

India

Pika Ghosh, *Making Kantha, Making Home: Women at Work in Colonial Bengal*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. Xv+163 pages. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 9780295746999.

Pika Ghosh's book explores Bengali women's domestic practice of making *kānthās*, "textiles created from layers of used, worn, even frayed fabric" (4). The book examines not only the textile of *kānthās* but also the embroidery on the *kānthās* themselves. In fact, the embroidery is the center of analysis in two out of the three chapters that make up

the book. The embroidery on the *kānthās* of two women, Manadasundari and Kamala, showcases the stories of (mostly elite) women's lives as experienced in colonial India in the mid-nineteenth century. This period is an important one, as anticolonial sentiment was "fueling nationalistic thought" (20). By situating *kānthā* production in this period, Ghosh is able to gain access to the makers of these textiles who left "glimpses into the creativity and agency of women" who lived through those times (16).

What makes this book particularly significant is that it sheds light on a largely public and male-centric notion of nationalism through the lens of women's private domestic lives through the activity of *kānthā* making. By bringing nationalism within the domestic realm of women's lives, Ghosh successfully shows how a *kānthā*'s close association with the purity of home (mostly rural) played a role in "anticolonial agendas" (21). More importantly, by analyzing *kānthā* imagery and vignettes, which she does in great detail throughout the book, Ghosh is able to foreground women's views and thoughts on the "shifting contours of the everyday in nineteenth-century Bengal" (159). By treating *kānthās* as historical documents, Ghosh not only gives voice to women who risk getting lost in textiles of time but also reclaims the names of these makers from the elite male and Western collectors, who ended up owning many of women's *kānthās* as a result of the European art and craft movements that "identified a goldmine in Indian designs and wares" (21). In many ways, the interpretation of Manadasundari and Kamala's *kānthās* that Ghosh offers as a native Bengali scholar and woman is also able to level the power dynamics of "male scholars speaking on behalf of vast numbers of women, who remain unacknowledged and often unnamed" (26). By inserting Manadasundari and Kamala's names in the titles of chapters two and three, Ghosh puts the makers' names and voices back into the textiles, while humbly positioning herself as a fellow Bengali woman alongside their work in a new, modern, and academic context.

Some of the recurring patterns that Ghosh returns to throughout the book include *kānthā* as collection, *kānthā* as historical document, *kānthā* as autobiographical assertion, *kānthā* as fabric of nation-building, and *kānthā* as art. Therefore, the book is an ambitious project (although containing only an introduction, three body chapters, and a very brief conclusion). The introduction of the book is the most comprehensive. Ghosh discusses almost all of the above patterns in the long introduction, particularly the topic of anticolonialism and the role of *kānthās* in the anticolonial agenda as well as the debates over art and craft and high versus low art during that time.

However, it is not until the reader begins to read chapters 1–3 that women truly surface from behind the shadows of Bengali giants of the colonial period, such as Gurusaday Dutt, Dinesh Chandra Sen, the Tagore family, and Raja Rajendralala Mitra, all of whom "sought equivalence for Indian art vis-à-vis European art" and mobilized *kānthās* for the cause of *svadeśī* resistance, movements boycotting British goods, and machine-made textiles (21–28). The introduction of the book is almost entirely consumed by anticolonial history and men's leadership concerning the promotion of *kānthā* production, which is discussed in great detail. Unfortunately, women's entry onto the historical scene in chapter 1—and after a rather male-dominated introduction—feels a bit late.

While the introduction discusses *kānthās* in a colonial context in depth, chapter 1 drops the topic of colonialism almost entirely, focusing instead on *kānthās* made in Bengali homes during 2007. The colonial period returns again in chapters 2 and 3. The common theme tying the three body chapters together is the undivided attention bestowed on women as *kānthā* makers and inheritors of family heirlooms. The last section of the

introduction, titled “Listening for Women’s Voices,” effectively prepares the reader for the transition from male-led nationalism to women’s domestic spaces. However, the sudden shift in time periods from the middle decades of the nineteenth century in the introduction to 2007 in chapter 1 is historically disorienting.

