CHAPTER 1

Beginnings: Rajmohan's Wife *and the Novel in India*

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Rajmohan's Wife, published in 1864 by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94), is generally regarded as the first Indian novel in English, significant not only because its author was the greatest Bengali novelist of the nineteenth century but also because it speaks to an emergent genre in the literature of colonial modernity. Unlike earlier short fiction in English, such as the futuristic novellas *A Journal of 48 Hours of the Year 1945* (1835) by Kylas Chunder Dutt and *The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century* (1845) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt, *Rajmohan's Wife* has affinities with the domestic and social novel in the vernacular, inaugurated by Peary Chand Mitra's *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (*The Spoilt Son of a Rich Family* [1855–57, Bengali]), and anticipates some of the major developments of the novel as a genre.[1]

Rajmohan's Wife stands at other intersections too: between "original" composition and translation, between realism and romance, between linguistic choices in periodical publication, and between modernity and tradition. Though it may strike us today as a novel without a posterity, it serves as witness to these relations at a critical moment of genre formation and of the construction of the colonial subject, and it offers lessons to later novelists, including Bankim himself. Sadly, the neglect of this work by his critics and biographers is a mark of the discomfort that overcomes literary historians when classifying the relatively minor English-language productions of major Indian writers such as Bankim, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Rabindranath Tagore.

The Colonial Public Sphere and the Politics of Print

The extent to which writing in the modern Indian languages was being transformed by contact with the West was a source of deep cultural anxieties as well as new modes of literary self-representation in the nineteenth century. New vernacular literatures attempted to acclimatize

Enlightenment ideas within native literary idioms, while Western genres had to accommodate the desires, aspirations, and experiences of the native bourgeoisie. Bankim's own writings, decisively shaped by progressive Western thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Auguste Comte, reflect the critical tensions that developed after the Revolt of 1857 between Western liberal thought, repressive government, religious and social reform, and traditionalist reaction and introspection. In literary terms, Bankim's novels show the influence of Shakespeare, Scott, and the Romantic poets as well as the Sanskrit *kavya* tradition. Strongly critical of the hypocrisy of the colonial middle class, he nevertheless felt what Sudipta Kaviraj calls "the peculiar melancholy of living in an alien and intractable history" (Kaviraj, *Unhappy* 161), so that the choice of modernity seems also to be the choice of subjection as its condition. Kaviraj regards this inability to turn away from either side of a divided history as a sign of the Hegelian "unhappy consciousness," expressed in profound estrangement from the system within which Bankim functioned as an educated collaborator (*Unhappy* 168). Bankim's most characteristic mode, therefore, is irony, a rhetorical doubling most evident in the essays he published in *Bangadarshan*, the Bengali journal he founded in 1872.

A member of the colonial bourgeoisie by birth and training, Bankimchandra was an early beneficiary of colonial higher education, when in 1858 he became one of the first two graduates of the newly founded University of Calcutta, and entered the civil service. But he was already widely read in his grandfather's Sanskrit library and was writing poems and essays in Bengali. He began *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1863, near the end of his tenure as deputy magistrate in Khulna, East Bengal. The novel was serialized in 1864 in an English-language weekly, the *Indian Field*, edited by Kishori Chand Mitra (Peary Chand's brother), who had been dismissed from the colonial civil service for his support of the legislative reforms proposed in Sir Barnes Peacock's Bill of 1857, extending the right of jurisdiction over Europeans to native magistrates. C. E. Buckland reports that "while at Khulna, Bankim Chandra began a serial story named 'Rajmohan's wife' in the *Indian Field* newspaper, then edited by Kisori Chand Mitra. This was his first public literary effort" (Buckland 1078).

However, by 1856, Bankim had already won acclaim for his Bengali poetry and prose, published in Ishvarchandra Gupta's journals *Sambad Prabhakar* and *Sambad Sadhuranjan*. In 1863–4, he was also working on what was to be his first published novel in Bengali, *Durgeshnandini* (*The Chieftain's Daughter*, 1865). Early copies of the *Indian Field* have not survived, but as late as March 1872, Bankim was writing to Dr. Sambhu

Chandra Mookerjee, editor of the English-language *Mookerjee's Magazine*:

> For the English Magazine, I can undertake to supply you with novels, tales, sketches and squibs. I can also take up political questions, as you wish. Malicious fortune has made me a sort of jack of all trades and I can turn up any kind of work, from transcendental metaphysics to verse-making. The Novel is to me the most difficult work of all, as it requires a good deal of time and undivided attention to elaborate the conception and to subordinate the incidents and characters to the central idea.[2]

