
The New Knowledge System Regarding the Idea of Community and Power-Structures of Society: The Bengali Narrative Ballads of *Maimansingha Gitika*

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Abstract: Circulation and reception of various national literatures, particularly significant texts and literary traditions in minority languages such as Bengali, are often neglected by the scholarly community and literary institutions. This creates an incomplete view of world literature, which should encompass the wholeness or totality of literature from different geographical locations. In an effort to minimize this gap, this research article explores the popular collection of Bengali narrative ballads, *Maimansingha Gitika*, compiled by Dineshchandra Sen. Most of the collected narrative ballads were composed between the 16th and early 18th century, yet this prime text is largely unavailable to readers and unobtainable to experts in politico-cultural and historical contexts. Using the concept of community and new historicism, this article analyzes two narrative ballads from *Maimansingha Gitika*, offering critical insights into the power structures of society and the new knowledge systems surrounding the concept of community. Through this analysis, the article highlights the importance of including prime texts in different national languages to inform the scholarly community about the rich literary traditions and relationality of knowledge extracted from minority languages to contemporary Euro-American knowledge structures.

Keywords: World Literature, Premodern India Literature, Power Structure, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida

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Introduction

To the Western critic, stumbling by good fortune upon Dr. Sen's book, these ballads, straight from the unsophisticated people's heart, come fresh and stimulant and ploughs across the monsoon gusts of Eastern Bengal. . . . But one cannot but dwell here on their intrinsic value as literature since it is to be hoped that Bengal will eventually value them most as such.¹

—E. F. Oaten

The epigraph by the British literary critic and historian Edward Frank Oaten offers some insight into how the scholarly community and literary institutions have overlooked the distribution and reception of national literature, particularly significant texts and literary traditions in minority languages like Bengali, resulting in incomplete world literature. This research article focuses on the popular collection of Bengali narrative ballads, *Maimansingha Gitika*, and analyzes a few of its narrative ballads using the concepts of community and New Historicism to suggest critical ideas regarding the power structures of society and the new knowledge system surrounding the concept of community. The article highlights the importance of circulating, receiving, and including prime texts in different national languages to inform the scholarly community about the rich literary traditions and the relationality of knowledge extracted from minority languages to the contemporary Euro-American knowledge structure.

The narrative ballad collection, *Maimansingha Gitika*, published in 1923 by Dineshchandra Sen, is a treasure trove of Bengali folklore and oral traditions that offers a glimpse into the rich literary traditions of undivided Bengal. Despite its historical and cultural significance, *Maimansingha Gitika* remains largely unknown to the scholarly community, making it an opportunity for the world of readers to gain insight into the diverse perspectives and experiences of people from around the globe (Badiuzzaman iii).

Bengali *Gitikas*² (Ballads) are a rich branch of Bengali folklore, passed down through generations orally. The stories feature a diverse cast of characters, including kings, gods, giants, and merchants, influenced by Arab and Indian folktales. Some of these tales were intended to be musical representations, such as the story of the serpent goddess *Mansha*, which later inspired the tale of *Behula and Lakhindar*. These folktales teach lessons in morality, humanity, and mortality, and showcase the triumph of human compassion over religious, racial, and caste boundaries (Rahman 235-256). Women protagonists are often highlighted for their character and perseverance rather than their beauty, painting a vivid picture of the society of the time. In general, these tales reflect an indomitable passion for life (Ahmed and Chakraborty 1464).

Gitikas are oral narrative poems and the heart of Bengali cultural and literary heritage. They are of two types—*Maimansingha Gitika* and *Nath Gitika*. *Maimansingha Gitika* is a collection of folk ballads from the Mymensingh region, also known as *Purbabangla Gitika*. Many of its ballads were later published in English as *Eastern Bengal Ballads* by the University

