

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

### Chapter 15: Consultations and Council

- This chapter begins with a description of **the dacoits' habitation**. In continuation with the theme of **Space Politics**, this zone can be understood as being neither a part of the "public" nor properly constitutive of the "private". The dacoits themselves inhabit a marginal position with relation to society. They are the "antisocial" elements, subjects who do not belong to respectable society and are not defined by the institutions of law and order binding that social structure. As "liminal" characters, they come to inhabit liminal spaces. **Liminality** is theoretically defined in anthropology as the temporary status of individuals who are undergoing a ritual change in their social life and are at the moment neither bound by their pre-ritual condition, nor entirely formed by the completion of the ritual. In that sense, the "profession" of dacoity imagined as a violent rite of passage could mean that the dacoits themselves are possibly looking for a return to mainstream society of which they had previously been a part, but with an elevation in their socioeconomic statuses. More generally, the liminal position must be understood as a boundary zone, a threshold status where the individual is suspended between two properly defined spaces. It is like a twilight zone where this individual is neither here nor there, becoming a shadowy character most commonly defined as marginal, peripheral, disoriented, ambiguous, insignificant, invisible, vague, insensible. All such synonyms suggest a negative identification where a person becomes an "absence"- someone you can see but who is like society's "waste", hidden and impure. The dacoits are also society's "rejects" in a sense because they disrupt the sacred behavioural categories and practises by which "normal" social life is ordered. Therefore Bankim uses imageries of Nature to carve out a space for the dacoits' habitation which is located outside respectable society and captures the spirit of liminality both physically and metaphorically:
  - The wild and lovely shores of the Madhumati River are said to be covered by "a tall rank grass almost impervious to human feet". It is further defined as a spot of "peculiar and almost frightful solitude", suggesting the absence of society and the busyness of village communal life. The grass, the cane bushes and the other underwood make it nearly impossible for humans to traverse this area, thereby presenting the dacoits with the perfect spot for their secret habitation. Typical of all "danger zones" characterizing the dark and unexplored boundaries of any society, this area too is dangerous because of thick impenetrable vegetation and the venomous reptiles which take refuge in its darkness. Like the reptiles, the dacoits find their "home" in this domain which is part of the wilderness and

therefore not entirely defined by the private-public spatial binary. Psychologically, this dark zone is also **society's unconscious**- that which society marks as alien and strange to itself and is in denial of, is often deeply attached to society; as the social history of dacoity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal reveals, many respectable members of society, including zamindars, members of the law courts and the local police were often part of such plans or enlisted the services of dacoits for their own interests.

- The “little hovel of straw which stood in the very heart of the jungle” is where the dacoits live. This habitation is quite unlike the general architecture of village huts; the purpose is to camouflage its existence by making the roof of the hovel appear like the top of a slightly elevated bush. Therefore the hut is both a human construction as well as a continuation of Nature. There is **a sense of temporariness** to this place suggestive of the dacoits' need to keep demolishing one “home” in the event of being detected by others, and moving on to another. It becomes an aspect of liminality where the ideas of “home” and “habitation” are ironically defined by their extreme fragility and transitoriness.
- Bankim describes the interior of the hovel as gloomy and damp, the walls made of bamboo and *darma*, with blackened pots and cooking utensils lying mostly unused in a corner. This space carries the illusion of the “private”, with symbols of domesticity cast around. However the very profession of its inhabitants and the lack of regular use to which the hovel is put suggests otherwise. This “habitation” is more like a secret meeting place and a hide-out where the dacoits assemble to chart out future plans of action or to get some rest before and after a dacoity. **If dacoity is a profession- even as an antisocial one- then this space blurs the boundary between the private and public, bringing the world of business into the space of domesticity.** Alternately, by looting people's homes the dacoits also enact a violent invasion of the sacred “private” space by the “public”. Furthermore, the presence of the men in the hovel as the “only inhabitants” strengthens **a 19<sup>th</sup> century deeply patriarchal belief that any habitation which is untouched by the “feminine” is incomplete and cannot really qualify to the status of “home” and “domesticity”.** Crucially enough, Bankim presents the dacoits as symbols of hypermasculinity unsupported by a necessarily opposed female gentleness. The absence of balance of the male and female contained within the “home” as microcosm of the larger society is what makes the dacoits dangerous and disruptive as antisocial presences. Their lack of “home” and a domestic life makes them suspicious figures and adds to their marginality. In fact, there is nothing in Bankim's description of the dacoits' physicality or of their surroundings which suggests a softening element- these men “of a stature and muscular formation that promised vast strength”, with their nearly naked bodies, the latties and swords lying scattered near them, and the “noxious fume of ganja” being smoked. This definition follows closely popular constructions of criminality where the smoking of ganja is seen as a mark of debauchery and immorality.
- **Rajmohan's entry into the liminal space of society's “rejects” complicates the sharp divisions existing between respectable society and the jungle home of the dacoits.** Once again, this proves his complicity in the dacoity plans and eliminates any pretensions to moral righteousness which Rajmohan might have.

