

CHAPTER TWO

DISCOURSE OF DESIRE AND

DOMESTICITY:

RAJMOHAN'S WIFE

We needed a language which should combine the strength, dignity or soft beauty of Sanskrit with the nerve and vigour of the vernacular....Bankim Chandra divined our need and was inspired to meet it....

- Sri Aurobindo

The Indian novel is thus a hybrid product, the offshoot of a conscious experimentation. The Indian novelist has striven to adapt a Western art form to Indian modes of story-telling and to a certain extent to bring the English language closer to the idiom of the soil. Though the form is alien, the content is Indian revealing the Indian sensibility and Indian social and political situations. If the novel is essentially a western concept, how far have our novelists developed it as an art? How far have they succeeded in character portrayal, realism and plot construction?

-T.Prabhakar

To create an identity is part of the essential business of an artist; to arrive at, or even to contribute towards a declaration of literary nationality, is not necessarily relevant to his concerns and may even infringe on the honesty of those concerns. A sense of nationality can grow out of the discovery of identity and it is important that this should happen frequently, if one is to establish a tradition that is both distinctive and deeply rooted. But while identities may cohere into a nationality, that emerging myth or image should not be used as a frame within which the artist is obliged to discover himself, or by which the value of his discovery is to be judged.

-Rajan Balchandran

Rajmohan's Wife (1864) by Bankimchandra Chatterjee has been acclaimed by many as the first Indian novel in English with realistic representation as its motive force. Before Bankimchandra began writing his first English Novel, there was a long poetic tradition in India, romance being the acceptable mode of narration. As an emerging Indian writer, Bankimchandra gave a breakthrough to the long existing narrative tradition practised through Sanskrit kavya-literature. He was not, however, completely immune to the indigenous

traditions of story-telling. Nevertheless, he has been regarded as the first Indian writer in English to create a new “form” aided by western influence. There was no precedent as yet for a scientific rendering of domestic life in fiction. Thus, *Rajmohan's Wife* is very closely realistic in its representation of East Bengal middle-class life. This chapter investigates Bankimchandra's portrayal of Matangini as “new woman power” in the nineteenth century that drew the attention of critics and readers. An attempt has also been made to draw out a new nation, a new woman and a new way of writing that informs and saturates this first novelistic venture in India.

First Indian Novel in English

Meenakshi Mukherjee, one of the influential writers on early Indian fiction, writes that the novel as a genre was in its infancy in India by the time Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialized in a small circulation short-lived periodical entitled *Indian Field* in the year 1864. It would be in order to unfold the exciting historical development of *Rajmohan's Wife*. Bankimchandra wrote this novel in the year 1863, when he was only 26 years old. It was first serialized in *Indian Field* in the year 1864 edited by Kishori Chand Mitra, who was Bankimchandra's contemporary and who, like Bankimchandra, had been in the Bengal Civil Service. For reasons not known, Kishori Chand lost his job in 1858, and the files of *Indian Field* were almost lost. For about a century, the existence of a complete English novel by

Bankimchandra Chatterjee was almost forgotten. Bankimchandra's biographer and nephew, Mr. Sachis Chandra Chatterjee stated that Bankimchandra did not finish his first English novel. A person named Brajendra Nath Banerji, the editor of 1935 edition of *Rajmohan's Wife*, happened to go through the files of the famous Anglo-Bengali paper *Hindu Patriot* for 1864 and stumbled upon the issues of the *Indian Field* which were found quite serendipitously to be bound with volumes of *Hindu Patriot*.

The first Indian novel in English thus saw the light of day due to a binder's mistake. Few mistakes in intellectual history have had such momentous outcomes. When Brajendra Nath discovered the files of the long-defunct weekly periodical, *Indian Field*, containing the publication of *Rajmohan's Wife* as a serial, he found that the first three chapters of Bankimchandra's original English work were missing. Brojendra Nath restored the missing chapters by an ingenious method. He translated the first three chapters from the Bengali version of Bankimchandra that later made of his first novel. This was called *Vari-Vahini* and this again was left unfinished after writing the first seven chapters of the English original. The fragment of Bengali rendering of Bankimchandra's English original was completed by his nephew Mr. Sachis Chandra Chatterjee. The reconstructed whole of Bankimchandra's first novel was given second birth in *The Modern Review* (1935) edited by Ramananda Chatterjee with a preface by Brojendra Nath Benerjee. It appeared in book form in the same year and was subsequently included in the collected works of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Bankim Rachanabali* edited by Jogesh

Chandra Bagal and published by the Bangiya Sahitya Sansad in 1969. Thus, “Bengal’s first great novelist, like Bengal’s first great modern poet”, as Brajendranath declares in his preface, “made his debut in the field of literature in the English language” (1935, 535).

The Indian poetic tradition, before Bankimchandra began his literary career, was rich in the description of nature. In the treatment of subject, romance was the acceptable mode of narration. The subject matter of pre-novel narrative is derived from scriptures, fables and fair tales. The consciousness of time and space was absent in the traditional narrative. As Mukherjee maintains “the pre-novel tales have a ‘once-upon-a time’ ambience where the tensions of time past and time present are absent” (1995, 5). But novels, on the other hand, treat the subject matter “on spatial and temporal axes, employing realism as one of the viable modes of viewing this concrete human reality” (1995, 5). Prior to *Rajmohan’s Wife*, there was hardly any narrative constructing a plot out of contemporary social life. However, *Rajmohan’s Wife* is very nearly a realistic representation of East Bengal low life. The dynamism of the story lies in the depiction of Matangini as a new woman, who cannot just restrict herself to the social taboos. The beautiful and confident Matangini is portrayed in minute details. *Rajmohan’s Wife* is the first of Bankimchandra’s series of novels, which initiates the description of interiors and the quotidian routine of women’s lives. The narrative goes even beyond realism in the evocative use of nature. In the secret journey of Matangini in chapter-VII, for example, the

novelist employs the descriptive conventions of vaishnava love poetry, where landscape and nature are used as narrative motifs.

Sisir Kumar Das, an astute critic of Bankimchandra, observes that one of the important components of Bankimchandra's fictional world that keeps us spell-bound is "an openness of atmosphere where human passion has a free play. The fields and the mountains, the rivers and the sea, the forest and the sky, the dark nights and raging storms –nature with all its turbulence, majesty and mystery are integral parts of this world..."(445). Bankimchandra used physical features for external projections of the inner geography of his fictional world, marked by plenitude and spaciousness of his imagination.

There are reasons to see *Rajmohan's Wife* as, what Sudipto Kaviraj calls, Bankimchandra's "imaginary history" (131). Kaviraj asserts that "An imaginary community can only have an imaginary history" (131). The actual history of Hindus and Indians could never capture a history of united action. The Hindus or Indians can be reorganized in a fictional history only, taking men of the future and putting them in the events of the past. He goes on to suggest that historical discourse could only be achieved by a discourse of truth, or poetry of the imagination, not by a discourse of facts.