of Calcutta. *Maimansingha Gitika* comprises a diverse range of narratives, from love stories to tales of adventure, and from moral fables to historical accounts, reflecting the cultural, social, and economic realities of the time (Sen, *Folk-Literature*). The collection is a valuable source of information for scholars studying the region's history and culture, as well as for literary scholars interested in the development of Bengali literature. By analyzing the selected narrative ballads from the collection, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of community and power structures in society, and broaden our understanding of the relationality of knowledge, and how it informs and is informed by contemporary Euro-American knowledge structures. Furthermore, the study of *Maimansingha Gitika* as World Literature fosters a sense of interconnectedness and understanding among different cultures, allowing for the exploration of universal themes and ideas. Furthermore, by employing the concept of community and New Historicism, we can gain new insights into the relationships between communities and the power structures that governed them. The concept of community by Jacques Derrida centers around the idea that community is not a fixed or stable entity, but rather a process that is constantly being created and recreated through shared experiences and language. He argues that a community is inherently open and inclusive and that the very act of forming a community involves both inclusion and exclusion. On the other hand, the idea of New Historicism reveals how power structures were established and maintained within the community. In analyzing the ballads from the *Maimansingha Gitika* using these concepts, we can gain new insights into the power dynamics of premodern Bengali society.

Inclusion and circulation of literature from minority languages like Bengali are important for the richness and relationality of knowledge in the field of World Literature and can inform our understanding of the political, social, and historical contexts in which the literature was produced. The narrative ballads in the collection also reflect the geography and environment of Bengal, making them a valuable resource for scholars interested in the region's history and culture. Despite its significance, as uttered, *Maimansingha Gitika* remains largely overlooked by the scholarly community and literary institutions, making it an opportunity for readers and scholars to better understand the literary traditions of Bengal and gain a more complete understanding of World Literature. Reading the ballad "Mahua," folklorist Stella Cromoreach remarked: "in the dizziness of fever I saw Mahua, Nader Chand, and Humra as if in a vision. Whatever I have studied of Indian literature, I have not come across any story so touching, so simple and so fascinating" (qtd. in Wakil Ahmed). In our analysis, apart from many reasons already stated, we will explore how this extensive ballad collection by Sen is yet relevant today and how it contributes to the debate about the knowledge construction regarding community formation and power dynamics of modern society.

About the Writer Dineshchandra Sen

An influential Bengali literary figure, renowned for his contributions to Bengali literature and folkloristics, Dineshchandra Sen (1866-1939) was a respected scholar and antiquarian who made substantial original contributions to the study of Bengali literature and folklore. As the Ramtanu Lahiri Professor at Calcutta University, he played a key role in establishing the Bengali department. He was a prolific researcher, compiler, and collector of Bengali folklore, particularly the *Gitikas*, or folk ballads, of East Bengal. One of his most notable achievements in this field is the four-volume *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, which includes a priceless collection of fifty ballads (Farhad Ahmed). The first volume of this series, containing the famous *Mymansingha Gitika*, is a particularly invaluable contribution to Bengali folklore. His most notable legacy is his work on the preservation and collection of rare Bengali folk literature, particularly narrative ballads that were on the verge of extinction (Sen, *Folk-Literature*). He collected and transcribed numerous ballads from various regions and communities of Bengal, publishing the most significant ones of them in the *Maimansingha Gitika*. The collection is considered a prime text of Bengali literature, offering a diverse and rich insight into the historical, cultural, and societal norms of Bengal during the 16th and 18th centuries, as well as an important tool for understanding the power was exercised on the ordinary people of a community in premodern Bengal.

Besides his work on folk literature, Sen was a skilled linguist and translator. He was the first to translate the epic poem *Ramayana* from Bengali to English and authored several articles on Bengali language and literature, which are still widely read and cited today. His lecture series at the University of Calcutta on the history of the Bengali language and literature were quite popular and later they were published by the Calcutta University Publications too. Sen's contributions to Bengali literature and folkloristics were recognized by the British Government and the Government of India, which awarded him the titles of "Rai Bahadur" in 1917 and "Padma Bhushan" in 1935, respectively. Sen's pioneering work on Bengali folk literature continues to be celebrated in Bengal, and his contributions can be a valuable resource for scholars and researchers all over the world.

Maimansingha Gitika as Premodern Indian Literature

Premodern Indian literature refers to the literary works produced in India before the modern era. This period of Indian literature spans from ancient times to the 18th century and includes a rich and diverse array of literary forms and styles. Some of the most notable literary traditions from premodern India include Vedic literature, the epics (such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), the Puranas, and the Bhakti literature. One of the most striking characteristics of premodern Indian literature is the strong influence of religion and spirituality. Many of the texts from this period are religious in nature, with the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* being considered some of the most sacred texts

in Hinduism. Additionally, the epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, contain moral and spiritual teachings that are still widely studied and revered today.