Furthermore, the exchange between him and the sardar where the latter suggests that both Rajmohan and his wife start living with the dacoits exposes his snobbery and hypocrisy. The exchange also reveals the fact that the dacoits have families that they have left behind in the village in pursuit of dacoity:

“Pack up, take your beautiful wife with you, and come and live with us at Mitguntie.

And lead the life of a robber?

Yes. Are you not one?

Perhaps, but it is impossible for me to be one by reputation.”

## Chapter 16: What Befell Our Hero

- By casting **Madhav in the role of the “hero”**, this chapter raises an important question for feminist readings of the text- Who is a hero? What qualifies an individual as a hero, and is “hero” a gendered term? Historically, the hero has always been a man, usually of noble birth, who proves his gallantry and masculine power by overcoming extremely difficult hurdles, both natural and manmade, and is either rewarded at the end with a happy prosperous life or dies a martyr’s death on the battlefield. In both Classical and Medieval European literature, the “hero” signifies an exclusive category from which men of common birth, women and slaves have been excluded. While Modernity evolved a different conception of “heroism” by foregrounding the common man as the potential hero, Bankim is obviously influenced by his own time and by an earlier classical period. **The central question here is- does Madhav really deserve the title of “hero” in this novel?**
  - **He is certainly a noble character**, not so much by birth as by nature, steadfast in his principles and in possession of great integrity. In that, he is the opposite of both Mathur and Rajmohan. This aspect of his character is capable of heroism in the face of “the unprincipled agency employed by cunning and clever antagonists”. Madhav’s heroism is secured by the fact that he will never stoop to the level of unethical cunning as is the weapon of Mathur and Rajmohan. Previously it has been seen that Madhav’s liberal education has made him more aware of gender inequality in society and therefore, the need to respect women. This too qualifies as a heroic trait in a man insofar as it lends a certain depth to his character. The fact that he reads attests to his civilized status as against the brutish Rajmohan and the culturally impoverished Mathur.
  - However, there is also **the problem of Madhav’s cowardice** in the matter of his love for Matangini, as seen before in their encounter at his house in the middle of the night. His strictness and paternalistic attitude towards Matangini during her passionate outburst makes him **a conformist** who is afraid to give in to his own natural feelings. The further question here is regarding the traditional hero’s relationship with his society- does he become heroic for challenging those societal norms which seek to constrict him, or is he a hero because he protects society

against acts of transgressions? In that second sense, Matangini's heroism is in direct opposition to Madhav's heroism, and this conflict too is ultimately resolved by subjecting Matangini to an early unheroic death. Therefore the question of Madhav's heroism needs to be studied alongside the progression of the events in the novel and that makes it necessary to return to this question towards the end.

- Madhav reflects on Matangini's sudden disappearance- "Certain he was, so well did he know her character, that whatever might have been her misfortune, she had not been guilty of a dishonourable desertion of her household". Once again, the subject of Matangini's honour, tied to her marital status and its responsibilities, appears in Madhav's thoughts. **His extreme confidence in his own "readability" of Matangini's nature is quite problematic because it suggests a certain reductive attitude towards one's object of love** ("reductive" understood as the act of reducing a complex individual, society, reality to certain easy ideas which make those individuals or societies more manageable). Clearly this explains Madhav's earlier discomfort with Matangini's instinctive, passionate persona during their meeting in his chamber. He seems to have formed a mental image of Matangini in his imagination, much of which is one-dimensional and does not do justice to her complexity as a human being. Furthermore, defining her in terms of her relationship to Rajmohan plays into the patriarchal discourses around a woman's identity being based on her statuses as someone's mother, daughter, sister or wife. Madhav seems to believe that a married woman in particular gains honour by proving her loyalty towards the household of which she becomes an inseparable part after marriage. This reductionism is doubly problematic because not only does it fail to recognize the woman as an autonomous individual with feelings and desires, but it also dehumanizes her by making her an extension of her marital home.
- Alternately, in the privacy of his chamber, Madhav now recalls "the deep and tender feeling which he had stifled in his breast at such cost". This is **clear admission of the fact that during his encounter with Matangini he was putting on an act to suppress his real emotions and in the process, he ended up projecting his own frustrations on Matangini by shaming her**. This makes Madhav a coward in comparison with Matangini. The musing and weeping that he indulges in now does not portray him as weak or make a mockery of his masculinity. Instead, had he expressed as much emotional truth as he does now, he might have qualified as more of a hero who is unafraid to show the tenderness of his feelings. He is able to "lose himself" in a "melancholy reverie" because he is alone in his room, unobserved and unjudged by society. This room offers him a safe space for catharsis, to lose himself in his irrational emotions before he can return to the public world and to his family as the rational reserved law-abiding patriarch.