

Text: *Rajmohan's Wife* -- Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay

### Chapter 17: The Vigilance of Love

- The word “**vigilance**” in the title of this chapter refers to a sense of duty associated with the sentiment of love. The idea is that “love” is not just a passion but also carries a certain responsibility towards the object of love. The reference here is to Tara, Mathur Ghose’s first wife and the object of his neglect. In the beginning of the chapter she speaks of the sincerity of her love for Mathur which makes her anxious for him. Clearly there is no reciprocation of her patient love. The institution of marriage itself often binds the woman to her “sacred” duties in which the husband is presented as her “god”, an authority she must necessarily “love”. **This extreme patriarchal injunction converts love into marital obligation.**
- In this chapter, **Tara’s character** is of significance-
  - From being a symbol of patient suffering she evolves into a woman of action. She is of course an **extremely intuitive and observant** woman. The chapter begins with her sharp assessment of her husband’s anxiety. She says- “Deceive the world, but you cannot deceive me.” Furthermore, she makes a point about gender roles which add to the subject of **Space Politics/Gendering of Spaces** in patriarchal society. While Mathur is kept busy by his public life, attending to business, lawsuits, house, garden, servants, etc, as the woman of the house, Tara says “I have nothing to care for, but my husband and my daughter.” Her entire world revolves around her husband and child, but the important question here is, what is the nature of this “world”? It is clearly a circumscribed world of strictly private affairs which does not give the woman an autonomous identity. She becomes an extension of her husband’s identity and everything else derives its legitimacy from the man’s centralizing presence. Interestingly, this limited role in society makes her perceptive towards the smallest of changes in the attitude or temper of her husband.
  - Bankim’s use of words and phrases to describe **Tara as a symbol of angelic purity makes her a stereotypical figure of female sacrifice.** Furthermore, these kinds of gendered terms popular among both Western and Indian literary traditions, particularly of the Victorian period, seek to reduce the woman to a one-dimensional representation of virtue and refuses to see her as a complex flesh and blood human being. Tara’s character construction suffers a similar **reductionism** at this point where she is not allowed to feel common human emotions such as jealousy, anger, frustration or sexual desire. Instead she is presented as the absolute opposite of Champak with an emphasis on “a woman’s sensitiveness” and “a woman’s depth of

- feeling”. Against Champak’s self-obsession, **Tara’s self-effacement** is expressed in her sacrificial attitude- “I would lay down my life to make you happy, but cursed be the hour when I was born!” The other stereotype of the “angel in the house” theory is that of **the unsuspecting, gullible, trusting wife**. She is the epitome of simplicity and her extreme devotion towards her husband makes her blind to the faults in his character. Both Matangini and Tara are cast in this role; Matangini is shocked and reviled by the discovery of Rajmohan’s treachery and Tara “loved her unworthy husband too well to think him the agent in some dark or unhallowed purpose”.
- **Tara coming into knowledge** is an important development, both in the general plot of the novel and in Tara’s character. She is able to watch her husband’s movement from her vantage point on the terrace and learn that he probably has some secret associated with the godown which might be the source of his anxiety and panic. The chapter ends by referring to **Tara’s “resolution”** which suggests a departure from her passive suffering self. She would now move towards action and the thirst for knowledge which is typically a “male” pursuit in Classical, Enlightenment and colonial discourses of power is now the driving force behind her plans. This is weighed against Mathur’s secretive and immoral dealings which carries the taint of deceit and betrayal. In fact, both Rajmohan and Mathur are implicated in this cover-up of the truth and choosing a metaphorical darkness over light. In this, both Matangini and Tara represent the light of knowledge which they arrive at after much struggle and patience.

### Chapter 18: Captors and Captive

- The chapter begins with a **detailed description of the interior of the godown** in which Madhav has been brought as a captive. The **element of realism is touched by the Gothic** in the references to the “gloomy” apartment, the heavy iron bearing down on the spirits of the readers and drawing them into the scene of horror and suspense, the suggestion that the “dim and flickering light” casts the room in the image of a “living grave”. A sense of claustrophobia accompanies the description of this space which serves as a kind of prison room.
- **Madhav Ghose is revealed in his heroic and noble disposition**. Even in the face of desperation he maintains a spirit of resolution instead of surrendering to hopelessness. The dacoit sardar and his assistant Bhiku are presented as Madhav’s opposite; they are the immoral antisocial elements whereas Madhav is distinguished by the knowledge of his own moral superiority. Madhav is also extremely restrained, refusing to react to the dacoits’ taunts. Like the dacoits, he is well-versed in the **strategies of psychological warfare**, choosing to project an expression of silent disdain towards them instead of betraying anger or nervousness. This trick appears to work because his captors start getting irritated by his lack of reaction.

- The subject of **Class distinction between the zamindar and the dacoits** comes to the fore in this chapter again- It seems that Madhav's contempt for the dacoits is also Bankim's contempt for the "vulgar". The writer refers to "that habitual awe and respect which compels even the most reckless among the vulgar to observe a proper distance to those entitled to deference". This line seems to refer to the "natural" show of respect which the inferior classes, particularly those who are not a part of respectable society (*shobbho samaj*), are supposed to feel for the superior classes. The zamindar's "right" or entitlement to that respect is presented as an equally natural expectation. **Vulgarity** is understood here as the attitudes, language, and clothes of the underclass such as dacoits. Although Bankim clarifies that the sardar is no vulgar ruffian, this class-specific definition of vulgarity remains. "Culture" itself becomes a measure of class, where the privilege of being "cultured", reflected in respectable language and "proper" clothes, is usually associated with those at the top of the class pyramid. It also carries the suggestion that the "vulgar" are those who are not civilized or socialized enough and therefore must be treated as inferior to the upper classes. While Bankim is concerned with the social problems of inequality of gender and class at least in his early writings, *Rajmohan's Wife* presents certain instances where this social reformist agenda might be questioned at least. Therefore, in contrast with the vulgarity of the dacoits' "speech" and manners, Madhav stands with a "lofty mien" and "stern deportment". These are symbols of his moral and class authority which he now exercises in his silent treatment of his captors. While the lower classes are usually blamed for intoxicated unruly behavior, the upper class intellectual man is qualified by his sober, rational disposition. In this chapter the smoking of ganja by the dacoits makes this distinction apparent. The dacoits' superstitious nature specific to "people of this class"/ "ignorant people", compared to Madhav's secular worldview and skepticism towards unscientific phenomenon is also presented as a crucial difference between the two parties in their reaction to the deep and hollow groan coming from outside. **However, Mathur Ghose and Rajmohan challenge this class distinction by becoming vulgar in their secret immoral enterprises.** The sardar asks his assistant at one point- "...who else in Radhaganj has an iron-walled dungeon to cage his prisoners in?" This rhetorical question is a significant one for it exposes the hypocrisy of "respectable society" where on the surface the zamindar maintains the illusion of gentlemanliness and a cultured manner, whereas beneath the surface the truth of his bestial and violent urges remain alive. The dungeon represents Mathur Ghose's hidden reality. As a human being he is capable of extreme acts of inhumanity, treating other humans as slaves and prisoners for fulfillment of his own vulgar desires. This critique of the zamindar questions the assumption that only the lower classes are capable of vulgarity. Yet Madhav is not included in this critique. It can therefore be said that it is probably Mathur's lack of a Western liberal education which makes him behave in such "uncivilized" fashion.