In fact, Bankim contributed a couple of essays, but no novels in English to *Mookerjee's Magazine*. His Bengali novels *Durgeshnandini*, *Kapalkundala* (1866), and *Mrinalini* (1869) had already been published to general acclaim, and although he continued to correspond in English, he urged Sambhu Chandra that "we ought *to disanglicise* ourselves, so to speak, to a certain extent, and to speak to the masses in their own language. I therefore project a Bengali Magazine."[3] That Bengali magazine was the epoch-making *Bangadarshan*, arriving to "ravish the heart of Bengal," as Rabindranath Tagore described it some forty years later (*Jivansmrti* 333). In his foreword to the journal ("Bangadarshaner Patra-Suchana" 245), Bankim argued that "until well-educated, enlightened Bengalis start expressing their own opinions in the Bengali language, there is no hope of progress for the Bengali race."[4] In colonial India, English was the compulsory medium of public discourse, and for those who had received a "modern" – that is, English – education, language was constitutive of social identity:

> No work of any kind is done in the medium of Bengali amongst the modern set. Scholarly discussion is carried on in English. Public affairs, meetings, lectures, addresses, proceedings, are all in English.... If you do not speak in English, the English do not understand you; if the English do not understand you, they grant you no self-respect or dignity; if you have no self-respect or dignity with the English, you have none anywhere. ("Bangadarshaner Patra-Suchana" 245)

Yet, as Bankim knew, "there is not much possibility of social improvement as a result of advice that is not heard or understood by most people of our land" ("Bangadarshaner Patra-Suchana" 245). It was as necessary to address fellow Indians in their mother tongue as it was to speak to Englishmen in English. Bankim's own practice points to a two-way process of linguistic transfer, a traffic in ideas and moral sentiments. If John Stuart Mill is the subject of an essay in *Bangadarshan*, Hindu philosophy could be

the theme of a contribution to *Mookerjee's Magazine*, and translation or adaptation remained the only means of sharing the creative resources of either language.

The politics of print, thus, demanded that the linguistic domains of English and Bengali be crossed and re-crossed by writers anxious to speak both to the rulers and the ruled. Bankim made no public renunciation of English to turn to the riches of his native tongue, as Michael Madhusudan Dutt claimed to have done in a celebrated sonnet (M. Dutt 159 [Sonnet 3]). Nevertheless, he cited Madhusudan as an example when he counseled his younger contemporary, the economic historian and colonial administrator Romesh Chunder Dutt, to use Bengali rather than English for his creative work (cited in A. Bhattacharya 167–8). In a brief skit, "Bangala Sahityer Adar [The Prestige of Bengali Literature]," he contrasted the English-educated but crass Babu with his Bengali-reading wife, who possesses a finer literary taste ("Bangala" 41–3). Eventually, Bankim not only adopted Bengali as his preferred language of creative expression, he also sought to make it a supple and powerful instrument of social commentary. Seen in the context of Lord Lytton's Vernacular Press Act of 1878, which sought to curb the freedom of the native press, Bankim's decision had larger political implications. The fact that *Rajmohan's Wife* remains his only English novel is part of a complex linguistic history made up of many strands and is not simply a mark of literary failure.

Translation and Cultural Transactions

Rajmohan's Wife is a text that carries the task of translation as its burden. On the one hand, it attempts to adapt the rhetorical devices of Sanskrit poetry to events and characters in a contemporary social setting, and on the other, it is driven by the classic concerns of the high bourgeois novel of nineteenth-century Europe: property, sex, and marriage. It is thus closely affiliated with the emergent Indian novel in the modern vernaculars, and if it had achieved a wider readership, it might have set the Indian novel in English on a parallel line of development.

The novel's transmission history is also a history of translation. In the preface to his 1935 edition, Brajendra Nath Banerji reported his discovery of all but the first three issues of the *Indian Field* for 1864 (containing Bankim's novel) bound in with issues of the *Hindoo Patriot* for that year. Since the first three chapters were missing, Brajendra Nath substituted for them "a version as close to Bankim's own as

could be desired," drawing on Bankim's own Bengali translation of the first seven chapters of *Rajmohan's Wife*, incorporated by his nephew Sachishchandra Chattopadhyay into the novel *Vari-Vahini*. Retranslated into English, probably by Brajendra Nath, the three first chapters supplied "the missing beginning of Bankim's English novel" (Banerji xiii).[5] In 1935, this composite text was published in the well-known Calcutta journal the *Modern Review*, appearing in book form from their office the same year.

