



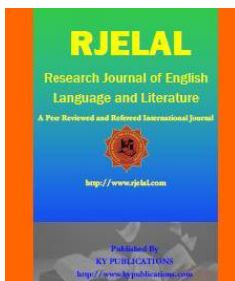
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FROM SUBJUGATION TO EMANCIPATION: THE EMERGENCE OF UNSHACKLED WOMANHOOD IN "RAJMOHAN'S WIFE"

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ABSTRACT

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, has generally been considered as the first Indian novel in English. Makarand Paranjape even goes one step further to consider it as Asia's first English novel. Though the novel is constructed following the track of a romance and adventure story mingled with the elements of mystery and suspense, trysts, feudal intrigues, burglaries, abductions and love confessions, it also impressively delineates the feelings and passions of modern woman through the character of the heroine against the backdrop of an old, feudal, rural setting of Bengal. Thus the protagonist of the novel may be seen as a strong and firm character unhesitant to declare her own passion, but at the end also, she is deprived of the justice she deserves. This article is an attempt to show how far the novelist successfully depicts the heroine as a representative of the unshackled, new woman of modern India.

Keywords: Indian English novel, emancipation, modern woman, subaltern, dilemma

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"Some women are the equals of some men"- *Rajmohan's Wife*, Chapter-5

By general opinion Bankimchandra, is regarded as one of the forerunners of Indian novelists who exhibit their great penetrating powers in exploring human minds while delineating their characters. However, "Babu Bankim Chandra Chatarji"(as he called himself in his essay "Bengali Literature"), unlike most other novelists of his time, was quite successful in proving that his women characters are no less prominent than men and are indeed made of flesh and blood rather than faint and shadowy figures. The way women characters are drawn in his novels show a special insight of the author into women's heart and authorial sympathy towards them. Ayesha, Motibibi, Shaibalini and Rohini- all are

distinct individuals and at times fearlessly confess to their unrequited love. It has been argued that his women characters are "complex and exciting. Unlike his men, the women are flexible, kind or cruel, active, diplomatic, sometimes conniving and speak in a simple and informal language." (S.N. Mukherjee xlv) Thus, Suryamukhi, Kundanandini, Shaibalini, Bhramar, and Rohini- all show, at the same time, forms of eternal womanhood and the particularities of the natural and social lives of Bengali women.

Indeed critics often consider Bankimchandra as the first successful novelist in Bengali literature. However, till 1935, the literary world was unaware of the fact that the first published attempt in novel by Chatterjee was in English. It was in the year 1935 that Brajendranath Banerjee, by chance, found that

an English novel of Chatterjee, *Rajmohan's Wife*, was published serially from 1858 to 1864 in an English weekly, *Indian Field*. Even Banerjee did not find the entire novel published in that weekly and the first three chapters were missing. Thus the first three chapters, as we find today, are but a translation of Bankimchandra's Bengali translation of the missing chapters. With the discovery of the novel *Rajmohan's Wife*, Bankimchandra was at once recognized to be the first Indo-Anglican novelist. The whole novel was published in book form in 1935. From the viewpoints of a critic, the novel may not be considered among the finest novels of the author, but undoubtedly, it betrays novelist's mastery in English as well as a young novelist's awareness about contemporary society, which was so much revealed in his later novels in Bengali.

Thus the novel was not so much important from the perspectives of aesthetics as from literary history. Chronologically, the novel was written at a time which corresponds to the Victorian period in England and occasionally Bankimchandra has in fact followed the style and pattern of Victorian novels. However, unlike most of the Victorian works, he treats his female characters with a unique distinctiveness and vigour. *Rajmohan's Wife* fully exhibits a young Deputy Magistrate's awareness of the plight of women in society. In the novel, Bankimchandra lends to his female characters, especially to his protagonist, such a vigour and determination in action that are rarely found in Victorian novels of that time. Though a reader well-acquainted with the later novels of the author may feel that the skillful mastery in weaving the plot and in delineating the characters is somewhat missing in this novel. However, there is also no way of denying that the novel portrays faithfully a truthful picture of the society within a limited perspective, which enables us to witness a transition from medievalism to modernity, particularly in depicting the struggle of young women in society.