Bankimchandra as a pioneering writer adapted himself to the European way of story-telling, which has been manifested in India's first novel with realism as its narrative technique. *Rajmohan's Wife* has all the features that qualify it to gain the first Indian English novel status designed to present an imaginative history of India. But there are critics who go contrary to this view

in favour of other narrative forms. It would be appropriate to cite here the tentative claim made by Subhendu Kumar Mund in favour of Ponchkouree Khan's *The Revelations of an Orderly*(1849), possibly first published in *Benares Recorder* in 1846 and later reprinted in London by James Madden in 1849, as being the first Indian English novel (9). Contrary to this claim, Makarand Paranjape argues that *The Revelations of an Orderly* cannot rightfully be judged as a novel as it lacks all the narrative magnetism and imaginative aesthetics of a novel. He maintains that:

By no stretch of imagination can this be called a novel. This text is, moreover, not widely available. It has not, therefore, even partially robbed *Rajmohan's Wife* of the glamour attached to initiatory texts. By setting itself up as a sort of originary exemplar of a certain cultural encounter, the novel seems to promise much.

(146)

This optimistic view of Paranjape on the plot structure of *Rajmohan's Wife* is almost identical with that of Mukherjee. She too sees the text as “a potent site for discussing crucial issues about language, culture, colonization and representation” (2000, 48). But *Rajmohan's Wife* as a first Indian novel in English has a lot to deliver that can be classified into three broad categories namely a new nation, a new woman and a new way of writing. These potential issues cited above will be taken up in detail separately, but for the logical convenience, it would be proper to air the complimentary and contradictory views expressed by different commentators. It may be interesting to begin with

one of the celebrated and younger contemporary writers of Bankimchandra, namely Sri Aurobindo, who published seven commemorative pieces in a Bombay based journal entitled *Induprakash* (1894) in the same year as Bankimchandra died. In one of the essays he casually mentioned *Rajmohan's Wife* but only to prove his favourite thesis: "To be original in an acquired language is hardly feasible" (ctd. in Mukherjee 2000, 34). But it is noticed that Ghose himself was a prolific writer and he only wrote in English. According to Sri Aurobindo, the enterprise of writing in English for an Indian has "something unnatural and spurious about it - like speaking with a stone in the mouth or walking with stilts" (ctd. in Mukherjee 2000, 34). In another essay entitled "Our Hope in the Future", Sri Aurobindo argued that what Bankimchandra was trying to create was nothing short of "a language, a literature and a nation" (102). However, in a later essay "Rishi Bankim Chandra", Sri Aurobindo asserted that Bankimchandra in his later works "will rank among the Makers of Modern India" (4). In the same essay he claimed that Bankimchandra was "a master of beautiful language and a creator of fair and gracious dream-figures in the world of imagination" (4). Within the framework of creation, Bankimchandra also tried to communicate his reformist agenda with the outer world. Traditionally, in Hindu society, a woman was restricted from participating beyond the family norms. But Bankimchandra's heroines, such as Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini*, Rohini in *Krishnakanter Will*, Saibalini in *Chandrashekhar* and notably Matangini in *Rajmohan's Wife* represent strong and transgressive women, who desire to communicate and

participate in social activities, crossing the limitations of conventional society. As Sharon Pillai holds, the “desire to communicate is also the urge to create”(45). This becomes true in case of Bankimchandra’s beginning as a novelist in English, then turning to Bengali, making his stand clear that he can bring a synthesis in communicating the home and the world.

The Early Novelizing Mission

The emergence of novel in India is not an isolated process. A lot of factors have gone into making of this new form. The form of this genre in the early stage of its germination, say, in the middle of nineteenth century, was not the same as we experience in the contemporary world. The post-colonial and post-modern novels have been able to maintain the authoritative positions at par with or better than European novels. Indian novels, both in English and in Indian languages, are quite capable of addressing its indigenous ethos. Many a discourses, pertaining to its culture, politics, gender and nationalistic issue have made the genre as, what Sharon Pillai has called, “a ‘finished’ cultural artefact” (31). But in the early stage of its development, it has gone through a constant mutation to acquire a definite form. As Pillai maintains, “it was a mongrel breed in a specific sense. It was a spawn of cultural miscegenation. British colonial expediencies and literary influences acted as both the distant sire and immediate midwife that birthed it into hegemonic life in the literary landscape

of India” (31). This is not to suggest that the novel in India is all that a western import. It is, in fact, a hybridization of European form and indigenous culture.

There are reasons for the appearance of this new form in India. As Pillai observes, the immediate reason is that the colonial administrators, posted far away from home, were lacking in proper recreation in India. There were very few avenues available in India, which would engage the leisure hour of officials in a healthy and pleasant way. There was apprehension that the colonial officials might be lost in the low grade society like India. Pillai maintains that “the spectre of their officers lapsing into cultural barbarity and degradation was a very real worry for the colonial government” (32). However, there was an urgent need for the officers to remain upto date with the latest at home. With the advent of steamship, as a result, “the western novels, both in its canonical as well as popular *avatar*, was part and parcel of the liberal shipments of ‘civilization’ from the metropole, assiduously affloaded on colonial shores” (Pillai 31). The minimum time that it took a steamer to reach the colony from metropole was six weeks. Thus, the colonial government expended a lot of money, time and effort to import books and save its colonial officials from cultural and social degeneracy. Priya Joshi in her detailed study records on the import of books and the amount of money spent for the English education in India (Mukherjee 2000, 4).

Thus, novels from England came to India in a large numbers, keeping in view two missions: to provide healthy entertainment for the colonial administrators and to educate the Indians with “the diffusion of the improved

arts, sciences, philosophy and literatures of Europe” (Mukherjee 2000, 4). The second reason for the dispatch of books, as Pillai sees, “was its implication in the pedagogical undertaking as an ingenious, secular ‘mask of conquest’ to further entrench and perpetuate colonial paramountcy” (32). Two acts in particular are very important to further strengthen English education in India: the first, Charter Act of 1813, and, the second, English Education Act of 1835, which followed Macaulay’s intended, imposing “Minute” of the same year. In consequence of these enactments, it became mandatory for the officials to look to the education of natives. As Gouri Viswanathan comments, “the more far-reaching significance of the Charter Act lay in the commitment enjoyed upon England to undertake the education of the native subject, a responsibility which it did not officially bear even towards its own people[!]” (23).

As a part of mission for the empire and reformation of the colony, a lot of renovative activities were undertaken on multiplicity of fronts. Places like Fort William College and the College at Fort St. George in Madras became the institutional centres especially set up for the training of officials. Printing presses and massive translation activities were engaged to translate native classical texts into English. Prose was the favoured medium of expression. Poetry was discouraged and novel became increasingly popular during nineteenth century.