The semi-translated character of *Rajmohan's Wife* is a reminder that in this early period of writing, and for a public divided by language, translation was a constant, necessary recourse. Two of Bankim's novels, *Kapalkundala* (1866) and *Bishabriksha* (1873), had been translated into English by 1885, but Bankim declared himself dissatisfied with the published versions and attempted his own rendering of *Bishabriksha*.[6] In 1891, near the end of his life, he showed Sureshchandra Samajpati an English version of *Debi Chaudhurani* (1884). The few chapters that survive of this reportedly complete and corrected manuscript are more like purposive adaptations than translations, as Julius Lipner has recently emphasized (Lipner 30–3).[7] Moreover, the unsigned article on "Bengali Literature" that appeared in the *Calcutta Review* of 1871 (No. 104), attributed to Bankim by his editors, contains a long summary and partial translation of *Kapalkundala* (B. Chattopadhyay, "Bengali Literature" 120–3 and 291).

Translation, then, was as constitutive of the literary culture of nineteenth-century India as it is of a "global" postmodernity. Often it seems expressive of a larger anxiety regarding the possibility of adequate representation of the colonial subject. H. A. D. Phillips, in the introduction to his translation of Bankim's *Kapalkundala*, urged Bengali fiction writers to provide an exhaustive list of native cultural practices and domestic objects (Phillips xxviii–xxix). Transactions between languages function as transactions between cultures, constantly importing material from one realm into another. *Rajmohan's Wife* is remarkable in its attempt to render as closely and vividly as possible the nature of women's talk and the colloquial everyday – a point worth noting, considering that Bankim has been criticized for the archaic diction of some of his melodramatic scenes, liberally employing personal pronouns such as "thee," "thou," and "thy." Yet given the difficulty of finding a linguistic equivalent in English for the vernacular "life-world," the general readability of *Rajmohan's Wife* is something of an achievement.

The Novel and Colonial Society

Bankim's novel is set in rural East Bengal, in a small village called Radhaganj on the banks of the Madhumati, one of the principal rivers of the Khulna division (Hunter 233). Most of the characters belong to the upper bourgeoisie, in particular a single Hindu Kayastha extended family "of menial origin," but now possessed of great wealth by the cunning defalcations (from his former master's widow) of its founder, Bangshibadan Ghose. Bangshibadan's sons, Ramkanta, Ramkanai, and Ramgopal, "purchased zemindaris, built fine houses, and assumed the state and style that belonged to their wealth" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 16).[8] Bankim's ironic treatment of this family's rise from humble origins to wealth and status suggests that he may have had a longer social narrative in mind when he began writing the novel. In fact, Bangshibadan's heirs are typical in their uneasy bridging of the traditional–modern, rural–urban, and East–West divides. The eldest son, Ramkanta, a conservative bigot, "had viewed with eyes of jealousy the encroachments that were being made in the ancient manners and usages by the influence of Western civilization and had steadily forborne to send his son to an English school, which he condemned as a thing not only useless but positively mischievous" (16–17). This son is Mathur Ghose, the novel's villain, who had early on learned "the science of chicane, fraud and torture" (17). By contrast, a wasteful and profligate modernity is exhibited in the second son, Ramkanai, who indulges his taste for fine living in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta, surrounded by parasites who draw him into mercantile speculation and bring "his mismanaged and neglected estates to the hammer" (17). Ramkanai's son, Madhav, has obtained "as good an education as he could receive in Calcutta" (17), as well as a beautiful, city-bred bride, Hemangini, the younger sister of Matangini, the novel's fiery heroine. Madhav inherits the property of his childless uncle Ramgopal (the third brother, about whose habits we have no information) and is persuaded by his wife to take her sister's husband Rajmohan into his employment in their ancestral village, Radhaganj.

