



WOMAN'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENT IDENTITY: A STUDY OF BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTERJEE'S *RAJMOHAN'S WIFE* AND ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first Indian novel written in English throws light on the predicament of Indian women. The Booker prize winning *The God of Small Things* is the debut novel of Arundhati Roy who is a socially committed writer and a political activist. Whereas Bankim's novel was serialized more than eighty years before India's independence, Arundhati's novel was published fifty years after India's democracy. In this paper my purpose is to focus on the rebellion of the female protagonists of the two novels against patriarchal oppression and traditional social system. Matangini is the heroine of Bankim's novel and she represents the suffering women of the pre-independent India. On the other hand, the female protagonist of Arundhati's novel is Ammu who stands for the oppressed and deprived women of the post-independent India. Matangini and Ammu tolerate sufferings, endure tortures, and raise their voice against society and traditional system. The two female protagonists – Matangini and Ammu suffer and die early but they are unforgettable characters for their struggle and search for independent identity.

Key Words: Paravan, Patriarchal oppression, rebellion, Syrian Christian, transgressor

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Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's wife* is the first Indian novel written in English. It was first serialized in 1864. Bankimchandra Chatterjee wrote fourteen other novels in Bengali, of which *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Mrinalini* (1869), *Bishabriksha* (1973), *Rajani* (1877), *Rajsingha* (1881) and *Anandamath* (1882) are widely read and discussed. But *Rajmohan's wife* remains a fascinating text even after one hundred and fifty years of its first appearance. The novel deals with

the rebellion of a beautiful and passionate woman against the oppression and dominance of her husband. In this novel the female protagonist goes against tradition through raising her voice against her cruel husband and loving the husband of her own sister. On the other hand, *The God of Small Things* (1997) is the debut novel of Arundhati Roy who is widely acclaimed for her social commitment and political activism. The novel is set in a remote village named Ayemenem of Kerala. In this novel

Arundhati Roy has highlighted the struggle of a Syrian Christian woman for her autonomy and independence. The female protagonist of Arundhati Roy's novel fights against patriarchal oppression and traditional social system.

Matangini is the heroine of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*. The novel traces the sufferings of a middle-class housewife Matangini at the hands of her husband Rajmohan. As the novel progresses it is seen that Matangini is a woman of vitality, courage, strong determination and a rebellious spirit. In the beginning of the novel, the novelist uses tropes from folklore to portray the perfect beauty of Matangini, a young woman of eighteen years old:

The dainty limbs of the woman of eighteen were not burdened with such abundance of ornaments, nor did her speech betray any trace of the East Bengal accent, which clearly showed that this perfect flower of beauty was no daughter of the banks of the Madhumati, but was born and brought up on the Bhagirathi in some place near the capital. Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half scorched and half radiant under the noonday sun. Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder; but some loose tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks. (RW 3)

Such a fair girl Matangini is married to the brutal Rajmohan. Rajmohan is a very cruel and zealous type of man. He always abuses and ill-treats his innocent wife. Rajmohan dominates over her and tries to snatch away her individual identity as a woman. Her every activity is controlled by her domineering husband. On one occasion Matangini accompanied with Kanak goes to a tank outside to fetch water. When Rajmohan comes to know it, he severely humiliates and tortures Matangini. He abuses her saying: "Have I not forbidden you a thousand times? Then, wretched girl, why did you go?" (RW 12) He shouts, jumps on his wife, grips her by the wrist and raises his other hand to

strike her. Matangini seems to be utterly helpless and submissive to her husband who threatens her: "I'll kick you to death" (RW 13). This is how Matangini is treated by her rude and arrogant husband.

The title of the novel refers to the fact that Matangini is a property of her husband Rajmohan who can use her as per his eccentricity and wish. In fact, Rajmohan feels himself proud of possessing such a beautiful and charming wife like Matangini: "Woman deceive me not. Canst thou? Thou little knowest how I have watched thee; how from the earliest day that thy beauty became thy curse, I have followed every footstep of thine – caught every look that shot from thine eyes. Brute though I be I was proud of my beautiful wife and as the tigress watches over her whelp, I watched over thee" (RW 61). He always tries to continue his rule over her body and mind. Matangini is to endure verbal assaults from her husband. Hence Rajmohan seems to be a cruel, selfish and barbaric figure like the duke of Robert Browning's monologue 'My Last Duchess'; the duke wants to control his wife in the same way as Neptune, the sea-god tames a sea-horse. But Matangini is a woman of free spirit. She cannot be controlled by power or force. She does not want to be an object of one's possession; she hates any idea of dominance. She gradually goes to the extent of hating her husband for his dominating trait and ferocious behaviour. Ramendranath Datta comments: "Her strength of character and resolve has a European ring and it is surprising to relate her endeavours to that of a country girl wilting under patriarchy. She becomes in effect the face of modern India – strong-willed and spirited, willing to bend rules and sometimes even break them" (RW 21).