In the second half of nineteenth century, novels were written in India as much as in vernaculars as in English. As regards to the form, the early novels in India appeared as a complex structure of multi-cultural determinants that

followed what Mukherjee calls, a “tangled process” (2002, viii). On the question of “popular heritage” of the novel, she continues that “the process was diverse and heterogeneous even within the country, depending on the specific historical variables, cultural geography and narrative genealogy of each linguistic region” (2002, viii). Since novel in India was a new genre, and they represented different linguistic zones, “variables”, “diversity” and “heterogeneity” are no way irrelevant and insignificant. At this point Pillai justifies that in spite of novel’s linguistic differences, there happens to be a lot of similarities in regard to their theme and narratorial discourses that “argue for the viability of a pan-Indian reading of the novel” (36). Nonetheless, linguistic variables is not the only factor in case of building a national literature. As Aijaz Ahmad argues “the ‘national’ literature of India finds its principle of unity not in linguistic uniformity but in civilizational moorings and cultural ethos ...” (255-256). It is also noticed that the early language novels and the novels in English focused on the common factors, such as “puranic heritage, hierarchical social structure, colonial education, disjunction of agrarian life and many others that affect the form of a novel as well as its content” (Mukherjee 1985, viii). Despite the regional variations, the novel acquired a basic pattern that qualified itself to attain the national status. The features common to most of the novels written during second half of nineteenth century are mostly about rise of women, colonial government, formation of new nation and many other issues relating to society, culture, history and religion that formed a complex structure of heterogeneous desires. Thus, Pillai’s exhaustive research finds the

novel perform “a variety of roles, answer a variety of calls, accommodate a variety of needs and serve as a means of rich and variegated wish-fulfilment” (37).

Towards the mid nineteenth century, novels flourished in India, both in mother tongue and in English, aiming to present detailed account of native life. Mainly two pertinent factors governed the realistic writing in India. The novelists’ experimentation and experience of the British Victorian model enriched their knowledge and understanding and it paved the way to achieve a positive desire. The other pertinent factor is the desire for objective understanding of the world. These two kinds of desires, as Pillai explains, “pushed the novel – a prose narrative of some length and generic facility for realist representation – towards adopting the artifice of history, even as the domains of fact and fiction, reason and imagination continued to be sharply polarized in official and ‘informed’ discourse” (43). The western science and philosophy with its objective reality – experimentation, observation, analysis – played a significant role in moulding the Indian narrative from the imaginary fantastic style to the objective presentation of things in a matter of fact way. The observation of T.W. Clark holds that “it became more virtuous to write a school textbook on geography or hygiene than to produce a work of the imagination ...” (77). Within the framework of realism the Indian novel is very often found to be didactic in its representation of “diverse modes of literary authentication, such as historiography, biography, journalistic reportage, essay – and travel-writings and the first person narrative” (Pillai 43).

The diverse modes of representation notwithstanding, the emphasis on detailing was very common among them all. The traces of new way of writing is evidently located in early Indian novels, such as O'Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1888), *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) by Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1897) by Fakir Mohan Senapati and many other language novels adapting "realism" as a mode of representation.

The colonial government also announced various contests and fabulous prizes, for Indian language narratives and Indian novels in English, documenting "native" lives. The examples of these are found in Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* (1874), which privileges "real" over "fantastic" as mode of representation. C. Vijayasree also informs that "the first Telugu novel *Sri Rangaraj Charitra* (1872) was written as an entry for a competition ..." (Mukherjee 2002, ix). Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his Bengali novels maintains a perfect balance between *Sadhu bhasha* and *Chalit bhasha*, giving preference for contemporary realistic narrative in place of excessively stylized romance trend. This is as much to be seen in his first English novel *Rajmohan's Wife*, which is aimed to be analyzed in terms of new nation, new woman and a new way of writing.

An Outline of the Novel's Plot

The brief description of plot and dramatis personae with intricate relations among them is as follows. The very first chapter begins with gossip between

two women: the older Kanak and the younger Matangini. The latter is forbidden from going to fetch water from river, but she has been tempted by Kanak into doing so. No wonder, the opening scene is marked by desire, temptation and transgression, thereby setting the plot in motion. In the next chapter, we are introduced to two men: the older man Mathur is crude, vulgar, corrupt, unscrupulous and turns out to be the villain of the novel. Possessed with a tall, stout, dull and dark complexion, “he had something positively unattractive about him” (5). He wears a gold amulet, a thick gold chain, gold studs on his shirt, and gold rings on all the five fingers of his hands. This is the picture of a corrupt Mathur whose crudity may be attributed to his half-baked village education. We are told that his father condemned an English School saying that it was not only useless, but positively dangerous.

The younger man, Madhav, the hero of the novel, is positively refined as a result of his English education he received in Calcutta. Madhav’s father was attracted to the city of Calcutta by its luxury and promises. Madhav took advantage of the city culture and exposed himself to the new liberal humanist ethos of English education. In total contrast to Mathur, Madhav is a progressive Zamindar. But he lacks in the vitality and energy represented by Matangini. “His clear placid complexion had turned a little dull either through want of exercise or too much comfort” (5). What is common in both the characters is that they are dull, a quality which signifies *tamas* or lethargy, ignorance and sloth. Both at the same time descended from a zamindar ancestor who appropriated money through dubious means to rise in society.

As the story reveals, the marriage between Rajmohan and Matangini is a failure. We also come to know that Madhav and Matangini loved each other from their childhood, but they could not materialise their love. As a matter of fact, her sister, Hemangini, was given the marriage with Madhav.

Rajmohan is described as “the very image of death” (8). He is truly an embodiment of jealousy. He is shown as cruel, brutish man of enormous strength but lacks any moral sense. He is very unkind and bears inhuman attitude towards his wife. Though poor, Matangini has a loving heart and brave personality. By the help of her sister, Matangini arranges an employment for her husband in Madhav’s estate. But the inconsiderate and immoral Rajmohan, along-with a gang of robbers, attempts to rob his own benefactor. It is this ingratitude and unfaithful personality of Rajmohan, which turns Matangini away from him. As a result there is complete disruption of family life for both of them.

Matangini has been portrayed as the heroine as the case in Victorian novels. She is brave and passionate. In one of the many memorable scenes, Matangini takes up an adventurous journey in the dark-night through forest, water, storm and lightening, which is comparable to Radha’s tryst with Krisna to meet him secretly. This solitary, heroic journey signifies two purposes: brave Matangini, very honestly, wants to save Madhav from robbery, and she also intends to confirm her childhood love for him. Though Matangini fails to achieve her love, she at last saves Madhav. But after this act, Matangini puts herself in trouble. Apprehending a death like danger from Rajmohan, Matangini

again takes another plight to hide herself from the wrath of her brutal husband. This time she does not feel confident to go to her sister's house. By the help of Kanaka and Suki's mother, she hides herself in Mathur's house. For the convenience of bringing in main plot of the tale, that is legality of land ownership, let's leave the fate of Matangini in Mathur's house for a moment.

