



## Silent Strength: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Resilience and Patriarchal Constraints in 'Rajmohan's Wife' and 'And Such is Her Fate'

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### Abstract

Throughout literary history, women have occupied a central and enduring place in storytelling—serving as both focal subjects and powerful symbols across varied cultural and historical landscapes. When we trace how female characters have evolved over time, a recurring pattern emerges: women are frequently depicted as casualties of patriarchal social structures. Yet despite this, they have continuously fought to carve out their own identities and seek liberation—sometimes by conforming to societal expectations, other times by defying them. Resilience has always served as a means to resist and survive patriarchal tyranny. In this context the present paper analyses how the central character, Bhano, in 'And Such is Her Fate' and Matangini in 'Rajmohan's Wife' attempt to establish their sense of self through various means, only to meet a tragic end. While Matangini in Rajmohan's Wife embodies a more visible form of defiance against marital and societal constraints, Tiwana's female characters often reflect an internalized resilience shaped by emotional suffering and social conditioning.

**Keywords:** Resilience, female identity, oppression of women, societal expectations, patriarchy

### Introduction

Women everywhere face systemic marginalization and must continually assert their right to exist on their own terms. This assertion takes different forms—at times through quiet acceptance, at others through open defiance of cultural norms. A woman's value is often measured solely by how well she adheres to prescribed roles. Still, even within these confines, women harbor a deep desire to

live authentically. Two important female character situated in distinct socio-cultural and historical context—colonial Bengal and modern Punjabi society—Navigating oppressive patriarchal structures through individual manners of resilience. Bhano, in Tiwana's 'And Such is Her Fate' published in 1969 navigates these tensions, seeking identity through multiple avenues yet arriving at a similarly bleak outcome. She submits both to fate and to social convention in pursuit of contentment, but

genuine satisfaction eludes her. Tiwana does not cast her protagonist as a revolutionary; instead, Bhano emerges as someone who has made peace with her subjugation, absorbing the judgments that society and circumstance thrust upon her. The paper reveals how Bhano has been conditioned to believe that survival depends on male protection, and it traces the subtle forms of resistance she employs in her search for self. While Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay presents a 19th-century colonial perspective through 'Rajmohan's Wife' published in 1864 where female resistance begins to surface, Dilip Kaur Tiwana portrays the nuanced emotional endurance of women in a more contemporary setting. Through this comparison, the paper seeks to trace the shifting forms of resilience—from overt defiance to silent strength—and to understand how silence itself can become a mode of resistance.

### Discussion

Situated in distinct socio-cultural and historical contexts—colonial Bengal and modern Punjabi society—both texts depict women contesting oppressive patriarchal structures that constrain their agency and voice. Through a comparative analysis, it is reflected that resilience is exhibited in different forms: overt resistance and silent endurance. While Matangini in Rajmohan's Wife represents courage and visible defiance against marital oppression, Tiwana's female characters often embody resilience through internalized suffering, emotional endurance, and muted resistance. The study argues that although the forms of resilience evolve across time, they remain deeply connected to the socio-cultural conditions that shape women's lives. By foregrounding silence as a powerful yet understated mode of resistance, the study contributes to feminist literary discourse and highlights the complexity of women's experiences across different literary traditions.

The concept of resilience has been an integral part of women struggle and therefore

gained significant attention in literary and cultural studies, particularly in the context of women's experiences within patriarchal societies. Resilience, primarily means the ability to endure, adapt, and respond to adverse circumstances. In literature, particularly in works such as Rajmohan's wife, Jane Eyre and The Color Purple (Bronte, 2006 and Walker 1982), women's resilience often emerges in nuanced and layered forms, shaped by the socio-cultural and historical contexts in which they exist. From overt acts of defiance to quiet endurance, women's responses to oppression reflect both constraint and agency. As Elaine Showalter remarks,

"Women's writing is a 'double voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant."  
(Showalter, 1981)

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Rajmohan's Wife, written in the 19th century during colonial rule, is one of the earliest Indian English novels and offers insight into the beginnings of female agency within a rigid patriarchal framework. In contrast, Dilip Kaur Tiwana's 'And Such is Her Fate' reflects a more contemporary Punjabi context, where women continue to grapple with deeply entrenched gender norms, often expressing their resistance through silence and emotional endurance.