This web of relations is representative of the native bourgeoisie in the post–Permanent Settlement era, and the opposed figures of Ramkanta and Ramkanai, and their sons Mathur and Madhav, offer alternatives of ideology and *habitus*. Ramkanta's obscurantism and Mathur's villainy are paired, while the profligate, city-loving Ramkanai, representing the class of spendthrift zamindars and dissolute *babus* who became the butt of nineteenth-century Bengali satire, has sired the handsome, educated, and refined Madhav. Satire was a powerful instrument in the making

of the early Bengali novel, from the satirical sketch or *naksha* instanced in Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's *Naba Babu Bilas* (*A Pleasant Tale of the New Babu*, 1825) and Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* (*Sketches by Hutom the Owl*, 1862), to Peary Chand Mitra's moral fable, *Alaler Gharer Dulal*. While much of this satire targets the dissolute, self-indulgent residents of the city of Calcutta, Bankim's own satirical essays in Bengali, as well as "The Confession of a Young Bengal," which he contributed to *Mookerjee's Magazine* in English, criticize both urban fashion and rural obscurantism.[9] But *Rajmohan's Wife* uses a melodramatic plot based on simple black-and-white contrasts. Mathur, prosperous but repellent, hires a gang of dacoits to steal his uncle's will, the key to Madhav's inheritance, and holds both Madhav and Matangini captive in his warehouse. Madhav, "mild and easily yielding by nature" (50), and given to weeping as he broods over his misfortunes (96), is honorable and tender in his relations with Matangini, rallies his household against the dacoits, and exhibits uncommon resolution when he is kidnapped. The lone British official, "a shrewd and restlessly active Irishman" (124), is, unlike parallel figures in Bankim's Bengali novels, the agent of colonial justice; his impending arrival leads the wicked Mathur to kill himself. The scales are thus weighted in favor of English education and the rigor of colonial law. Yet this ideological slant, however influenced by choice of language and audience, is tempered by the novel's pervasive irony and Bankim's imaginative investment in the character of his heroine Matangini.

In her edition of the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests that Bankim completed *Rajmohan's Wife* in a hurry, having lost interest in a limited English-speaking audience and outgrown this act of bad faith (M. Mukherjee, "Afterword" 131). Less persuasively, Makarand Paranjape claims the text as a national allegory in Fredric Jameson's sense:

> All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson, "Third-World" 69)

Building on Jameson's sweeping generalization, Paranjape casts Matangini as the new Indian nation, born out of the opposition between evil obscurantism (Mathur) and Anglicized refinement (Madhav). Whatever the merits of Jameson's characterization of "third-world texts" (critiqued, for example, by Aijaz Ahmad in a celebrated essay [Ahmad, "Jameson's"]), it

is difficult to be convinced by the "culturalist-allegorical" reading of the novel that Paranjape presents. The fact that some characters have a representative function – historically or generically – does not mean that the novel as a whole is allegorical, even in Jameson's somewhat loose sense. Rather, the initial morality-tale structure is left behind as the novel penetrates the domestic interiors of the Hindu middle class on the one hand, and the dark, dacoit-infested hinterland of rural East Bengal on the other. In doing so, it combines realism with romance, everyday life with gothic horror, bourgeois respectability with crime and passion: an uneven blend but one that actually works to resist, rather than confirm, Jameson's categorization. *Rajmohan's Wife*, "Bankim's initial and tentative attempt to write fiction on a Victorian narrative model to which colonial education had exposed a new generation of urban Indians" – as Mukherjee describes it ("Afterword" 129) – is remarkable in its refusal to dissolve history into myth, event into symbol, individual fate into national destiny.

Persons, Objects, and *Habitus*

The novel focuses on the social and domestic *habitus* of persons, answering a need that Bankim correctly saw as central to the realism of the nineteenth-century novel. The techniques of realist description are grounded in the careful detailing of inanimate things: settings, objects, dress, and domestic interiors. It is these that give substance to the imagined lives of human individuals, threatening at times to overwhelm their actions or feelings, or to become their sole index and witness. *Rajmohan's Wife* allows passion and melodrama full room, but Bankim is attentive to his representational project, describing the appearance of individual characters in specific material surroundings and producing a marvelous realist centerpiece, the description of the four sections, or *mahals*, of Mathur Ghose's house in the thirteenth chapter. This lays the ground for Nagendra's three-sectioned (*tin-mahalla*) house in Bankim's later novel *Bishabriksha* (1873), both evidencing a newly aspirational bourgeois ethic.[10] But unlike Nagendra's tastefully appointed residence, Mathur's rural mansion combines an outward lack of care and cleanliness with the primitive accumulation of money and goods in its storehouse:

> The house of Mathur Ghose was a genuine example of mofussil magnificence united with mofussil want of cleanliness.
>
> From the far-off paddy fields you could descry through intervening foliage, its high palisades and blackened walls. On a nearer view might be seen

> pieces of plaster of venerable antiquity prepared to bid farewell to their old and weather-beaten tenement.... Not unfrequently a young shoot of a bur or a less noble vegetable had struck its roots in the crevices between the layers of brick, realizing, rather on an humble scale, the Persian monarch's dream of a hanging garden. (*Rajmohan's Wife* 74)

By contrast, the hero Madhav is seen in a richly furnished setting, filled with signs of a refined bourgeois sensibility that can afford to look away from the evidence of its operations:

> Madhav Ghose was alone. He sat reclining on a mahogany couch covered with satin. A single but well-fed light illumined the chamber. Some two or three English books were scattered over the couch, and one of these Madhav held in his hand but he hardly read it. He sat with his abstracted gaze fixed on the dark but star-besprinkled heavens which were visible through the open windows. (95)

Such details enlist the material world into the service of a notation of manners and sensibility, just as later accounts of the inner, women's quarters of both residences "furnish" that material context with human substance.

This semiotic practice, deriving from the mid-Victorian realist novel, is combined in Bankim's novel with descriptions modeled on classical Indian rhetoric, as in the account of Matangini's beauty (a passage retranslated from Bengali, perhaps embellished by the author). These luxuriant images are reminiscent of those in Sanskrit *kavya* or in medieval Vaishnava love-poetry:

> 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. Her faultlessly drawn arched eyebrows were quivering with bashfulness under a full and wide forehead. 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. (3)

There is nothing quite so metaphorically "wrought" elsewhere in the novel: Matangini, a "perfect flower of beauty," bred in the civilized environs of Calcutta rather than in rustic East Bengal, is a heroine who recalls the love-quests of Krishna's consort Radha and her *gopis*, at the same time as she gestures toward a future that is, for women, still to be born. Both possibilities are implicit in Bankim's description of Matangini's journey to Madhav's house at dead of night, when she conceals herself from detection by immersing herself in a

pool: "apprehensive lest the fair complexion of her lily face betray her, she unloosed the knot of her hair and spread the dark luxuriant tresses on all sides of her head, so that not even the closest scrutiny could now distinguish from above the dark hair floating over the darkened pool" (42). The account of Matangini's midnight excursion is clearly influenced by the *abhisarika* figure of Sanskrit love poetry. Yet she also exhibits a modern resolution and daring, taking extreme risks to warn her sister and frankly confessing her love to Madhav.

As a character, Matangini is the focus of a special project of Bankim's imagination, the liminal woman standing at a remove from orthodox society: threatening, attractive, and ultimately unassimilable. Yet even this idealized and romantic figure is embedded in a carefully detailed social and physical context. Matangini is confined in an unhappy marriage to a brutal husband who beats and threatens to kill her, and her situation is brought out through her initial conversation with Kanak, with whom she is contrasted by an elaborate semiotics of costume. So too Mathur, dark, portly, and unattractive, wears fine clothes of Dacca muslin, a gold chain, an amulet, and studs, as well as rings on each finger; Madhav, handsome but passive, is unostentatiously well-dressed, wearing only a single ring. Both men wear "English shoes." These details, like the account of the garden itself, enter into an elaborate register of material indices signaling social place, individual temperament, and the contrast of country and city. A contemporary parallel to the "directedness" of such object-description may be found in the *naksha* or satirical sketch targeting the *babu* culture of Calcutta and the visual art of the Kalighat *patuas*.[11] Nevertheless, Bankim's adaptation of this technique to domestic fiction in English aligns it with Victorian realism as well as with an older rhetoric of image and desire: "There was a fire in that voluptuous eye, – there was a glow on that moonbeam brow … as she stood leaning with her well-rounded arm on the damask-covered back of the sofa" (55). Both have a place within the new representational project of constructing the life-worlds of the colonial gentry.

Space, Plot, and the Colonial Uncanny

Set "on the banks of the Madhumati" (3), *Rajmohan's Wife* articulates a localized east-west binary, contrasting rural East Bengal with the western metropolis of Calcutta. Lacking the grand geographical sweep of Bankim's historical novels, its spatial trajectory extends from humble domestic

settings to the dacoits' lair on the riverbank, a place of "peculiar and almost frightful solitude" (89). Yet space and plot, we realize, are etymologically related: the carefully described ground plan of Mathur's house alerts us to a narrative *thinking through space*.