The theme of land, ownership and legality of land is at the centre of Bankimchandra's Rajmohan's wife. It is necessary to unveil the feudal past in the novel which controls the narrative and decides the fate of main characters. The Zamindar system which is inter-woven in the story is as follows. Bangshibadan happens to be the Zamindar of East Bengal. He inherits his fortune at Radhaganj. He is blessed with three sons. The eldest son, Ramakanta, is industrious and hardworking. His only son, Mathur, represents a corrupt and dying tradition. The second son of Bangshibadan, Ramakanai, is indolent and extravagant. His son Madhav gets right education in Calcutta and aptly proves to be the right heir to the estate at Radhaganj. Ramgopal, the third son, who died early and childless, bequeaths his property to Madhav, the worthier of his two nephews. It is this will that Mathur is after.

Returning to Mathur Ghose's house, where Matangini had taken shelter, it comes to knowledge that the former had devised all plans to collect the property will from Madhav. The narrative, at this moment, unfolds the legal intrigue, criminal conspiracy and dark incarceration in dungeons, which formed a part of colonial life of nineteenth century. Both Matangini and Madhav were put in dark dungeon by Mathur and they were made to suffer. It is Tara,

Mathur's first wife, who came in rescue and saved the hero and heroine from the death like situation.

The abrupt ending of the novel informs that Mathur commits suicide in the same "godown-mahal", where he has kept Madhav as a prisoner. Matangini was sent to her father's house, and there, "she died an early death" (88). The Sardar of the dacoities successfully escaped. But Rajmohan and his criminal companion were implicated and ultimately convicted. Tara, the first and faithful wife of Mathur plays an important role in the novel. She represents the best of residual culture. It is likely that she will serve a constructive cause in the building of the new nation.

A New Nation

In the light of the textual presentation, the character of Matangini could be analysed as the "perfect flower of beauty" (2) whose charmed blooms could be compared with that of the "land-Lotus half-scorched and half-radiant" (2). Sri Aurobindo claimed that Bankimchandra fashioned a language which could "combine the strength, dignity or soft beauty of Sanskrit with the nerve and vigour of the vernacular" (5), on the one hand, and "the most sonorous gravity" (5), on the other. In his reference to *Anandamath*, Sri Aurobindo acknowledges the great services of Bankimchandra to this country, which consisted in showing us "the way of salvation" (6); taught the nation "the religion of patriotism" (6) and gave the country "the vision of our mother" (6). Sri

Aurobindo's elevation of Bankimchandra as one of the makers of new India is no exaggeration of the fact that he brought about solidarity among heterogeneous cultural groups and established homogeneity among them all through the spirit of nationalism.

Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* represents the rise of a new woman with Matangini as new spirit. She is not merely Rajmohan's wife, as Paranjape views, "but the 'spirit' or personification of modern India itself" (149). Claiming *Rajmohan's Wife* as an allegory of modern India, Paranjape continues that "what the novel actually offers is a way of mapping the Indian society of that period on a complex grid of ideological, political, social and cultural coordinates. The novel accomplishes this through richly textured negotiation of cultural choices for a newly emergent society which, for the sake of convenience, we may call modern India" (147). Ganeswara Mishra holds that Bankimchandra was "deeply involved in the social problem of his time, and one of his favourite themes is the emancipation of Hindu housewives from their age-old suffering and superstition"(6).

Makaranda Paranjape, [an eminent critic of third world literature] suggests that "though the pronounced nationalism of *Anandamath* belongs to a later phase in Bankimchandra's career, its beginnings may be found in *Rajmohan's Wife*" (145). In another context in the same article, Paranjape asserts that "*Rajmohan's Wife* is really an allegory of modern India" (147), the society which can rise out of the debris of a fragmented old social order into "the new, albeit stunted, possibilities available to it under colonialism"

(147). While discussing *Rajmohan's Wife* as national allegory, Paranjape argues that Bankimchandra uses allegories and personification extensively to convey his idea of nationalism. The description of the heroine, Matangini connotes that she is not timid or weak, but strong and spirited. Her adventurous journey through dark is a testimony to her resolute will. She carries the plot forward with her own kinetic energy and does not entirely end up defeated though thwarted in the course of her journey.

The portrait of Matangini is a unique combination of the traditional and the radically new. Ganeswar Mishra shows that "it uses several elements from both classical and folk forms. For instance, the heroine is always shown with a companion, who serves to highlight the former's beauty, besides, several of the images used are taken from long-standing literary conventions" (10).

Matangini has been portrayed as a new woman, who all through her journey struggled hard as she desired to get out of the conventional world. In a way, Rajmohan stood for the old world symbolising jealousy, cruel and brutish man devoid of any moral sense. Madhav, on the other, represents the enlightened progressive new world. The brave and courageous Matangini can neither altogether break with the past-world, nor can she be accepted by the new world. But the abrupt ending of the novel and giving Matangini an early death, the novelist puts the readers in confusion. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, 'this breezy assertion of universal mortality in retrospect makes all story-telling redundant. But such an ending could have been the author's way

of getting out of a serialization project that was no longer engaging his interest' (2000, 39).

At the heart of the novel, there is a discourse on woman, particularly Matangini, who is depicted not just as Rajmohan's wife, but as a moving and dynamic spirit of modern India itself. In the opening chapter, we find that she is at age of eighteen, a "perfect flower of beauty" (2):

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 luster of her 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 dropping lids. But when they were raised for a glance, lightening seemed to play in a summer cloud. The small lips indicated the sorrow nursed in her heart. The beauty of her figure and limbs had been greatly spoilt by her

physical or mental suffering. Yet no sculptor had ever created anything nearly as perfect as the form half revealed by the neat *Sari* she wore. The well shaped limbs were almost entirely bare of ornaments. There were only *Churis* on the wrists and a small amulet on her arm. These too were elegant in shape. (2)

Matangini represents the image of strong-willed but sorrow-stricken national woman of nineteenth century India. Paranjape observes from a culturalist-allegorical perspective that Bankimchandra imagines not the India of villages or the old India of feudal times; it is born near the capital, Calcutta, and is full of new hopes and possibilities. The story of Matangini is an allegory of the long suffering India struggling to come out of the brutish forces and colonial rule. She is confined within the four walls of the house. The unhappy, sorrow-nursed heart filled with energies and powers is under the control of an unworthy brutal husband. She is unhappy, but nourishes a desire to free herself from traditional bondage. The restlessness, vitality, charm and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini.

Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife*, in many ways, stands for the awakening of national consciousness. Paranjape observes that "the struggle for / of the nation is often a struggle between the colonial and the national elites" (157). In *Rajmohan's Wife*, Mathur and Madhav represent the reactionary and progressive elites who, in spite of their contradictions, "are vying for the control of the emerging nation" (152). What is important in the text is that the competition between the conservative Mathur and progressive Madhav is over

possessing Matangini on the one hand, and becoming the legal heir of the property of their uncle, Ramgopal, on the other. If Matangini stands for the future of India, who should possess her to lead the modern India into its destination? Rajmohan, on the other hand, an angry, abusive, unhappy and frustrated proletariat is constantly being alienated from his family and society. Paranjape emphasises that Rajmohan could stand for the “lumpenised proletariat under colonial rule, alienated from its own people and country” (157). Rajmohan’s alienation from Matangini, as Paranjape views, is symbolic of the proletariat being unable to “man” the nation. Impoverished and brutalized, underclass proletariat (Rajmohan here) cannot shepherd the delicate, beautiful and precious blossom like Matangini and the new nation in making. In this novel, the proletariat is criminalized where as the elite is split into worthy and unworthy in spite of, or, may be because of their ascendancy from a zamindar background. At a crucial moment in the narrative (chap. XVI), we find Madhav Ghose “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...” (66). The English books are certainly the sign of civilized way of life, at least from the perspectives that it was the carrier of western science and philosophy.

The narrator of the tale in *Rajmohan’s Wife* is nothing if not critical and irreverent towards the feudal set up and the value system. The outline history of zamindar presented in *Rajmohan’s Wife* makes it clear. “It is a

notorious fact that many eminent zamindar families in Bengal owe their rise to some ignoble origin” (10). Bangshibadan Ghose, the progenitor of the clan to which Mathur and Madhav belonged, was a menial servant. His rise and progress signifies the end of old order and rise of an intermediate class during the colonial period. Bankimchandra’s typical narrative style reveals that the zamindar system could be traced back to the pre-colonial period. The zamindar Bangshibadan was a servant of an old zamindar of East Bengal. After the latter’s death, Bangshibadhan inherited his fortune at Radhaganj, which is now in contention. Again, after the death of Bangshibadan, his young wife, Karunamayee, who becomes powerful, takes her servant as her lover. Feudal system in the past, in any case, was nothing short of the vice of profligacy. From the historic episode of zamindar system, we come to know that in the pre-colonial period, the servants, who came from the margins of the society, had been either the land owners or the key persons on the estate after the death of the old zamindar. It wouldn’t be unjust to analyse that the land symbolically representing the potential India in the past, was being ruled by several invaders from west, English being the last ruler. Though Mathur and Madhav stand for the real owner of the land, they have allowed themselves to fall apart. The land, belonging to Ramgopal, the third son of Bangshibadan who died young and childless, becomes the bone of contention between Mathur and Madhav, although Ramgopal has bequeathed his property to the latter. It is this will, Mathur, the villain, is after. Paranjape claims that the national allegory can be constructed by illustrating Matangini as the future of India and Ramgopal’s

will as its past wealth and strength. The pertinent question which is central to the novel is concerning the legitimate claimant who should actually inherit the legacy of the past and shape the future of the country.

The issue of land, ownership, shifting of ownership, legality and legitimacy – all these are not only at the core of Bankimchandra's nationalist discourse, these are more or less common to other Indian writers of nineteenth century. Fakir Mohan Senapati's realistic Oriya novel *Chha Manna Atha Guntha* (1897) (*Six Acres and a Third*), for instance, is an exposition of the problems circling around a plot of land measuring about six acres and a third. After the introduction of Land Tenancy Laws in 1830s by the colonial ruler, a land was allowed to be shifted from one owner to another. Therefore, the ownership of the land was moving from the military Oriya aristocracy Bagha Sinhas through Seikh Dildar Mian, a Muslim horse trader to the protagonist of the novel, Rama Chandra Mangaraj who happens to be an upstart money lender and zamindar. Finally the land goes to a shrewd urban lawyer Ram Ram Lala, an English speaking man, suggesting that the colonial rule that has overtaken the country.

Critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee and Priyamvada Gopal observe that nineteenth century colonial India was marked by the changes that have taken place with the introduction of new laws in the fields, such as land, property, fiscal policy and English education in India. "New wealth generated by changes in property law, English education, and migration to the city had generated a new urban culture which was very different from agrarian life"

(Priyamvada 29). After the land tenancy laws were introduced by the British, a lot of changes have been observed. Under the impact of new law, the old feudal system gave rise to the measuring, parcelling and sifting of land from one owner to another owner. Land becomes the sight of contest as the case in Senapati's *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1897), Lal Behari Day's *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874) and in so many other Indian novels. Critics have engaged in highlighting the land issue which is central to most of the novels written during nineteenth century. In one such seminal essay, Mohapatra and Nayak unfold how the ownership of land was shifted from the tiller to the village zamindar in two major Indian novels of nineteenth century, such as *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* and *Bengle Peasant Life*. "The story of alienation of land from its tiller is also at the heart of Day's novel. It is after all the same story of tenant losing out of his 'paternal acres' to the village zamindar..." (Mohapatra and Nayak 107). In case of *Rajmohan's Wife*, land is not only an object of competition between Madhav and Mathur, it is, in fact, the bone of contention between them. Moreover, the land, signifying the country as a whole, was divided, ruled and finally overtaken by the British.

Claiming *Rajmohan's Wife* as a shaper of nationalist discourse, critics of Bankimchandra find in his long literary and creative projects the existence of a strong and beautiful India represented by women characters. *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first fictional work in a series of fictional and non-fictional writings through which Bankimchandra imagines and gives concrete shape to the existence of a future nation. As Bhabatosh Chatterjee puts it, the three novels

written in the later phase of Bankimchandra's literary career – *Anandamath*, *Devi Caudhurani* and *Sitaram* are illustrations of his “doctrine of culture” through which the “imaginative remodelling of history” takes place for “national regeneration” (*Introduction xxxviii*). But under colonial subjugation, Bankimchandra's beautiful and powerful India is shown as being burdened by sorrow and anxiety. Matangini's suffering is symbolic of the wretched condition of the country under colonial rule. She is neither happy nor even free. Her energies and powers are under the command of an unworthy crooked husband. The very first chapter begins with temptation and desire. Matangini was persuaded by Kanaka to go to the river to fetch water, but she had been forbidden to do so. The conversation between Kanaka and Matangini in chapter one entitled “The Drawers of Water” makes it clear that the plot is set in motion at the beginning out of tension between these two characters. Matangini's impulse provokes her to “desire” against her husband's will, that she had been “forbidden”, as the former was “tempted” by Kanaka, her companion:

“.... you know my husband has forbidden me to fetch water, and you know him well.”