Women have long recognized that freedom from gendered subjugation is essential to achieving equality with men. They have aspired not only to critique the intertwined forces of racism, classism, and sexism but also to imagine and construct new frameworks of resistance. Early feminist thinkers proposed that embracing "womanhood" (Hooks, 1981, p. 1) could serve as a foundation for women's identity. Women are socialized to be obedient, sexually subordinate, and voiceless—pushed to the margins of society. Over time, however, many have come to understand that true emancipation requires throwing off the chains

of sexist thinking. Initial writers such as Bankim Chandra, Rabinder Nath Tagore, Toru Dutt, Raja Rao and the later like Mary Church Terrell, Sojourner Truth, Anna Cooper, Toni Morrison, Dilip Kaur Tiwana, Amrita Pritam, and Ajeet Cour have contributed to this effort by documenting their experiences and thereby affirming their existence. Their shared goal is to cultivate a stable, positive sense of self that can be embraced and honored. In both texts under study, patriarchy functions as a pervasive force that shapes women's lives, limiting their autonomy and silencing their voices. Another key concept is that of voice and silence. Traditional interpretations often equate silence with submission; however, contemporary feminist thought recognizes silence as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Silence serves as a mode of survival, and helps the protagonists to negotiate power within restrictive environments. Resilience is constructed and represented in the selected texts, paying particular attention to the interplay between agency, oppression, and resistance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers a critical lens on this issue in her reflections on Indian literature. She observes that one rarely encounters an authentic expression of women's inner lives and poses the provocative question: "Can the subaltern speak? And can the subaltern (as woman) speak?" She argues that the "figure of woman" has already been shaped by male-dominated traditions, and that the connection between women and silence must be examined by women themselves, cutting across differences of race and class. Subaltern scholarship, she contends, must grapple with the difficulty of such representation (Spivak, 1988, p. 93). Women thus find themselves battling a "double burden"—the combined weight of racism and sexism, often intensified by poverty and class barriers.

Rajmohan's Wife presents one of the earliest portrayals of a female protagonist in Indian English fiction. Matangini, the central character, is depicted as a woman caught in an

oppressive marriage with Rajmohan, a man characterized by cruelty and moral corruption. Despite her constrained circumstances, Matangini emerges as a figure of strength and moral courage.

Her resilience is evident in her refusal to remain passive in the face of injustice. She actively resists her husband's tyranny and takes bold steps to protect the people she cares about. Her actions reflect a form of overt resistance that challenges the traditional expectations of female submissiveness. In this sense, Matangini represents an early articulation of female agency in Indian literature.

"Madhav knew Matangini to be a woman of two clear a mind to have been greatly deceived, and he knew her also too well to think she would ever be at so much pains to deceive him." (Chattopadhyay, 2022, p. 9).

On an another instance—"Matangini read her fate in his looks and stood, not pale and trembling but firmly and proudly, with all the dignity and courage which had that very evening awed into silence the fury of her brutal oppressor." (Chattopadhyay, 2022, p. 71). Matangini's above expression depicts Elaine Showalter remarks, "women reject both imitation and protest... and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art." (Showalter, 1977)

However, her resistance is not without limitations. The socio-cultural context of the time imposes strict boundaries on her actions, and her defiance often comes at great personal cost. Her struggle highlights the tension between individual agency and societal constraints, illustrating the complexities of women's resilience in a patriarchal setting.

However, the novel 'And Such is Her Fate' tells the story of a young woman navigating the specific cultural expectations of her community while confronting overlapping oppressions of gender, class, and ethnicity. Dr. Dilip Kaur Tiwana, a prominent figure in

Punjabi literature, has devoted much of her work to exploring gender dynamics and the roots of women's suffering within Punjabi society. In this narrative, she lays bare the harm inflicted by gender-based oppression both within the home and beyond.

Tiwana's celebrated novel 'And Such is Her Fate' (*Eho Hamara Jiwana*) is a moving account of a working-class rural woman. Set in a Punjabi village, it depicts the anguished life of an ordinary woman ensnared by her circumstances. Oppressed on account of both her gender and her poverty, she lacks the power to achieve her modest aspiration: to live with dignity as a wife and mother. She therefore strives to embody the ideals of domesticity and respectability. As Natarajan and Nelson note in their survey of twentieth-century Indian literatures, this work stands as Tiwana's "most outstanding achievement... a deeply affecting story of a poor peasant girl victimized by unchecked human desire" (Natarajan, 1996, p. 264).

The story follows Bhano, a woman from an impoverished farming family who is now married to Narain, an alcoholic dependent on drugs. Through conversations among secondary characters, readers piece together Bhano's troubled past. Initially, she is perceived as cunning and immoral because she is not Narain's lawful wife; Bachni speculates that she was either bought or ran away from home. Bachni remarks: "But have you seen that wretch? A full-fledged woman to the hilt! God knows which innocent man she must have jilted before preying upon Narain! These hussies have no sense of shame. They like to have a new husband every day" (Tiwana, 1980, p. 1-2).

This passage invites reflection on Toni Morrison's observations about women's treatment of one another. In a 1979 commencement speech at Barnard College, Morrison expressed alarm at "the violence that women do to each other; professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence... the

willingness of women to enslave other women" (Hooks, 1984, p. 49).