In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also refers to the fact of the oppression of Indian women by patriarchal structures; she also indicates that colonialism is another agent of subjugating Indian women. Matangini is a victim of patriarchal oppression. Matangini abhors her husband because of his intention of dominating over and suppressing her and robbing of her inner self. She revolts against her husband Rajmohan when he becomes ungrateful

towards his benefactor and makes plans to ruin a good man who has helped him get a job and earn livelihood. Rajmohan is a hateful character who always suspects his wife for loving other persons. This jealousy of Rajmohan's character makes him an abhorrent character of the novel. In fact Rajmohan's behaviour and ill-treatment towards his wife lead her to love another man. In Madhav, Matangini finds her relief and refuge. Nothing can stop her from loving Madhav because her inner self desires to love that man.

Matangini is a transgressor as she crosses the border-line of his marital domain; she abrogates the relation with her husband and expresses her deep love for her brother-in-law. She knows well that it is impossible to continue this love relation as it is illicit in the traditional society and she will not be loved by him in return. Yet she articulates her love in front of Madhav. The novelist has described this utterance of Matangini's love for Madhav:

'Ah, hate me not, despise me not', cried she with an intensity of feeling which shook her delicate frame. 'Spurn me not for this last weakness; this, Madhav, this, may be our last meeting; it must be so, and too, too deeply have I loved you – too deeply do I love you still, to part with you forever without a struggle.' (RW 54)

Madhav Ghose, the hero of the novel is described as "a remarkably handsome young man of about twenty-two. His clear placid complexion had turned a little dull either through want of exercise or too much comfort. His clothes were good but not very costly; a dhoti, a fine chudder, a cambric shirt and English shoes" (RW 8). Madhav marries Hemangini, the youngest sister of Matangini. Madhav is a man of education and has a sense of responsibility towards others. When Hemangini tells Madhav about Matangini's request for Rajmohan's employment or job, Madhav at once appoints Rajmohan as his assistant in the management of a part of his zemindari. Though Rajmohan accepts the job in a churlish manner, Madhav continues to behave well towards him. Madhav vests him with the control of one single village and allows him a handsome salary in return. Madhav also builds for him a house and gives him lands to cultivate by

hired labourers. In spite of all this, Rajmohan behaves with coldness towards his benefactor. He makes an alliance with the enemies of Madhav to ruin him.

The sixth chapter ('Midnight Plotting') of the novel shows Rajmohan's association with dacoits. Rajmohan helps them conceal their robbed property in his safe hiding place and bargains well to get his due in return. A dacoit discloses his intention of robbing Madhav Ghose's property that night: "We mean to carry off Madhav Ghose's property for ourselves; but we want to carry off something else for another.....His uncle's will" (RW 34-35). Later it becomes clear that this 'another' man is none but Mathur Ghose whose sole desire is to take possession of Madhav's property through forgery of his uncle's will. In response to the robber's query Rajmohan discloses the whereabouts of the will: "It is an ivory box..... with three English letters written in gold on the lid. Those are the first letters of his name" (RW 35). The most important and praiseworthy trait of Matangini's character is her courage; she cautiously overhears all these exchanges between Rajmohan and the dacoit and is certain that the robbery shall be done on that night at Madhav Ghose's house, "Matangini sank on the floor in astonishment and dismay" (RW 36). The novelist very realistically delineates Matangini as a brave heroine who can immediately overcome any difficult situation:

By degrees she recovered composure enough to think on what she had heard. A new and terrible light had just been thrown on the life and character of her husband. She had hitherto known him as a man of mad heart and brutal temper, but she recoiled with horror at the recollection that the accomplice of robbers, himself a robber perhaps, had hitherto enjoyed her innocent bosom. (RW 37)

Matangini thinks that the victims of this ensuing horrible deed are Madhav and Hemangini. She holds courage and she determines to save them even at the price of her own life. She decides that she must go herself to Madhav's house to make him cautious of this midnight plotting of the robbers; she goes through the jungly path, at that hour of

dreadful loneliness. It is Matangini who undertakes a dangerous journey at night through dark forests to inform Madhav of the conspiracy of her husband and the evil rogues. She is determined to destroy the evil plot of her husband and other enemies of Madhav; she takes the risk only to save Madhav who is the husband of her sister and the man of her heart, and besides this, he is an innocent man. Later again Mathur makes Madhav captive in a hidden place of his farmhouse with the help of the robbers. Matangini is also captivated and confined in a mysterious dark chamber at Mathur's instructions. After suffering a lot they become free with the help of Tara, Mathur's wife. At the end of *Rajmohan's Wife*, Madhav is saved from danger after many unhappy incidents, Mathur – the villain hangs himself, Rajmohan is implicated deeply in the crime and is subject to trial. But Matangini goes to her father's house to live there permanently:

Matangini could not live under Madhav's roof. This, of course, they both understood. So intimation was sent to her father and he came and took her home. Madhav increased the pension he allowed the old man, on her account. History does not say how her life terminated, but it is known that she died an early death. (RW 127)

The sense of responsibility towards their family and social awareness keep the lovers apart from each other. Madhav has done nothing but to weep like a child: "Oh! Matangini, let us forget each other. Let us separate" (RW 56).

Matangini is a brave, impetuous and transgressive character of Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife*. Though she violates traditional social codes by raising her voice against patriarchy and by expressing her love for the husband of her sister, she wins the sympathy of the novelist and the readers. In her introduction to *Rajmohan's Wife* Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments:

Inscribed in the text we also find an early statement about the helplessness and claustrophobia of women in incompatible marriage that was going to be a recurrent concern of Indian fiction for many years to come. Given the rigidity of the power structure within the family among upper-

caste Bengalis in the nineteenth century, it seems surprising that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of society. (Mukherjee viii)

Matangini overcomes the barriers of conventions. She rejects the traditional concept of a woman's subservient position and endurance of her husband's tortures and villainous activities. She is a victim of an incompatible marriage that deprives her of her due honour as a wife. She defies tradition and pays a lot for her struggle for independence and autonomy. Her love for her own brother-in-law remains unrequited; her passion for her lover is frustrated. She loses her place at her husband's house; she abrogates her identity as a wife of a villainous and cruel man; she sacrifices her love for the sake of her sister. Consequently, Matangini is led to the territory of uncertainty, shame and depression. She is punished for her rebellion against patriarchy and tradition. Fayaz Sultan aptly comments: "The way Matangini transgresses makes us sympathetic towards her. As a naturalistic writer, Bankim has put out all the codes and taboos of that society in which he portrays the contemporary life where characters like Matangini are setting out to challenge the established codes and ethics" (4).

The female protagonist of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is Ammu Ipe. She is the daughter of an entomologist. Ammu is a victim of patriarchal oppression and cruelties. As a girl Ammu has also seen the cruel faces of patriarchal power. She experiences how her father used to beat her mother; her father once turned the mother and the daughter out of the house. Her school education comes to an end the same year when her father Pappachi retires from his job in Delhi and moves to Ayemenem. Pappachi thinks it a waste to educate a female child. According to Pappachi "a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (TGST 38). Whereas Ammu's brother Chacko is given enough opportunity to carry on his higher studies abroad, Ammu is deprived of having a minimum educational qualification. It shows how one's gender determines his or her possibility of getting facilities

in the field of education. Ammu, however, leaves Delhi and returns to Ayemenem with her father. Ammu's waiting for marriage proposals begins as it is the lot of a girl of Ayemenem to wait for marriage and to do household works. This waiting makes Ammu desperate; she always dreams of escaping from Ayemenem. It becomes unbearable for Ammu to confine herself in the clutches of her ill-tempered father and long-suffering mother. She goes to Calcutta to spend the summer with a distant aunt. There, at someone's wedding reception Ammu meets a man who is an assistant manager of a tea estate of Assam. When that man proposes Ammu for marrying him, she accepts it because she wants to avoid returning to Ayemenem: "Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (TGST 39).

Coming to Assam Ammu gradually finds out that her husband is not just a heavy drinker but a full-blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm. Ammu's son and daughter – the twins – Estha and Rahel are born. By the time the twins become two years old, their father's drinking habit increases to a great extent; he begins to neglect his duty. Consequently, Mr. Hollick, the English manager of the tea estate summons him and tells him to resign from the job. Mr Hollick also points out another alternative that can save Ammu's husband from losing his job. The lustful manager tells Ammu's husband: "You're a very lucky man, you know, wonderful family, beautiful children, such an attractive wife An extremely attractive wife" (TGST 41-42). Mr. Hollick proposes that Ammu should be 'looked after' (TGST 42) at his bungalow. Ammu's husband informs Ammu about it and waits for her consent or approval; he tries to prostitute her to his lecherous boss. Ammu's silence leads her husband to abuse her and torture her severely: "He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the effort" (TGST 42). Not only this, the small twins become the objects of their drunk father's violence. This torture upon the innocent children leads Ammu to take

divorce from her husband. This decision on the part of a woman shows her strong determination and sense of self-respect. Her dreams are shattered; she returns to her parents' house in Ayemenem unwelcome.