Inside and outside have complementary functions: Matangini is first glimpsed in the humble domestic interior of a "mat-walled" (30) hut flanked by kitchen gardens, and Madhav and Mathur chat on the terrace of a substantial brick-built house, while their womenfolk occupy themselves indoors. This apparent security is contrasted with the wilderness outside, through which Matangini journeys to Madhav's house at dead of night, and where the dacoits have their hideout in the impenetrable underwood on the riverbank. Within the frame of bourgeois domesticity, we pass from the outer apartments of Mathur Ghose's house to the women's quarters where his elder wife Tara plaits her daughter's hair, and his younger wife Champak applies lac-dye to her feet. Despite the uneasy tensions between these two claimants for Mathur's attention, it is in these regions governed by women that Matangini finds succor when she escapes from her murderous husband. Tara, who shelters Matangini and rescues Madhav from his dungeon, a "gloomy and low-roofed room, whose sombre and massive walls looked more grim in the dim light" (104), emerges as a type of feminine valor.

The bourgeois respectability of Mathur Ghose's house is contiguous – spatially as well as morally – with the storehouse where he keeps his goods and imprisons not just Madhav but the object of his lust, Matangini. So too, in the rural heart of Bengal, is village domesticity contiguous with outlaw gangs – dacoits who lurk on the forested outskirts and carry out raids on prosperous households. That Matangini is saved from death by the dacoit's sudden entry into her room suggests that the "inside-outside" binary is only nominal. Darkness inhabits both interior and exterior, the wilderness and the human heart. Yet Bankim achieves much rhetorical purchase by his splendid descriptions of Matangini's midnight sojourn: "The knotted trunks of huge trees showed like so many unearthly forms watching her progress in malignant silence.... All the wild tales she had heard of fierce visages and ghostly grins that had appalled to death the belated traveller, rushed to her imagination" (40).

Matangini's superstitious fears are linked to the rich store of country legends about ghosts and dacoits mined by Bankim's contemporary, the humorist Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay (*Bhut*). Yet the villainous *sardar* and his principal aide Bhiku are vividly sketched as they discuss terms with Rajmohan, smoke *ganja* in their hideout, and sardonically dismiss

the folly of the householder. In fact the *sardar*, who eventually escapes punishment, is a more representative specimen of his tribe than the idealized dacoits of *Debi Chaudhurani*. A shrewd and practical criminal, he becomes a fit tool of bourgeois cunning when Mathur employs him to steal that classic Victorian plot device, a will (used again in Bankim's novel *Krishnakanter Will* [1878]).

Rajmohan's Wife thus opposes the structures of bourgeois domesticity and colonial law to the dark regions "without the law," where robbers and specters reign. This latter might be described as the colonial uncanny. For superstitious village folk, the uncanny resides in a world of ghosts and predators prowling the unlit, untilled spaces beyond household and plough land. But while ghosts might be outside the magistrate's purview, dacoits – legendary robbers living by their own savage codes in forest settlements – were certainly subject to the full rigor of colonial law, as William Henry Sleeman's tireless prosecutions in northern India showed. Tales of dacoits and thugs become part of a colonial repertoire of sensational narrative (Sleeman; Taylor). Bankim himself had to deal with the repeated depredations of dacoits in Khulna, and *Rajmohan's Wife* employs the *frisson* of the supernatural as well as the real terror of the dark regions outside the law to produce for its readers an early version of the "uncanny" of colonial India, a parallel to Victorian gothic.

The Lives of Women and the Future of the Novel

The twentieth chapter of *Rajmohan's Wife*, in which Matangini rejects Mathur, is editorially titled "Some Women are the Equals of Some Men." The novel has already given centrality and visibility to the lives of women: Matangini's energy, resolution, and courage are a match for the villainy of Rajmohan and Mathur. Although she frankly declares her love to Madhav in a melodramatic midnight encounter, the novel's conventional morality will not allow their love to be consummated. At the close, there is little Matangini can do but die. Yet she has been the center of the novel's world, both as agent and as victim. Moreover, she is part of a larger company of women, finding assistance and succor among her fellows when she escapes from Rajmohan's murderous attack. Even as Bankim penetrates the inner quarters of the Ghose family, he examines women's lives with unerring precision. Earlier, the relatively minor character Kanak is described as married, according to Kulin custom, to an absent husband with many wives.