The story of the novel is one of an unsuccessful marriage between Rajmohan and his beautiful wife Matangini along with some intrigues related to the property at the feudal background of nineteenth century Bengal. The protagonist in the novel has got a name Matangini. But in the title she is introduced

as Rajmohan's wife only. In this connection, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that although in the present novel Rajmohan interests us very little as a person, Matangini's identity, as announced in the title, is irrevocably connected to her marital status. (2002, 144) Gradually, the readers are introduced to Rajmohan's wife, Matangini- eighteen years old and charming as well.

"Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the luster 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."
(*Rajmohan's Wife* 2)

For artistic reasons, Rajmohan has been depicted as immoral, unscrupulous and orthodox in attitude towards women with little sense of conscience. It is ironical that a sensitive woman like Matangini is the wife of that Rajmohan. Mathur pronounces the fact unequivocally:

"What luck! That clown Rajmohan to have a wife like this!" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 7)

There is always a difficulty in determining the position of Matangini in the colonial space. How much is she marginalized? Or is she marginalized even from the margins? The novel is in fact a story of revolution, a silent revolt of a young woman of eighteen.

"The eyes were often only half seen under their drooping lids. But when they were raised for a glance, lightning seemed to play in a summer cloud."
(*Rajmohan's Wife* 2)

Not much dialogue has been placed on the lips of Matangini. Her silence is her speech. Matangini's performance lies on her silence. It is the silent revolution of a nineteenth century woman against a feudal conspiracy, against the "domestic violence" that she faces.

In his later novels, Bankimchandra has placed many woman characters as protagonists and Matangini is the first one in this long series of bold women who have secured permanent places on the

minds of the readers for their self assertions in male dominated world. It is to be noted that the year 1858, the probable time of the commencement of the work, is remarkable in the career of Bankimchandra as well as in the history of Bengali literature for various reasons. For the first time, that year saw Bankimchandra as a Deputy Magistrate as well as his acquaintance with Dinabandhu Mitra. Also in the arena of Bengal literary world, two famous works with women protagonists, viz. *Padmini* by Rangalal Bandyopadhyay and *Sharmistha* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt were published on the same year. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bankimchandra has placed a marginalized female at the centre of his first novel. Again in the following year, *Durgeshnandini* was published where again the plot centers around a female character Tilottoma. Thus, Matangini is not at all a disjointed character of that time. Rather to a reader well-acquainted with the literary scenario of Bankimchandra's time, it is not a wondrous fact that Matangini is the most fascinating character in the novel and that "the conflict between the individual and community is very boldly presented through the passions of a woman in flesh and blood and her predicament to accept the value system of her society. Matangini is portrayed as a brave and fearless woman, capable of deep love and wonderful restraint." (Mund 93-94).

The novelist has portrayed Matangini with different colours and shades. Matangini oscillates in her deeds according to her conscience on one hand and in maintaining social norms as a marginalized woman on the other. At first Matangini tells Kanak that her husband has forbidden her to fetch water and she prefers remaining caged in her house rather than facing her husband's wrath. Again she had left the house to fetch water without taking anyone's permission "because", as she retorts, "I thought there was nothing wrong in it." (*Rajmohan's Wife* 9) At her display of boldness, Rajmohan tries to strike her in his beastly fury. At times Matangini uses her silence in confronting the wrath of Rajmohan and his angry outbursts find outlet only through a series of abuses and threats like "I'll kill you." Her confrontation with her husband with composure and resolution and her awareness that she has to face her husband with no way to escape show her to

be judicious and sagacious in nature. In her debates with her ever-oppressive husband, she unmistakably exhibits signs of a modern woman. In this context, the observation of Mund is worth-quoting:

"...she discovers the individual in herself but does not assert it. In her it is the glory of womanhood which decides her behaviour." (95)

The novelist seems to preserve different narratives for Rajmohan's wife and Matangini. From the title, it appears Rajmohan's narrative is the prominent one and it is suggested that his wife is allowed no control over her own body as well as her sexuality. She has to lay down her arms in an unequal battle with Rajmohan:

"Matangini lay in her bed brooding over the sufferings she was doomed forever to bear. Her husband, she knew would not see her that night, as was his wont whenever he was offended with her. She, however, felt all the happier for it, and felt a pleasure too in being left alone to indulge in her reflections... Matangini's chamber was without a light, and total darkness pervaded it,...With her head raised from her pillow and supported on her hand, her 'anchal' thrown off her bosom towards the waist on account of the sultry heat, Matangini gazed on the single ray of moonlight that recalled to her remembrance the days when she could sport beneath the evening beams with the gay and light heart of childhood...The loud laugh was forgotten, the faces which she loved ... she never more could see... her life was a continued misery, and Matangini wept as she thought it could be nothing more." (*Rajmohan's Wife* 20-21)

However, as the plot progresses, Matangini's narrative grows stronger. There are strayed hints that this woman has the potentiality to become another Tilottoma or Mehrunnisa or Kapal Kundala. When, by chance, Matangini comes to know that her husband has joined his hands with a gang of robbers to visit Madhab's household and steal the will, she resolves for the first time to go against her husband, "the man to whom she had pledged her

faith before God and Man" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 26), to hear the call of her conscience.