Another important aspect of premodern Indian literature is the emphasis on storytelling. These stories were passed down through generations and were told in different forms, such as poetry, drama, and prose. These stories often served as a means of preserving cultural traditions and values, as well as providing entertainment. The Bhakti literature, which originated in the 7th century CE, is another important literary tradition from premodern India. This genre of literature is characterized by its devotional and emotional content and is often associated with the worship of the god Vishnu and his incarnations. Premodern Indian literature also includes the works of many prominent poets and writers, such as Kalidasa, who is considered one of the greatest poets in Sanskrit literature, and the poet-saint Kabir who wrote in the vernacular language and played a significant role in the Bhakti movement.

Maimansingha Gitika has been widely recognized as an important piece of premodern Indian literature too because these ballads offer a glimpse into the literary traditions of pre-colonial Bengal. Despite its significance, however, *Maimansingha Gitika* has been abandoned by both the scholarly community and literary institutions. This research article aims to fill this gap by re-exploring the collection and its significance within the context of premodern Indian literature.

The ballads collected in *Maimansingha Gitika* are considered prime texts, not only because they provide a window into the literary traditions of pre-colonial Bengal, but also because they offer insight into the social, cultural, and historical context of the time that is still pertinent. Many of these ballads were composed by anonymous poets and often deal with themes such as love, separation, and heroism (Zbavitel 3). They also offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of people, including their beliefs, customs, and practices.

The collection of narrative ballads in *Maimansingha Gitika* is also significant because it is written in pure Bengali at a time when the influence of Sanskrit and Arabic was rampant. Bengali is a minority language both in the subcontinent and the world, and literature written in this language has often been neglected in the study of Indian literature. The inclusion of literature from minority languages in the study of premodern Indian literature can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the literary traditions of the country. Bengal has a rich cultural and literary heritage that dates back to ancient times, with *Gitikas* or folk ballads considered the heart of the cultural and literary legacy of Medieval Bengal. Ashutosh Bhattacharya classified *Gitikas* into two categories, East Bengal *Gitika* and those belonging to South-East Bengal, with examples such as *Nizam Dakater Pala (The Story of a Pirate Named Nizam)*, *Chowdhurir Ladai (The Fight between the Chowdhurys)*, *Bheluya*, *Kafan Chor (The Shroud-thief)*, *Ayna Bibi*, *Kamal Saodagar (Merchant Kamal)*, *Nurunnessa O Kabarer Katha (Nurunnessa and the Stories of a Grave)*. According to Bhattacharya, these ballads describe the occupations, adventurousness, and cruelty of the people living in the coastal belt, while the poems in *Maimansingha Gitika* or *Purbabanga Gitika* are more humane and gentler but touch the core of power struggles and community formation in society. The study of premodern Indian

literature such as *Maimansingha Gitika* can provide insight into the spiritual, cultural, and historical context of premodern India, as well as shedding light on the timeless themes and ideas that continue to resonate with readers today (Chatterji 378-379).

***Maimansingha Gitika* through Concepts of Community and New Historicism: A Framing Community**

The concept of the community generally refers to a group of individuals who share common interests, values, or goals, and who are connected by social, cultural, or political ties. Communities can take many forms, ranging from local neighborhoods and villages to global virtual networks. They can be based on shared identities such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender, or shared experiences, such as those of survivors of suffering or people with shared political ideals. The idea of community often emphasizes the importance of belonging, mutual support, and collective action, and is a central aspect of many human societies and cultures such as Bengal (Gupta 273).

Derrida has contributed significantly to the discourse on the concept of the community too. According to Derrida, the concept of community is often grounded in an exclusionary or oppositional binary that defines a group's identity by what it is not, i.e., the "other." He argues that this binary is often used to establish a hierarchy of power, with the dominant group defining the norms and values of the community (51). Derrida also critiques the notion of a fixed and stable community, suggesting that the very idea of community is inherently unstable and that communities are continually changing and evolving. For Derrida, the community is not an entity in itself, but rather a site of struggle and negotiation, where power relations and social hierarchies are constantly negotiated and contested (Caputo 104).