Bhano embraces the traditional feminine roles of wife, daughter, and sister-in-law. As she recounts, her father—after selling livestock and mortgaging land—was prepared to sell her to fund medical treatment for her ailing brother. Tiwana paints a stark but accurate portrait of poverty-stricken Indian communities where a father trades his daughter for money, marrying her off to Sarban from Moran Walli village. Yet even marriage fails to grant Bhano a peaceful, dignified existence; her husband's four unmarried brothers leer at her with predatory intent. She describes them: "Ammo, they were five brothers and he was the only one who was married. His brothers were strong like bulls and straight like columns of stone, and their lecherous eyes kept chasing me all the time" (Tiwana, 1980, p. 8). The situation reaches its terrible climax when the brothers murder Sarban over a minor land dispute, leaving Bhano with no choice but to comply with society's callous customs.

Bhano becomes an outcast. She persists in her quiet, submissive ways, channeling her anger and disappointment into self-blame while accepting whatever society and fate decree. Another character, Santi, reflects: "It's true, women are born to be 'bad' or 'evil'. It is better not to ask or discuss about their lives" (Tiwana, 1980, p. 32). The social reality depicted in the novel is one of relentless, inescapable assault—a world that denies basic dignity to women across cultures.

Bhano displays signs of deep self-loathing throughout the narrative, frequently lamenting the worthlessness of being female. So profound is her despair that she attempts suicide after her husband's death, only to be rescued by Narain, who takes her into his home.

Bhano embodies the archetypal Indian woman who accepts her lot without seeking outside support. She strives to maintain her relationships under any circumstances,

performing all the duties expected of a wife in hopes of gaining social approval. Yet her efforts prove futile; the social order overwhelms her. She is cast out because she cannot produce an heir for Narain, who then brings another woman into the household. Bhano attempts to adapt to her new status as co-wife, but gender-based oppression breeds hostility not only between men and women but among women as well. When Bhagwanti, the second wife, gives birth to a son, she persuades Narain to sell Bhano to an elderly man for a pittance. Tiwana thus illustrates how women can become instruments of harm against one another. Once again, Bhano yields to fate and leaves the home she helped build, wandering the streets like a stranger, as though she had never existed.

Throughout the novel, Bhano leads a dejected life, striving to prove her worth within a social structure that confines women to narrow roles. As Tiwana shows, Bhano inhabits a world where a woman has value only under the protection of a man—father, brother, husband, or son. Lacking any skills beyond care giving, she cannot articulate her own desires. Society has moulded her into an accommodating "good" woman, and that is all she knows how to be. Her environment offers no alternative. Silence becomes her only form of resistance. She might have asserted herself had she, like Bhagwanti, borne a child. Through Bhano's silence, Tiwana exposes social realities that demand re-examination. The narrative resonates with the force of human destiny and the oppressive predictability of social norms. Its characters must bow to both fate and convention. Bhano's inner conflict lies at the heart of the story: she desperately wants to belong to a stable social order as a respected member, yet each time she tries to fit in, she is expelled like "an absolute non-entity." The author raises vital questions about women's existence but leaves readers to draw their own conclusions. As Spivak observes in a related discussion: "What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?

The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" (Spivak, 1988, p. 46).

Spivak also offers a way forward: "What interests me is that the protection of women (today the 'third-world woman') becomes a signifier for the establishment of a 'good' society" (Spivak, 1988, p. 50). Until society ceases to marginalize and dismiss its women, a just and happy world will remain out of reach. A comparative analysis of the two texts reveals both similarities and differences in the representation of women's resilience. One of the most striking contrasts lies in the nature of resistance. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, resilience is expressed through action and defiance, while in *And Such is Her Fate*, it manifests as endurance and silence.

Despite these differences, both forms of resilience challenge the notion of women as passive victims. Matangini's bold actions disrupt the patriarchal order, while Tiwana's characters subvert it in quieter, more subtle ways. In both cases, resilience becomes a means of asserting agency within restrictive environments. As Tiwana portrays, Bhano endures, yet ultimately meets disaster. She walks the street as a stranger—a fate "no less than death."

## Conclusion

This comparative study of 'Rajmohan's Wife' and 'And Such is Her Fate' demonstrates that women's resilience is a multifaceted and evolving concept. While the forms of resilience may differ—ranging from overt defiance to silent endurance—the underlying struggle against patriarchal oppression remains consistent.

Matangini's visible resistance marks an important moment in the representation of female agency in early Indian literature, while Tiwana's portrayal of silent resilience reflects the continued relevance of these issues in

contemporary society. Together, these texts illustrate the diverse ways in which women navigate and resist the constraints imposed upon them.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of recognizing silence as a meaningful and powerful form of resistance. By giving voice to these “silent” experiences, literature plays a crucial role in challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the resilience of women across time and space.

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