Kanakmayee did not reply off - hand. She quickly glanced round to see if anyone was coming. When she saw there was no one about, she stood with her eyes fixed on the face of her companion as if wanting to say something. But she repressed

the impulse from fear and remained musing with downcast eyes. The younger girl asked, “what are you thinking about?”

“If only you had eyes”, replied Kanak. The younger woman would not, however, listen to her. She made a sign to Kanak to stop and said, “Hush, hus, I understood your meaning.”

“If you have done so, what are you going to do now?” asked Kanak. The younger girl remained silent for a while. Her quivering lips and reddening brow betrayed the preoccupation of her mind. A silent tremor in her limbs also showed how agitated she was. After some time she said, “Let us go,…” (3-4)

Once Matangini gets out of home and comes across Madhav and Mathur on the way, the plot gets moving. For Matangini, there is no getting back to her “designated first world” (Lal 12) after she has stepped “over the bar”(Lal 12). She must make the “irretrievable choice of making the other world (her) permanent home”, what Malashri Lal called “the law of the threshold” (12), thus, seems to operate in the very first Indian English novel.

Desire can also be looked upon as subversion of biblical myth from the puranic archetype to the realistic mode of fiction. Bankimchandra might be thinking of portraying Matangini as Adamic archetype, who betrays the “preoccupation of her mind” (4) and who is also not sure of what she does. As her mind is “agitated” (4), Matangini cannot choose between right and wrong. Kanak reminds her, of the sin, saying that “It’s sin even to say so”, (4) but eventually tempts her to do the wrong: “come now, my proud girl, let’s go and

show beauty's splendor to the gaping idiots" (4). Thus, Matangini has to bear brunt (sin). As a result, she had been abused by her husband as "wretched girl.... I'll kick you to death" (9).

A New Woman

The story hinges on a midnight plotting among a gang of robbers, to which Rajmohan, the husband of the heroine of this tale, is also a party, planning to attack Madhav's house at Radhaganj and rob him. Matangini could overhear the secret plan made by her husband and his companions. The brave and strong Matangini wanted to serve two purposes by taking an adventurous action: she determined to save Madhav, her brother-in-law from robbery, and she wanted to show the strength of her love for him. At the stroke of midnight, Matangini wrapped herself in a coarse piece of bed-cloth from head to foot and set out for Radhaganj. Bankimchandra uses a kind of diction that manifests how the author has been influenced by the traditional narrative forms used in puranas and kavyas. The passage describing Matangini's journey through night is filled with romantic adventures in mysterious or frightening surroundings which was natural in Gothic novels of eighteenth and nineteenth century European literature.

At this hour of dread loneliness, a young woman would have to thread her way through a wild and jungles path, she was, naturally enough, superstitious and her rich imagination was

stored with tales of unearthly hunters of the woods, and had fed on them since infancy.... The trees now cast shadows of huge length and the moon hung over the far horizon, shedding a waning light.... As she stood out in the open space and eyed the vast solitude of the blue heavens and the thick mass of the noiseless tops of the trees, her heart again misgave (her) and her feet refused their office. 'Gods, give me strength' she uttered with her hands closed on her bosom. Then summoning all her resolutions, she made rapid but noiseless steps. Her heart beat as she walked through the jungly path. The dreary silence and the dark shadows appalled her. The knotted trunks of huge trees showed like so many unearthly forms watching her progress in malignant silence. In each leafy bough that shot over her darkened path, she fancied there lurked a demon. In each dark recess she could see the skulking form and glistening eyes of a specter or of a robber. All the wild tales she had heard of fierce visages and ghostly grins that had appalled to death the belated traveler, rushed to her imagination. The light crack of the falling leaf, the flapping wings of some frightened night bird as it changed its unseen seat among the dark branches, the slight rustle of crawling reptiles among the fallen leaves, even her own footsteps made her heart fainter and fainter. (26 – 27)

The description in the above passage makes use of several gothic elements that reveals Bankimchandra's acquaintance with Victorian narrative. It also reveals Matangini's turbulent passion and desire, combined with faith and will-power--all have been expressed in her heroic journey. For Bankimchandra, nature and landscape became an integral part of his discourse, as was the case in Victorian novels. What is important to foreground here is that Bankimchandra's pre-occupation with traditional Sanskrit kavya literature where the doctrine of nature was reflected in human discourse.

Matangini has been portrayed as a strong and transgressive woman. She happens to be the first in a series of "new women"(Nandakumar 400) Bankimchandra created in his Bengali novels. It is not surprising that woman issue / suffering of woman was a recurrent discourse in major Indian fictions in the nineteenth century and it continued for several decades even after *Rajmohan's Wife* was written. Half of Bankimchandra's Bengali novels have a woman as central character and the narrative is focused on the predicament of women. Most of the critics of Bankimchandra point out that *Rajmohan's Wife* was a representative novel in the Victorian narrative mould. The colonial education had an impact on the new generation of Indian writers who were educated in English. As a result similar attempts were being made in several Indian languages in the second half of nineteenth century. It may not be improper to cite some of the major Indian novels which followed the formal narrative style of European novels. Pyarechand Mitra's *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1858) written in Bengali, *Indulekha* (1888), a Malayalam novel written by O.

Chandu Menen, Harinarayan Apte's Marathi novel *Pan Lakshyant Kon Ghetto* (1890), *Umarao Jan Ada* (1899), an Urdu novel written by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, *Padmamali* (1889) by Umesh Chandra Sarkar, Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Chha Manna Atha Guntha* (1897) etc., are some of the examples that followed the realistic mode of narration.

The rise of the novel in India, both in mother tongue and in English language, has its root in the imperial design made to both entertain the colonial administrators and keep them up to date and to educate and enlighten the natives. The Charter Acts of 1813 and 1835 made it imperative for the colonial government to intervene in the education of natives. These acts were evidently presupposed by the import of European literature to the colony to save the colonial officials from cultural degeneracy. Sharon Pillai spells out the duality of the novelistic discourse: thus generated novel as an instrument of imperial design and fashioning of native desire. Meenakshi Mukherjee maintains that the advent of the steamship made it possible to supply novels in large numbers within a span of six weeks. *The Calcutta Review* in 1846 brought out an unnamed article in praise of steamship: "Thanks to our splendid steamship... every month brings to our shores a fresh supply of European literature, scarcely six weeks old" (ctd. in Mukherjee 2000, 5). Although the intended readers were not primarily Indians, they were, in deed, hungry for English books. Thus, the Indian readers were exposed to the century old European classical texts and canonical literature from Britain. The "colonial editions" of popular fiction were also made available for educated Indians outside the classroom, who

responded to both enthusiastically and without taking much care about literary status and chronology of the text. Thus, the reading and knowledge acquired about western science, Philosophy and literature were processed by the Indian novelists both in their mother tongue as well as in English.