The interest Bankim shows in his protagonist Matangini is deeply rooted in the project of constituting the female subject in colonial India (T. Sarkar; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing*). This was more a *male* social and discursive imperative than a task for women themselves. Education, social reform, the age of consent, and companionate marriage were issues of public debate and of legislative endeavor. In literature, these are visible themes through which a certain notion of selfhood, male as well as female, might be constructed. The history of nationalist self-consciousness in India is doubly worked out through the histories of women: *women* as agents and subjects and *woman* as idea and representation. Bankim's novels are remarkable in their representation of relatively free and self-determining women protagonists, even if he was unable to fit them into social space. For him, the feminine was itself a liminal category, an undetermined social and historical site. "Women are the prime movers of the verbs" (Kaviraj, *Unhappy* 18) in his fiction, yet his heroines stand at the boundary of a social world incapable of accommodating them. The importance of the free woman in Bankim's fictional imaginary, signaled by the radical content of his 1875 essay, "Samya [Equality]," is at odds with his deeply conservative social views, as with his acquiescence in the patriarchal social order and in colonial rule.[12] The woman protagonist in *Rajmohan's Wife* signals a dangerous excess that domesticity cannot absorb: she is central but excluded, placed at the heart of the narrative but tragically unfulfilled.

In choosing this figure, and placing her in a complex domestic and social setting, *Rajmohan's Wife* is a novel that speaks to an emergent genre in the Indian vernaculars. Not only is it closely tied by features of plot and character to Bankim's own later fiction, it anticipates some concerns – especially the central importance of women – of the early novel in Bengali, Marathi, and Malayalam. It is not a "false start because the author chose to write in English" (M. Mukherjee, "Afterword" 131) but an indication of the road that the novel would actually take. A local variant of the realist or sensational Victorian novel about property, sex, and marriage might have helped domicile the English *language* itself in India; but Bankim abandoned the project after this single attempt, and *Rajmohan's Wife* does not appear to have attracted many readers. There are few contemporary references to it, and it had no real successors. When the Indian novel in English took off in the early twentieth century through the work of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, it had already been co-opted into a quite different social and nationalist project, better suited to produce Jameson's model of a "national allegory."

Notes

1 For accounts of the development of the Indian novel, see M. Mukherjee, "Epic," and S. Chaudhuri, "Bengali." Contenders for the title of the first Indian novel include *The Revelations of an Orderly* ([1846] 1849) by Panchkouree Khan (evidently a pseudonym), *Phulmani o Karunar Bibaran* (1852, Bengali) by Hannah Catherine Mullens, and *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857, Marathi) by Baba Padmanji.

2 Letter to Sambhu Chandra Mookerjee, March 27, 1872 (*Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 3, 171).

3 Letter to Sambhu Chandra Mookerjee, March 14, 1872 (*Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 3, 170). Emphasis in original.

4 All translations from Bengali are my own unless otherwise indicated.

5 Banerji's preface is printed in Meenakshi Mukherjee's edition (Penguin/Ravi Dayal) of *Rajmohan's Wife*. All in-text citations of the novel are from this edition by page number. For Bankim's Bengali translation of the first seven chapters of *Rajmohan's Wife* (converted to nine in Bengali), see *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 2, 923–41.

6 Bankim reportedly translated *Bishabriksha* under the title *The Bane of Life*. See S. Chattopadhyay, 87.

7 For the surviving chapters of *Debi Chaudhurani* in Bankim's translation, see *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 3, 273–88.

8 A "zemindari" (or zamindari) was the title to land-rents, and the zamindar a landholder. Under the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, also called the Cornwallis Code (1793), zamindars secured permanent tenure of the lands for which they had earlier been merely revenue-collecting intermediaries under the Mughal emperor. This created a new zamindari class, which saw land as a commodity.

9 See *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 3, 137–41 and 292.

10 See S. Chaudhuri, "Phantasmagorias" 183.

11 See K. Sinha, *Satik Hutom*; and K. Sinha, *Sketches*. For the art of the Kalighat *patuas*, see J. Jain, *Kalighat*.

12 Bankim's essay "Samya [Equality]," published in *Bangadarshan* in 1875, was inspired by John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) (*Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. 2, 328–51).