Ammu returns to Ayemenem and very soon comes to realize that she loses her position and right in her parental house and property. The members of her parents' house seem to be unknown to her. Baby Kochamma, the aunt and Chacko, the only brother reveal their ugly changed faces. The novelist finely describes the condition of a divorced woman in her parents' house:

As for a *divorced* daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (TGST 45-46)

Baby Kochamma, Ammu's aunt denies Ammu's right to her father's property. She even dislikes the twins because she considers them doomed and fatherless waifs. Ammu is, therefore, humiliated by one who is not only her aunt but who is by gender a female one. Even Chacko, Ammu's brother expresses his discomfort at her return to her father's house. Chacko always tries to make it clear that Ammu has no right to their 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves' factory:

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as *my* factory, *my* pineapples, *my* pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property.

Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I. (TGST 57)

Ammu's unhappy marriage, her divorcehood, and uncertainty at her father's house make her depressed and lonely. Yet she does not give up her inner fiery spirit. She falls in love with Velutha who is a Paravan. Valutha is an untouchable as in Kerala the Paravans are considered untouchables. Ammu

belongs to the Syrian Christian community i.e. she is a member of an upper stratum of her society. Ammu loves this untouchable Paravan and goes beyond the barriers of caste and class. She forgets the codes of motherhood and divorcehood; she breaks the love laws of her society – “the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (TGST 33). In fact, Velutha’s indomitable spirit attracts Ammu. Velutha has been deprived in various ways and has suffered humiliation for his Paravan identity; yet he fights for the due honour of the Paravans; he is an active communist party member. On the other hand, Ammu has a rebellious self within her – her rebellion is against those forces which have deprived her and led her to play a subservient role in her family and society; those forces are patriarchy, tradition and society. It is the spirit of protest which brings Ammu and Velutha close to each other. K.M. Pandey rightly comments: “Ammu’s effort to win love for herself can be interpreted as her protest against the existing laws of society” (Pathak 83). In *The God of Small Things* the males are the privileged ones whereas the females are the deprived. This gender discrimination is prominently perceived in this novel. Whereas Chacko’s ‘man’s needs’ have been satisfied by some female workers of their factory and Mammachi takes a direct part in helping the poor female workers enter Chacko’s safe compartment, Ammu’s relation with Velutha has been forbidden not only by Mammachi but also by others. Ammu’s relationship with Velutha is discovered and she is locked in her room. Velutha is dismissed from his job at Chacko’s factory. He is wrongly accused of an attempted rape of Ammu and also Sophie Mol’s accidental death; he is tremendously tortured and killed in police custody. Ammu and her twins get a great shock from the unjust murder of Velutha. Ammu becomes lonely again; she is compelled to send her only son to live with his father; she sets out to find a job leaving everything behind her. A few years later she dies alone in a room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey at the age of thirty-one, “Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age.” (TGST 161) Ammu’s disgraceful death brings the story of her life to an end. Rajyashree Khushu – Lahiri holds the view: “Velutha and Ammu pay for their

‘transgression’ with their lives” (Dhawan 117). Though Ammu is a rebel, she has not enough power to defeat the antagonistic forces around her. So the tragic consequence is inevitable. R.S.Sharma rightly comments: “The forces opposed to the private desires, interests and pursuits of small people are ruthless and deterministic” (51).

Bankimchandra’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* depicts the plight of women of the pre-independent India i.e. of India as a colonized country and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* highlights the miserable condition of women in the post-independent India. Hence it is seen that the condition of women remains unchanged – they are deprived and humiliated in every possible way. It is an accepted fact that women have no protesting voice; they should only tolerate oppression meted out to them. In *Rajmohan’s Wife*, Matangini has been punished for disobeying her husband’s orders; she has to suffer for protesting against her husband’s evil plans of harming innocent people. Even Matangini’s sincere love remains unrequited; she is discouraged by the barriers of traditional society. She undergoes unbearable pains and dies an early death. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu is a victim of patriarchy – her education has been stopped by her father; her identity as an individual woman has been suppressed; she has been tortured by her husband in several ways – her identity as a wife has been erased. Moreover, her deep love for a Paravan has been destroyed by Society and Tradition. Ammu’s right as a member of her parental house is always questioned by her brother, mother and aunt. She is not even given the opportunity to live an honourable life. Humiliation, torture and suffering bring about her early death. In Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, much has been done to destroy the essential self or identity of the woman protagonist either of Matangini or of Ammu; both women suffer a lot, endure enormous physical and mental tortures; yet they continue their struggle. Matangini and Ammu continue their fight for emancipation, suffer and die early, but their rebellious spirits remain undefeated and unconquered.

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