Derrida's concept of community is often associated with his notion of "the gift," in which he argues that any true gift must be given without expectation of return or reciprocity. This idea challenges the traditional concept of community as a group with shared values and interests, instead emphasizing the importance of the relationship between individuals. Derrida argues that true community must be based on the gift of oneself, in which individuals give themselves to each other without the expectation of receiving anything in return. This notion of community is often seen as an alternative to the more traditional, exclusionary forms of community that are based on shared identity and values. Instead, Derrida's concept of community emphasizes the importance of openness, vulnerability, and the recognition of others as different and unique (107).

Derrida's concept of community is based on the idea that the idea of community is inherently unstable and cannot be fully defined or controlled. He believed that community is always in a state of flux and that it is continually being redefined and reshaped by the interactions and relationships between individuals. Derrida also believed that there is always an inherent tension between the community and the individual and that this tension is necessary for the survival and growth of both. He saw the individual as both a product and a producer

of the community and believed that it is through our interactions with others that we come to understand ourselves and our place in the world.

In analyzing the ballads from the *Maimansingha Gitika* collection through Derrida's lens, we can see how the idea of community is constantly being redefined and reshaped. We can also see the tension between the individual and the community, and how this tension is necessary for the growth and development of both. By exploring these themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the control mechanism of premodern society and the role that the community played in shaping and defining them.

New Historicism

New Historicism is a literary and cultural theory that emerged in the late 20th century as a response to traditional historicism, which was seen as being overly focused on the analysis of historical context at the expense of the text's literary qualities (Colebrook vi). The New Historicist approach emphasizes the idea that literature is a product of the historical moment in which it was produced and that it cannot be fully understood outside of that context. New Historicism seeks to explore the relationship between literature and power and to show how power structures are embedded in the texts of a particular period. This approach focuses on the interplay between the text and its context, and it considers a range of cultural and social factors in the interpretation of a text. By examining the relationships between power, culture, and history, New Historicism seeks to challenge traditional historical narratives and offer new perspectives on literary works (Dollimore 45-46).

Stephen Greenblatt's idea of New Historicism, also known as "Cultural Poetics," is a critical approach to literary analysis that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Veeser 1). It is an interdisciplinary method that seeks to understand the relationship between literature, culture, and society by examining the historical and cultural contexts in which a work of literature was produced. This approach emphasizes the importance of looking at the literary work as a product of the culture and society in which it was created and how it reflects the power structures and social norms of that time (Brannigan 4). New Historicism also seeks to examine the ways in which power is constructed and maintained through the production and dissemination of cultural texts. The approach also emphasizes the role of the reader in interpreting the text and how the reader's own cultural and historical context shapes their understanding of the literary work.

Though Michel Foucault is often referred to as a reference point for the study of New Historicism, it is important to note that the term "New Historicism" was not actually used by Foucault himself. However, many of the concepts and methods associated with New Historicism draw on Foucault's ideas about the relationship between power and knowledge in history (Gearhart 457-458). Foucault argued that power is not something that is possessed by individuals or groups, but rather something that is present in all social relationships and interactions. He also believed

that knowledge and power are closely linked, with knowledge serving as a means of control and domination (777).

New Historicists have adopted these ideas by examining the ways in which power operates in different historical contexts, particularly through language and discourse. They argue that literary texts are not simply reflections of the historical moment in which they were produced, but rather active participants in the creation and dissemination of social and cultural norms (Colebrook vii). By analyzing the language and rhetoric of literary texts, New Historicists seek to uncover the power relations that underpin them and the ways in which they contribute to the construction of social hierarchies and identities. In this sense, the New Historicist approach emphasizes the role of literature and culture in shaping our understanding of the past and present and the ways in which power operates in society.

By analyzing the ballads from the perspective of New Historicism, it becomes clear that the stories in *Maimansingha Gitika* are not only reflections of the communities that produced them but also of the power structures that existed in premodern India. Through the tales of pastoral heroes and villains, kings and commoners, and gods and mortals, the ballads illustrate the complex social relationships that existed in Indian society during this time. Through the *Maimansingha Gitika* collection, we can gain a new understanding of premodern Indian literature and the social structures that influenced it to be reflected and accepted widely. The narratives of these stories portrayed in the popular literature in premodern Bengali writings (Bhattacharyya 61), while entertaining, also offer critical insights into the power dynamics and societal norms that existed in premodern India. As such, the study of *Maimansingha Gitika* and other premodern Indian literature can provide valuable perspectives on the evolution of Indian society and the power structures that continue to shape it today.