"Matangini now perceives with despair that her only resource lay in herself. She must go herself. Her whole soul recoiled at the idea. She thought not of the danger, though the danger was great." (*Rajmohan's Wife* 26)

The name 'Matangini' in the novel bears special connotation. From the derivative point of view, 'Matangini' is the name of goddess Kali and when she ventures to step out in the dark night to protect Madhab from the dacoits, she rises to superhuman heights of prowess and goes out to destroy the evil hands. She has now the power of an elephant (another meaning of 'Matangini') that may eventually crush everything which comes to her way in doing justice (*Bangiya Sabdakosh*). Like a delirious river, her immense inner strength is revealed in the language when she knocks the household of Madhab with the hope of informing him well before about the dacoity:

"I am a woman and no thief, come and see," (*Rajmohan's Wife* 29)

Now she frees herself from her socially constructed identity as Rajmohan's wife and establishes her self-image. In fact, that courage of Rajmohan's wife, her defy of social norms, the act of informing Madhab at midnight- all these create trouble in establishing the typical image of a woman in the nineteenth century Bengal. That established social construction further breaks down when, in one of the key scenes of the novel, Matangini reassures her love for Madhab, her former paramour and brother-in-law, in an unequivocal language. Here the novelist presents a scene of confession quite unknown to his time:

"Then, as if under the influence of a maddening agony of soul, she grasped his hands in her own and bending over them her lily face so that Madhab trembled under the thrilling touch of the curls that fringed her spotless brow, she bathed them in a flood of warm and gushing tears." (*Rajmohan's Wife* 37)

Here the language of Matangini is far distant from her time:

"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, Madhab, 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, too part with you for ever without a struggle." (*Rajmohan's Wife* 37)

At this point Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

"Given the rigidity of the power structure within the family among the 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 the society. Matangini's unrequited love for her own sister's husband is presented with authorial sympathy but the abruptness and the ambivalence of the ending may be the result of an anxiety such a woman of energy generated, by posing a threat to the social order and creating a moral dilemma for the author." (vi)

"The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak opines. The narratives of subaltern women are often marginalised or oppressed. However, Matangini clearly spells out her inner self even from a socially marginalised position. Thus, here the novelist's endeavour to lend a voice to a marginalised woman cannot but be appreciated. Mukherjee further seeks our attention to the fact that literary echoes of Radha's *abhisara* in Vaishnava poetry when she braves the elements on the way to her tryst with Krishna is commemorated in Matangini's solitary journey through the woods in a bleak night of thunderstorm and lightning. In fact, in the tradition of Bengali literature, Matangini is only one instance in a long series of women who have betrayed enough courage to make their own voice heard even from a marginalized position in society. Besides Radha in *Srikrishnakirtan*, we find Fullara (in *Chandimangal*), Chandrani (in *Lor Chandrani*) and Manasa (in *Manasamangal*). They even vie with dominant

males in their courage, mental strength and in their defiance of social norms. Thus, unlike the typical Indian woman, some of them, like Matangini, not only refuse to submit themselves to their husbands but also nurture secret love and admiration for men other than their husbands.

In this novel, the more the social orders become rigid; the more the changing of strategy by the protagonist takes place. Matangini cannot be compared to Radha, Fullara or Chandrani in every respect. According to Mund, it cannot be ascertained whether Matangini had received Western education, but the novelist had. Her character, therefore, appears to have been carved out of the image of the women the novelist had formed under the influence of English education. (96-97) Perhaps this leads Bankim to remark, "...the power of woman and her beauty have their influence upon all,...". However, it may also be argued that in forming the character of Matangini, Bankimchandra does not blindly imitate the Western model. Matangini is not outside the gamut of nineteenth century morality or value system. It may be mentioned that it was that time when Indian society was facing the issue of woman's education. Bengali society was raising its voice against Sati custom or child marriage. Widow remarriage act had just become a reality. Mismatched marriages were being criticized. Thus, we find Mathur to comment, "Marriage is called a lottery" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 7). It was against that backdrop that the character of Matangini was carved out. There is no surprise that the protagonist of this novel only anticipates many more women of revolutionary, independent and of somewhat audacious temperaments like Bimala, Ayesha, Rohini and many more. Makarand Paranjape posits an exaggerated analogy. According to him, Matangini "is not just Rajmohan's wife, but the "spirit" or personification of modern India itself. This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India... The defining features of modern India are thus its energy, its adventurousness, its unwillingness to be confined by tradition, and its desire to break free. The restlessness, vitality, charm, and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini.(150)