In spite of this structural drawback, chapter 1 plays an important role by filling a crucial ethnographic gap. What, to at least this reader, felt like a balanced approach to make up for the physical absence of Mandasundari and Kamala, who are long dead, was Ghosh’s decision to speak with Bengali women living in Bengal and in the Bengali diaspora who continue to make and use *kānthās* at home. Ghosh’s approach of documenting women’s voices in the physical spaces of their homes is why the ethnography in this chapter is so telling. Ghosh’s conversations with Bengali women about *kānthās* contextualizes this expressive phenomenon within its original domestic setting, allowing the author—and by extension the reader—to “observe how *kānthā* in everyday interactions make ordinary lives, how they are valued in these processes and ultimately cherished as distinctly Bengali” (53). Ghosh acknowledges that her primary interest in Mandasundari and Kamala’s *kānthās* ends up paying greater attention to ornate, elaborate *kānthās*, safely preserved in museum settings. This is why chapter 1’s ethnographic account of women discussing the meaning and value of ordinary *kānthās* in everyday domestic use makes this book an accurate and comprehensive account of how these narrative textiles prove to be historical documents, but which also continue to be functional and aesthetic objects in modern Bengali homes.

It is in chapter 2, which is about Mandasundari’s *kānthā*, where the crux of the book is to be found, since it picks up women’s colonial voices that ended in the introduction. Here, Ghosh most successfully describes a woman’s narrative left behind in an elaborate and ornate *kānthā* that depicts the domestic activities of a colonial mansion. Mandasundari’s agency articulated through her artistic creation is forceful as it flips the patriarchy of the colonial period on its head to showcase how women saw their male counterparts, especially the “debauched, drunk or good-for-nothing men” whose behavior is interrupted and even stopped by women, sometimes through violent means (111). Ghosh’s analysis of Mandasundari’s depiction of the flamboyant Bengali *bābū*, the greedy *gosvāmī*, and the sycophant situated women in positions of social power and within hierarchical order. Although this interpretation is not entirely new, it does reiterate an important point that scholars writing about women like to showcase: that in spite of politically marginalizing norms, women find ways of speaking through socially accepted media like the *kānthās* that document their commentary on the world as they experience it (157). The fact that Mandasundari’s *kānthā* was a gift to her father is poignant, as it allows her vivid imagery to be read by a male audience on a female’s terms. One feels a great sense of satisfaction, and even social justice, as demonstration of a woman’s version of domesticity plays out in Mandasundari’s imagery, photographed and analyzed in detail throughout the chapter.

The connection between chapters 2 and 3, while clear in theme (both chapters discuss the textiles of two colonial women), is confusing in content. Upon its first reading, chapter 3 appears to be solely concerned with Bengali Vaishnavism, so the reader is left questioning how colonialism connects with *kānthā* culture other than the fact that Kamala, the maker of one of the *kānthās* highlighted, made it during that historical period under discussion. Ghosh seems unable to successfully retrieve the maker from the sacred imagery of the Radha-Krishna story that ends up getting too much attention

in the chapter at the cost of the book's historical context that should have deserved more consideration.

However, for scholars of material culture, and especially those of us who study women's material cultures, chapter 3 is particularly satisfying. For one thing, the chapter draws attention to the sensual element of the physical touch of the fabric in the hands of its maker. Although the element of touch is a recurrent theme throughout the book, what makes touch such a spiritual force is its meditative, therapeutic, and generative abilities. Ghosh writes, "It allowed them [women] to return to their bodies, to reintegrate themselves, to cope with losses, and to gather strength through their hands into their bodies" (49). In many ways, the power of touch in the context of women's socially-dependent existence living in joint family households resonates with readers who see women "escape the relentlessness or uncertainties of chores and caregiving" to do something that gives them personal satisfaction and a sense of material achievement (157). Like chapter 2, chapter 3 makes a compelling case to read *kānthās* as historical texts and listen to women who "sought to make their thoughts heard and their work appreciated on their terms" (161).

Making Kantha, Making Home stays true to its title largely due to the three chapters of the book that are written about women and by a woman with the purpose of reassessing and re-evaluating early nationalist literature on *kānthās* that left women's voices and domestic spheres out of the picture (159). The book is a significant contribution to colonial literature, women's literature, and material culture studies, and it is a valuable read for anyone interested in South Asian Women studies, religion, and textiles. In the end, the book leaves us content in the memory of women who made micro-histories through textiles, stitching connections and creating a sense of wholeness from things "imperfectly beautiful" (163).

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