Analysis of the Selected Ballads

As discussed, New Historicism is a theoretical approach to literary analysis that emphasizes the importance of the historical context in which a work of literature was produced and seeks to understand how that context influences the text's meaning. The approach views literature as a product of a specific time and place and argues that analyzing a work's historical context can reveal deeper insights into the text itself. The Bengali narrative collection *Maimansingha Gitika* is a key example of how New Historicism can be applied to the literary analysis of narrative ballads of the premodern time since the collection consists of narrative ballads that were composed before the 18th century, and provide valuable insights into the complex relationship among the social, cultural, and political milieu of premodern Bengal.

By applying the principles of New Historicism to *Maimansingha Gitika*, we can achieve novel perspectives on the correlation between communities and power structures in premodern Bengali society. Selected ballads from the collection are analyzed to reveal how power

structures were established and maintained within the community. Furthermore, using the lens of New Historicism, we can explore the ways in which these ballads reflect the political, social, and economic conditions of their time. New Historicism emphasizes the interdependence of history and literature and seeks to uncover the hidden power dynamics that shape both. In the case of *Maimansingha Gitika*, New Historicism allows us to see how the ballads reinforce and challenge existing power dynamics, and how these structures are shaped by larger historical forces.

One of the key ways in which *Maimansingha Gitika* reflects power structures is through its portrayal of social hierarchies. The ballads often feature powerful kings, landlords, merchants, and government officials, who are able to exert their influence over the less powerful peasants, laborers, and women. The power of these elites is reinforced by a web of cultural practices, such as the use of honorific titles, arranged marriages, and caste distinctions, which help to naturalize their dominance. At the same time, however, the ballads also contain moments of rebellion and resistance, in which these power structures are challenged or subverted.

The ballad from Vol. 1, “Rupavati”³ (“the Betrothed Maiden”), is about a young woman and her mother who challenge the gender and class hierarchies of their society by outsmarting a powerful emperor. The emperor in the narratives becomes intrigued by a letter describing the incomparable beauty of his subordinate landlord’s daughter and decides to pursue her as his own bride. However, the young woman and her mother are able to use their wit and resourcefulness to outsmart the emperor and maintain their own agency. The emperor claims:

Listen, O Rai.
Heard the only daughter yours is a beauty of paragon,
Give her hand to me and you live your own.
You’ll be honoured, O my elder.
Your place at my court will be greater.

(Sen, *Maimansingha Gitika* 297; my trans.)

The wife of the landlord named Rai, in order to protect her daughter Rupavati from the emperor’s ill desire, cleverly marries her to a young boy in their court and sends them into exile, as depicted in the ballad. This illustrates the struggles that ordinary people in premodern Indian feudal societies faced against the powerful kings and social structures they regulated. The ballad also portrays the resistance of an ordinary peasant woman who later in the story cares for the banished noble couple, Rupavati and her husband Modon, and uses her knowledge of society and the way power is exercised in the kingdom as a tool to resist the malpractice of the social power structure, particularly when Modon is imprisoned by the king.

New Historicism also allows us to see how the ballads are shaped by larger historical forces, such as colonialism and economic change. Many of the ballads were composed during the period of Mughal rule in Bengal, which was characterized by a complex web of alliances, conflicts,

and negotiations between local rulers and imperial authorities. The ballads reflect this complex political landscape, as well as the economic changes that were transforming rural Bengal, such as the rise of cash crops, the growth of trade, and the emergence of new forms of labor exploitation. Through a New Historicist lens, we can see how the ballads both reflect and respond to these larger historical forces, and how they provide a window into the complex and dynamic social world of premodern Bengal.

In ballad 4 of Vol. 1 named “Kamala,” originally narrated by Dbeej Ishan, we see how the power of the ruling class intersects with the communal bonds between women (Sen, *Maimansingha Gitika* 121). Kamala, a helpless and beautiful girl, faces societal torment in a patriarchal power structure in this story. Despite Kamala’s efforts, her society listens only to men, even when they are evil. Karkoon, a wicked man who desires Kamala, stalks her and enlists the help of a courtesan named Goalini to reach her. When these attempts fail, Karkoon uses false praise and evil tactics to deceive the king into raising taxes, leading to the arrest of Kamala’s father and brother.

