemin Qayum and myself.

²⁸ *Swadhinata* here refers to a specific relationship to work. It is not so much the fact that one works for someone else that prevents one from being *swadhin*. People who work in offices do work for someone else. But rather, it is the fact of having to be at the beck and call of the employers all day, the inability to go home at the end of the day, which makes one *paradhin* (unfree). While both employers and servants use this word, the servants use it repeatedly, as we shall see.

²⁹ Karen Hansen, *African Encounters With Domesticity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992) reports a similar dynamic in Zambia. In Janet Bujra's study of Tanzania, only two out of the sixty employers interviewed thought women were better servants. See Janet Bujra, "Men at Work in the Tanzanian Home: How did they ever learn?" in *African Encounters With Domesticity*, edited by Karen Hansen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

³⁰ Bengali landlords, for example, frequently used lower caste men to fight off rivals and frighten tenants. See John Roselli, "The Self Image of Effeteness".

³¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me of this point.

³² James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³³ Karin Kapadia, *Siva and her Sisters*; Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992).

³⁴ Paul Willis, 1977. *Learning to Labour*. Aldershot, England: Gower, 1981.

³⁵ See for example, Luisa Passerini, *Autobiographies of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) and Barbara Laslett and Barrie Thorne, eds. *Feminist Sociology: Life Histories of a Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997)

³⁶ Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* and Hilary Standing, *Dependence and Autonomy*.

³⁷ Psychologist Sudhir Kakar concludes, following his interviews with two working class women in Delhi, that despite their many hardships, there is "nothing to dim the luminosity of their romantic longings". See Sudhir Kakar, *The Indian Psyche* (Delhi: Viking India (Penguin), 1996): 71. I would argue that it is not just romantic love to which they cling, but rather to the idea of being acknowledged, recognized and appreciated.

³⁸ The literature on domestic workers in Latin America emphasizes young women's desire for autonomy as well. See Elisabeth Jelin, "Migration and Labor Force Participation of Latin American Women: The Domestic Servants in the Cities" in *SIGNS* 3(1977):129-41.

³⁹ Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 33.

⁴⁰ Lakshmi uses the same Bengali word *bhalobasha* to refer to the affections of her employer and husband.

⁴¹ Manisha Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

⁴² See for example, *Hum Apke Hai Kaun* or Who Am I to You and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* or The Gallant One Will Win the Bride, two of the most popular Hindi popular films in recent years.

⁴³ Taussig and Rubbo, "Up Off their Knees"

⁴⁴ See also Hansen, *African Encounters with Domesticity*.

⁴⁵ Ram, *Mukkuvar Women*.