Meenakshi Mukherjee claims that “since realism was the dominant mode of the British Victorian novel – the model immediately available to the Indian writer – his primary challenge was the achievement of realism while remaining faithful to the reality of a social order which generally inhibited individual choice” (1985, 68). A cluster of novels which had immediate influence on the new generation of Indian writers are *Emma*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Middlemarch*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Tess*, to mention only a few.

In most of the novels of early Indian writers, the romance mode, blended with history, continued to be the dominant style in several Indian languages. As Mukherjee points out, these novels derived their themes from historical perspective, unquestionably from the pre-colonial period. Zamindar system happened to be the central issue in most of the nineteenth-century novels. *Rajmohan's Wife* is no exception to this rule. It is in place to supplement the idea of Mukherjee about why and how the historical and pseudo-historical novels became popular during nineteenth century. She argues that “a whole new world of imagination, humanism and triumph of self over hierarchical society” (45) was suddenly exposed to the educated Indians through the introduction of European literature. But for middle class Indians in the

nineteenth century, there was a social and political restriction under the colonial administration. That is why the creative writers often foregrounded the past glory, valour and heroism as they found it to be psychologically more comforting than dwelling on a bleak and denuded present. Secondly, in comparison to the realistic novel of western model, the so-called historical novel of nineteenth century was suitably fitted into the traditional way of storytelling. Thirdly, the painful experience of people suffering under the colonial subjugation led the writers to be reminiscent about their past. Lastly, by way of glorifying past heroism, the novelists in a way turned their gaze away from present servitude. This new form of the novel, gave expression, as a result, to a fraught sense of nationalism, caught up in a double bind of admiration for the West and denunciation of India. If India was a fit candidate for admiration at all, it was its ghostly image.

As it is very clear, woman issue happens to be the central discourse in Bankimchandra's novels. Apart from Matangini, there are other female characters in the novel – Kanak, married to an absent and polygamous husband who, according to the custom of Kulin Brahmins, is not obliged to provide her with a home, and Tara, the wife of a powerful landlord, superseded in her husband's affection by a younger and prettier wife – providing three variations on the theme of wifely misery. It would be worthwhile to mention Dorothy Spencer's classification and valorisation of Indian woman more often as mother, sister, wife and less frequently as a daughter in the nineteenth century novels and short stories. Bankimchandra frequently addresses his readers

directly on the image of women in his novel *Krishna Kanta's Will*: "woman is full of forgiveness, of compassion, of love; woman is the crowning excellence of God's creation, the shadow of the Gods. Man the Gods' creation only. Woman is light, man is shadow" (ctd. in Spencer 16).

In comparison to Bankimchandra's later heroines portrayed in Bangla novels, the female characters in *Rajmohan's Wife* seem somewhat perfunctorily sketched, but they nevertheless engage our attention more than the men in this novel who are either meekly virtuous or melodramatically villainous. These scenes around the women, especially the vivid description of group activities in the interiors of the houses, contribute to the effect of realism in fiction. The mock-serious account of the bustle and commotion in the kitchen courtyard in chapter-V, entitled "A LETTER-A VISIT TO THE ZENANA", where cooks, servant women, children and girls with tinkling ankle-bells vie with each other to keep the decibel level permanently high:

There was a servant woman, black, rotund and eloquent, demanding the transmission to her hands of sundry articles of domestic use, without however making it at all intelligible to whom her demands were particularly addressed. There was another who boasted similar blessed corporal dimensions, but who had thought it beneath her dignity to shelter them from view; and was busily employed, broomstick in hand, in demolishing the little mountains of the skins and stems of sundry culinary vegetables which decorated the floors, and against

which the half-naked dame never aimed a blow but coupled it with a curse on those whose duty it had been to prepare the said vegetables for dressing. (17)

The above passage delineates the informal but time-table routine-bound life of women in the country kitchen. The realism goes further to even unfold the women's bodies in free and sensual movements when they are engaged in performing kitchen activities. The following passage contains a more realistic description about the cook, the servant women, the matron and girl children, performing their duties and activities in the zenana:

A third had ensconced to herself in that corner of the yard which formed the ground receptacle of house hold filth, and was employing all her energies in scouring some brass pots; and as her ancient arms whirled round in rapid evolutions the scarcely less active engine in her mouth hurled dire anathemas against the unfortunate cook, for the mighty reason, that the latter had put the said vessels to their legitimate use, and thus caused the labours which excited the worthy matron's ire. The cook herself, far removed from the scenes where both her spiritual and her temporal prospects were being so fiercely dealt with by the excited scourer of the brass pots, was engaged in an angry discussion with an elderly lady, apparently the house wife and governess, the subject of the debate being no less interesting and important than the quantity of ghee to be allowed her for the

culinary purposes of the night. The honest manufacturer of rice and curry was anxious to secure only just double the quantity that was necessary, wisely deeming it advisable that half should be set apart in secret for her own special benefit and consumption. In another corner might be heard those sounds so suggestive of an agreeable supper, the huge *bunti* serving the bodies of fishes doomed to augment the labours of the conscientious cook aforesaid. Several elegant forms might be seen flitting, not often noiselessly but always gracefully, across the *dalans* and veranda with dirty earthen lamps lighted in their little hands, and occasionally sending forth the tinkling of the silver *mal* on their ankles or a summons to another in a voice which surpassed the silver in delicacy. A couple of urchins utterly necked and evidently excrescences in the household thought the opportunity a fitting one for the display of their belligerent propensities and were making desperate attempts at tearing each other's hair. Some young girls were very clamorously engaged in playing at *Agdum Bagdum* in the corner of a terrace. (17 – 18)

The long passage, dealing with zenana, gives a minute picture of village life with a particular interest in women's lives. The narrative devotes itself, with no little interest, to elaborate descriptions of women going about their noisy business. It provides a photographic picture of women's activities in the zenana, which forms an integral part of realism in *Rajmohan's Wife*.

A New Way of Writing

Bankimchandra himself writes on the issue of English language in a journal, *Bangadarshan*, which he founded in 1872: “There are certain issues that do not pertain to the Bengalis alone; where the whole of India has to be addressed. Unless we use English for such discourse, how will the rest of the country understand?” (ctd. in Mukherjee 46). It is doubtless that though Bankimchandra started his literary career in English with *Rajmohan’s Wife* and took up Bengali for his latter writing, he remained alert to the political possibilities of English as the language of national consolidation. He even continued writing essays and discursive pieces in English and actively participated in various debates on Hindu religion and Indian culture in the columns of local English newspapers.