The tarnished Karkoon performed misdeed,
Entered the house with the order of the king indeed.
After witnessing the mandate, I understand
Father and brother were captured in a foreign land. (158; my trans.)

Kamala’s beauty becomes both a blessing and a curse as it attracts the attention of this vindictive man Karkoon, who relentlessly pursues her. Despite her efforts to avoid him, Karkoon resorts to deceitful tactics to get Kamala’s father and brother arrested as depicted in the above excerpt. To escape the humiliation and mistreatment, Kamala leaves her home and seeks refuge with her maternal uncle. However, she is once again victimized and falsely accused of being characterless. As a result, Kamala is forced into exile and seeks asylum with a farmer who becomes a father figure to her. Through Kamala’s relationship with the farmer, the ballad highlights the importance of familial support in a society that is often hostile to women. Kamala’s relationship with her new “father” [the farmer] provides her with the knowledge and strength to overcome the challenges she faces, transcending class boundaries and gender norms. However, the ballad also sheds light on the power dynamics between men and women in premodern India. Kamala’s beauty becomes a double-edged sword, allowing her to gain entry into the court of a prince but also leaving her vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by those in positions of power. Therefore, the ballad of “Kamala” portrays the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, the importance of familial support, and the complex power dynamics at play.

The ballads in *Maimansingha Gitika* not only serve as a reminder of the darkness that existed 400 years ago but also provides a guide for us to break free from the superstitions and social injustices that were often enforced by those in power. In a world where we are accustomed to witnessing the filthy fighting for power and material gains, these ballads offer a light for the blind and guidance for those who have lost their way. The stories teach us that our character’s false pride

in chastity does not stem from our intellect but from the power dynamics, laws, and social norms that are influenced by social practices. It is important to note that society does not inherently protect one's chastity, but rather it is inner chastity that blooms through communal harmony, which in turn protects society itself. By studying these ballads, we can see how power dynamics have historically influenced social norms and practices. We can use this knowledge to challenge the status quo and create a more just and equitable society. These ballads provide a valuable resource for those who seek to understand the history and culture of the Subcontinent and the ways in which power structures have shaped its development. They remind us of the importance of fighting for justice and upholding our values in the face of adversity in the time of the (post) modernist community living which is often volatile.

The concept of community by Derrida centers around the idea that community is not a fixed or stable entity, but rather a process that is constantly being created and recreated through shared experiences and language. He argues that a community is inherently open and inclusive and that the very act of forming a community involves both inclusion and exclusion. In analyzing the ballads from the *Maimansingha Gitika* collection using this concept, we can gain new insights into the communal constructions of premodern Bengali society.

Through these stories, we see how communal support and solidarity could provide a way out of difficult circumstances, even in a society with strict social hierarchies. The narratives show how the concept of community involves both inclusion and exclusion, sometimes, as the woman is excluded from her community due to her relationship with an outsider. We can also see how power structures operate within the community, as the so-called leaders of the community enforce the banishment as a means of maintaining their own power and control. However, most importantly, the community is recreated with shared collective experiences and mutual understanding irrespective of religious and cultural differences, supporting Derrida's concept of "other" reflected in the openness of a community.

The ballad "Manjurma" from Vol. 2 of the *Maimansingha Gitika* depicts the coexistence and assimilation of ideas between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Derrida's concept of community can be functional to analyze this ballad as the ballad portrays a community that transcends religious boundaries of "otherness" where the Hindus and Muslims joined hands in their festive ceremonies, apparently participating in their mutual beliefs without losing regard for their respective creeds. This ballad is unique and reflects the Mahomedan community's literature and ethics, which are permeated by a spirit of far greater freedom. The Mahomedans have been exponents of liberty, and from the very outset, they have warred against traditional customs and orthodoxy. A Hindu writer of those days could never have portrayed the mighty character Manjurma as the Muslim poet did, doing full justice to her. Theology and traditional faith would have blinded him (Hindu writer) to the glaring fact that she was a mere young child. The ballad forms a valuable record, not only illuminating pages of our obscure social history but also indicating the lines to be pursued for bringing about union and peace again in the vast country inhabited by people professing diverse religions (Sen, *Maimansingha Gitika* 3).

