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Prostitution in Colonial Bengal: Realities and Representation

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Abstract.

Prostitution in colonial Bengal is already a much researched field of critical inquiry, triggering a considerable volume historical literature. Yet there are many gaps that need to be filled and issues that need to be addressed. The proposed paper will examine the circumstances that led Bengali women to the profession in the colonial era. Prostitution produced a vast corpus of literature in colonial Bengal. This corpus included autobiographical accounts by prostitutes themselves. These autobiographical narratives focused on the prostitute's early life within respectable society and then proceeded to delineate the circumstances that eventually rendered her a prostitute. The literary corpus that dwelt on prostitution also included a vast volume of fiction penned by celebrated writers. These foregrounded a prostitute as the central protagonist, telling the life-stories of prostitutes and the circumstances that made them what they were. Novels and short stories often represented the prostitute as an affective being – an individual capable of deep emotions despite her profession. She was seldom a person who had voluntarily embraced prostitution. The proposed paper will further analyse how prostitutes were represented in Bengali films set in the colonial context and in the immediate post-independence era.

Keywords: autobiographical; emotions; fiction; films; prostitute.