The Novel and Colonial Society

Bankim's novel is set in rural East Bengal, in a small village called Radhaganj on the banks of the Madhumati, one of the principal rivers of the Khulna division (Hunter 233). Most of the characters belong to the upper bourgeoisie, in particular a single Hindu Kayastha extended family "of menial origin," but now possessed of great wealth by the cunning defalcations (from his former master's widow) of its founder, Bangshibadan Ghose. Bangshibadan's sons, Ramkanta, Ramkanai, and Ramgopal, "purchased zemindaris, built fine houses, and assumed the state and style that belonged to their wealth" (*Rajmohan's Wife* 16).[8] Bankim's ironic treatment of this family's rise from humble origins to wealth and status suggests that he may have had a longer social narrative in mind when he began writing the novel. In fact, Bangshibadan's heirs are typical in their uneasy bridging of the traditional–modern, rural–urban, and East–West divides. The eldest son, Ramkanta, a conservative bigot, "had viewed with eyes of jealousy the encroachments that were being made in the ancient manners and usages by the influence of Western civilization and had steadily forborne to send his son to an English school, which he condemned as a thing not only useless but positively mischievous" (16–17). This son is Mathur Ghose, the novel's villain, who had early on learned "the science of chicane, fraud and torture" (17). By contrast, a wasteful and profligate modernity is exhibited in the second son, Ramkanai, who indulges his taste for fine living in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta, surrounded by parasites who draw him into mercantile speculation and bring "his mismanaged and neglected estates to the hammer" (17). Ramkanai's son, Madhav, has obtained "as good an education as he could receive in Calcutta" (17), as well as a beautiful, city-bred bride, Hemangini, the younger sister of Matangini, the novel's fiery heroine. Madhav inherits the property of his childless uncle Ramgopal (the third brother, about whose habits we have no information) and is persuaded by his wife to take her sister's husband Rajmohan into his employment in their ancestral village, Radhaganj.

This web of relations is representative of the native bourgeoisie in the post–Permanent Settlement era, and the opposed figures of Ramkanta and Ramkanai, and their sons Mathur and Madhav, offer alternatives of ideology and *habitus*. Ramkanta's obscurantism and Mathur's villainy are paired, while the profligate, city-loving Ramkanai, representing the class of spendthrift zamindars and dissolute *babus* who became the butt of nineteenth-century Bengali satire, has sired the handsome, educated, and refined Madhav. Satire was a powerful instrument in the making

pool: "apprehensive lest the fair complexion of her lily face betray her, she unloosed the knot of her hair and spread the dark luxuriant tresses on all sides of her head, so that not even the closest scrutiny could now distinguish from above the dark hair floating over the darkened pool" (42). The account of Matangini's midnight excursion is clearly influenced by the *abhisarika* figure of Sanskrit love poetry. Yet she also exhibits a modern resolution and daring, taking extreme risks to warn her sister and frankly confessing her love to Madhav.

As a character, Matangini is the focus of a special project of Bankim's imagination, the liminal woman standing at a remove from orthodox society: threatening, attractive, and ultimately unassimilable. Yet even this idealized and romantic figure is embedded in a carefully detailed social and physical context. Matangini is confined in an unhappy marriage to a brutal husband who beats and threatens to kill her, and her situation is brought out through her initial conversation with Kanak, with whom she is contrasted by an elaborate semiotics of costume. So too Mathur, dark, portly, and unattractive, wears fine clothes of Dacca muslin, a gold chain, an amulet, and studs, as well as rings on each finger; Madhav, handsome but passive, is unostentatiously well-dressed, wearing only a single ring. Both men wear "English shoes." These details, like the account of the garden itself, enter into an elaborate register of material indices signaling social place, individual temperament, and the contrast of country and city. A contemporary parallel to the "directedness" of such object-description may be found in the *naksha* or satirical sketch targeting the *babu* culture of Calcutta and the visual art of the Kalighat *patuas*.[11] Nevertheless, Bankim's adaptation of this technique to domestic fiction in English aligns it with Victorian realism as well as with an older rhetoric of image and desire: "There was a fire in that voluptuous eye, – there was a glow on that moonbeam brow … as she stood leaning with her well-rounded arm on the damask-covered back of the sofa" (55). Both have a place within the new representational project of constructing the life-worlds of the colonial gentry.

Space, Plot, and the Colonial Uncanny

Set "on the banks of the Madhumati" (3), *Rajmohan's Wife* articulates a localized east-west binary, contrasting rural East Bengal with the western metropolis of Calcutta. Lacking the grand geographical sweep of Bankim's historical novels, its spatial trajectory extends from humble domestic