However, the secret love between Matangini and that of Madhav Ghose does not end up happily. Nor was it possible for the novelist in his social set up, "Matangini could not live under Madhav's roof. This, of course, they both understood" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 88). Thus at the end of the novel, after many turmoil and adventures, Madhav is saved, Mathur hangs himself and Matangini is banished. Now Bankimchandra takes recourse of history. But history does not tell the story of the subaltern or marginalized woman. Thus, "history does not say how her life terminated, but it is known that she died an early death" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 88). The energy of the new India she represents cannot find fruition in this novel for obvious reasons. Here Mund sees Matangini as an authentic portrayal of Indian woman's sense of guilt in indulging in an extra-marital relationship. Paranjape observes:

"Her union with Madhav is impossible, though both personally and ideologically they constitute the basis of the new India that is to come. That is, for Bankim, India's destiny is to be shaped by the new English-educated elite, but somehow this cannot be affected easily. There are insurmountable barriers to this project of refashioning India. Perhaps, the real hitch was the hidden but dominant and all pervasive colonial presence. India's modernization was not smooth, but badly distorted. There is no easy or happy end in sight to Matangini's problems."(154)

This question of morality is much prominent in Bankimchandra's novels. The eighteenth century Indian society was a society dominated by strict codes and social taboos. Stories of Bankimchandra's novels often turn around a conflict between two inevitabilities, observes Sudipto Kaviraj, between two things that are equally necessary truths of human life. "A social world requires definitions, a kind of a basic social map which defines permissions and prohibitions, at the same time, there are elemental drives of human nature which these social constructs are meant to discipline into reasonably safe forms but hardly can. The social and moral worlds in which men actually live are made up of

these two dissimilar and contradictory element---the desire that controls men and the constructs that make society. Much of Bankim's fictional movement arises from this central conflict between the inevitability of moral orders and inevitability of their transgressions." (2) . Sometimes this novel even seems to be an allegory of Bankimchandra's autobiography written in different format. It is, as if, he is in the act of exposing the conspiracy of his atrocious lord, the British against his secret love, his motherland India. His novel is the medium of sabotage within the higher class structure. Thus, Matangini is the mouthpiece of the novelist himself and becomes the symbol of rebel within the social structure.

The symbolic significance of Matangini in this novel may be multifaceted, but it is also undeniable that the way the character of Matangini is portrayed definitely shows the motifs of feminine anguish and revolt. At the core of her character lies a rebel against accepted conventions. At first, she is portrayed as a stereotyped housewife of any Indian village ready to accept the patriarchal codes silently and uncritically. However, as the plot develops, Matangini is transformed, quite in the same vein like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, into a character who is constantly torn between passion, duty and social norms and finally blurts out her doubly forbidden love. However, the novelist cannot reserve for Matangini any happy ending for his faithfulness to reality. Thus, though at first, the novel is narrated from the viewpoint of Matangini, the final conclusion is left to the discretion of the reader. "Matangini's transgressions are thus only partially successful. The dream of creating a new society from the remnants of a decaying older order is thus a failed experiment in this novel. Like Hester Prynne, Matangini will have to wait for an other time and space before she or someone like her can live happily with her chosen mate"(Paranjape 156). A sensitive reader may feel that the novelist is in dilemma about what to do with her fate and that the final course of her life may have been chosen more sympathetically. Perhaps, here the author himself is torn between his progressive educated self and his consciousness about the rigidity of Hindu society. Thus, at the end, he himself fails to

answer the questions raised silently by him in this novel, that is, in the words of Rabindranath Tagore, "why will not a woman be given the right to shape her own destiny?" The question remains unanswered at the end of the novel. Perhaps the answer lies on the novelist's dream of creating a new society free from gender biasness and narrow social constraints.

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