The ballad reflects a time when Hindus and Muslims had a catholic spirit of assimilation and a warm sympathy for each other's beliefs, as the poet speaks of the holiness of the Ganges and the sanctity of *tulasi* leaves, which are revered by Hindus. The ballad also refers to the pastoral god of love, Kanai, who was also respected by Muslims, and Durga Dasabhuja, a Hindu goddess who was revered by Muslims in the countryside. It is imperative to note that the ballad's portrayal of Manjurma, a woman in a lawful marriage who runs away with another man, is unique and could not have been written by a Hindu poet of that time. It can also be argued that the Mahomedan community's literature and ethics are permeated by a spirit of far greater freedom than Hinduism, and they have been exponents of liberty from the outset (Sen, *History* 31). According to Sen, the coexistence of these two religions should be pursued for union and peace in India (33). In reference to Derrida's concept of community, we can see that the ballad reflects a time when Hindus and Muslims were willing to participate in each other's cultural and religious practices, without losing regard for their respective creeds (Sen, *Eastern* vii-viii). However, the present bitter feelings that are tearing the very heart of India are threatening the unity and coexistence of these two religions.

The ballad "Manjurma" also presents a complex portrayal of the characters and their actions, which further can be discussed through Derrida's idea regarding community. The unknown Muslim poet evokes a sense of community by creating a sympathetic interest in Manjurma and condemning the snake-charmer for marrying her. However, the poet also generates compassion for the snake-charmer, who fell in love with Manjurma despite his initial aversion to women:

Adept was he in *Gadura* lore and when he sprinkled holy water from his magic basket *pala* on the body of his patient, reciting mystic words, the man long given up for dead, would stand up and walk. And his fame went on increasing all the more as he charged no fee but offered his gratuitous service to all. . . . A celibate was he and lived alone, having no wife or children. So deep-rooted was his prejudice against women that not one of them he believed to be true. He abhorred even to look at one of the fair sex. (Sen, *Maimansingha Gitika* 9-10)

The poet portrays the snake-charmer's love as saintly and childlike, and his subsequent actions as driven by fate rather than evil motives. By doing so, the poet challenges traditional notions of morality and transcends social tradition to see matters from a higher standpoint.

The poet's portrayal of the characters and their actions also reflects the tension between individuality and community. While Manjurma's actions are typical of her gender, the snake-charmer's love for her is unique and at odds with his previous beliefs. The poet's emphasis on the snake-charmer's romantic love as something that ennobles life and gives it meaning, suggesting a celebration of individuality. On one side, there is the snake-charmer Manir, a mature man who loves the young girl Manjurma with all his heart. On the other side, Manjurma loves Hasan, with whom she grew up from childhood, and they loved each other like two lovebirds, without realizing its seriousness while being together. Before realizing her love for Hasan, she had been

married to Manir, but now her heart is filled with grief and solemn gravity: “My heart is laden with unsupportable grief when I see my beloved playing on his flute to beckon me or sitting on the bathing-ghat to have a glimpse of my face” (15).

In a desperate bid to escape the suffocating circumstances that threatened to destroy them, Manjurma and Hasan made the bold decision to leave the village and start a new life together: “No more shall we live in this cursed land. Let us go to a distant, far distant place” (17). As they embarked on this uncertain journey, they were filled with both hope and fear, unsure of what the future held for them. Leaving behind the only home they had ever known was not an easy decision, but they knew that they could not continue living under the oppressive weight of their circumstances. Their love was forbidden, and their union would never be accepted by the community. But together, they found the strength to face their fears and take a chance at their future. As they journeyed into the unknown, they could face countless challenges and obstacles. But they refused to be deterred, and their love for each other sustained them through even the toughest times. Along the way, they encountered new people and new experiences, and gradually, they began to build a new communal life together, embracing *other*. Although their journey can be filled with hardship and uncertainty, Manjurma and Hasan never look back. They had made the decision to follow their hearts, and they knew that no matter what lay ahead, they would face it together. In the end, their love for one another was the only thing that mattered, and it gave them the strength to overcome any obstacle in their path.

The concept of community by Derrida suggests that there is no stable or fixed meaning of the term, but instead, it is a constantly evolving and contested idea. In the case of the ballad “Manjurma,” the poet’s condemnation of Manjurma’s actions and emphasis on social norms and values indicates a commitment to the community. The poet recognizes the importance of community norms and values in shaping and governing behavior. Manjurma’s actions, although driven by her feelings for Hasan, go against the established social norms and expectations of a married woman. The poet condemns her actions and portrays her as a cunning and deceitful woman. This condemnation reflects the poet’s belief in the importance of maintaining social order and following community norms.

The emphasis on social norms and values also highlights the poet’s commitment to the community’s welfare. The poet recognizes that Manjurma’s actions could harm not only herself but also Manir and Hasan. By leaving the village with Hasan, she could potentially cause social disruption and bring shame to her family and community. Thus, the poet’s condemnation of Manjurma’s actions is an attempt to protect the community’s welfare and prevent harm from being inflicted on its members. Therefore, the ballad “Manjurma” reflects the complex and contested nature of the concept of community. While the poet’s condemnation of Manjurma’s actions indicates a commitment to community norms and values, the portrayal of Manir, the snake-charmer, also shows compassion and an understanding of the complexity of individual human nature. Ultimately, the poet’s commitment to the community’s welfare is evident in the emphasis on social norms and values, which serve as a guide for governing behavior and maintaining social order.

The use of vernacular Bengali language and the brevity of the ballad further enhance its sense of collectivity. The use of Vaisnava phraseology and the absence of theology or propagandism suggest a shared cultural heritage and a focus on the human experience. The ballad's popularity in Mymensingh and its recovery after being given up due to opposition from purists also suggest a sense of community and a desire to preserve cultural heritage. Overall, the ballad "Manjurma" presents a nuanced portrayal of characters and their actions that reflects the tension between individuality and community. The poet challenges traditional notions of morality and celebrates individuality while also emphasizing the importance of social norms and values.

Conclusion

Maimansingha Gitika serves as an important window into the literary traditions of pre-colonial Bengal. The collection not only provides valuable insights into the social, cultural, and historical context of the time but also demonstrates the importance of including minority languages in the study of Indian literature. By examining the power structures of premodern society through the lens of New Historicism, we achieve a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which literature reflects and challenges existing power dynamics. This approach allows us to better understand the complex world of premodern Bengal and the ways in which communities were organized and governed.

Furthermore, by using the concept of community as developed by Derrida, we can better understand the power dynamics and social hierarchies portrayed in the ballads of *Maimansingha Gitika*. These ballads demonstrate the ways in which the formation of communities involves both inclusion and exclusion, and how power structures are shaped and maintained through the creation and enforcement of boundaries. Through this analysis, we gain new insights into the social, political, and cultural realities of premodern Bengali society. The New Historicism approach, along with the concept of community, thus allows us to see the complex ways in which literature reflects and interacts with historical context, offering a richer and more comprehensive understanding of literary traditions and power dynamics in premodern Bengal. Therefore, the remark from critic Francis H. Skrine is quite noteworthy in this regard: "the Professor [Sen] has rendered eminent service to his country in rescuing the charming ballads of Eastern Bengal from oblivion. His labours, indeed, may well be compared with those of Sir Walter Scott and Joseph Ritson, who did the same for the melodious songs of the Scottish Border" (qtd. in Sen, *Eastern* 437).⁴

Notes

1. Sen, Dineschandra. *Eastern Bengal Ballads*. Calcutta UP, 1928.
2. Dineshchandra Sen translated the English term “ballad” into Bengali as “gitika.” Bengali ballads are songs that tell narrative stories but also contain dramatic dialogues. The singer performs the entire story and dialogue of the dramatic characters while the choristers repeat after he and the musicians play their instruments. The ballads are performed for a rural audience, who sit around the stage and become enchanted by the music and drama (Wakil Ahmed, *Banglapedia*).
3. The writer of this ballad is unknown.
4. I acknowledge the support of Dr. Neil Ramsey for his unwavering support throughout the research process of this article. I also extend thanks to ChatGPT for its role in providing information that enriched the content of this article. Additionally, I am thankful to the University of New South Wales (UNSW) for providing the necessary logistical support and graduate funding that made this research possible.

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