One would observe Bankimchandra’s pursuit of indigenous narrative on the compatibility between culture and language when Matangini is made to articulate her illicit love for her brother-in-law in the passionate language used in traditional Romantic poetry. The outburst of long preserved love and emotion has occurred to Matangini in chapter-IX when she comes to Radhaganj to inform her brother-in-law, Madhav that he was going to be robbed by a gang of robbers:

“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". (37)

The intensity of pastoral love, so long cherished by them, that could be comparable to that of Vaishnava love poetry, the immortal love that existed between Radha and Krishna:

"Yes, reproach me, Madhav," she continued "censure me, teach me, for I have been sinful: sinful in the eyes of my God, and I must say it, Madhav, of my God on earth, of yourself. But you cannot hate me more than I hate myself. Heaven alone knows what I have felt – for the long long years that have past, could I rip open this heart you could then and then only know how it beats." (38)

Madhav wept again. "Matangini dear, beloved Matangini - he began, but his voice thickened, and he could not proceed.

Oh say again, again say those words, words that my heart has yearned to hear - say Madhav, do you then love me still? Oh! Say but once again and tonight I shall meet death with happiness. (38)

Love which can conquer death and happiness is all that is not earthly. It transforms Matangini from "sinful" (38), "impure felicity" (37) by her confession with rhetoric of guilt – "you cannot hate me more than I hate myself" (38). Madhav, on the other hand, has been refined by his English education into such a paragon of scrupulous virtue that, when Matangini

confronts him with “unutterable feelings” (37) in a “serene” and “melancholy” (37) mood, all he can do is to weep and teach her to “forget” and “separate” each other (38). Whatever may have been the moral design of the author, despite his flawless conduct and virtuous character, Madhav gets overshadowed all through the text by the impetuous and brave heroine.

Bankimchandra’s narrative becomes a fertile site of the intersection of feminism and realism. In the chapter-v for example, while presenting the interior part of female world, the narrator gives a detail and minute picture of *Zenana* in a matter of fact manner, suggesting his adaptability with “realism” of western narrative style which was markedly different from the traditional prose fiction. Bankimchandra, in fact, was as familiar with the native “romance” practised in poetry and Sanskrit literature as exemplified in Dandin’s *Das Kumar Charita* (6th century), Subandhu’s *Vasavadutta* (late 6th century or early 7th century) and Bana Bhatta’s *Kadambari* (first half of the 7th century). Sanskrit criticism makes a clear distinction between *Akhyayika*, built around real events and persons, and the *Katha*, whose plot was pure invention. This would roughly correspond to the distinction between “novel” and “romance”. Krishna Chaitanya, an eminent critic of Bhasa Sahitya, explains that “apart from the fact that there are not enough examples to substantiate the validity of this distinction, we find that even in the *Akhyayika*, invention is given a free hand, though the main characters may be historical personage” (ctd. in Naik 99).

Bankimchandra's use of descriptive narrative style in the novelistic discourse clearly marks his preference for sanskritised heavy style (*Sadhu Bhasa*) to the colloquial style (*Chalita Bhasa*). Ganeswar Mishra observes that Bankimchandra was actually not against colloquial style, but he preferred sanskritised heavy style for his Bengali novels (7). In case of *Rajmohan's Wife* Bankimchandra's use of colloquial style is clear from the use of light and comic diction, such as "Agdum" "Bagdum" which refers to a children's game.

However, the passages describing the quotidian routine of women and servants in the *Zenana*, are astonishingly rich in the description of 'andar mahal'. This suggests Bankimchandra's attempt to portray a realistic picture of nineteenth century Bengal society. The protocol of realism in Indian novel, as Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests in *Realism and Reality*, is partly derived from European novels and re-accommodated by Indian novelists according to their immediate concerns and narrative traditions. Mukherjee records various determinants, such as philosophical, aesthetic, metaphysical and socio-historical factors, that shaped the contours of the novel in India. It reveals various junctures in the cultures which were unstable at best. Mukherjee in her thesis does not plead for an Indian theory of a novel; she rather throws light on the unstable categories and in-determinate techniques that went into making a novel in India. In her article "From Puran to Nutan", Mukherjee continues that:

... in spite of the limitations of the model, in spite of basic incompatibilities between the English and the Indian temperaments, the novel in India which began under English

tutelage soon began to acquire its own distinctive character. Without attempting to arrive at any definition of the Indian novel, it will be our purpose to examine the synthesis of a borrowed literary form and indigenous aesthetic – as well as cultural expectations – in order to determine the extent to which the form has undergone mutation in the process. (18)

Mukherjee seems to suggest that a kind of attenuated realism took shape as a mode of narration in early Indian novels. Baidik Bhattacharya, on the contrary, seems to go a step further suggesting that the question of uncertainty itself is the “principal factor in the emergence of what could be provisionally called ‘realism’ ... especially in the novels of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay” (70). He goes further to interrogate the ways “certain narrative protocols and expressive resources were assembled around a structural principle that was contingent at its core and that nonetheless facilitated the novel’s way into the world” (70). Baidik does not formulate a project concerning a stable *being* of the novel. His investigation is concerned with the radical promises inherent in the *becoming* of a set of narrative practices that were recognizably distinct from other contemporary conventions.

It would be convenient to see how Bankimchandra evolves realistic narrative style in applying a photographic description of an object, a person, or a thing that happen to be part of a whole culture or system. What is suggested here is a kind of experimental realism that is partly derived from traditional narrative form and partly from European realism. In the following passage,

taken from chapter – XIII of *Rajmohan's Wife*, one would observe Bankimchandra's minute and accurate presentation of outer view and inner configuration of Mathur's house:

From the far-off paddy fields you could descry through the intervening foliage, its high palisades and blackened walls. On a nearer view might be seen pieles of plaster of venerable antiquity prepared to bid farewell to their old and whether-beaten tenements. Some rude and unpainted shutter hanging by a single hinge whose companion had left the precinets years before, while in other both hinge and plank had left little trace of their existence and had been supplanted by the less pretentious tribe of *tat-screens*. But a small portion of the huge edifice had ever been plastered on the outside. On the favoured reason which a boosted such a decoration, and which no doubt composed the sanctum sanctorum of some great man in the house, if not Mathur Ghose himself, you might descry a few apologies for venetians, but window panes the giant house had eschewed as too frail a substance to be permitted to ornament its limbs. By far the greater part the exterior was un-plastered, and the dried slime and soot reposed on the mass of bricks in a murky grandeur. Not unfrequently a young shoot of a *Bur* or a less noble vegetable had struck its roots in the crevices between

the layers of bricks, realizing, rather on an humble scale, the Persian monarch's dream of a hanging garden. (52)

The narrative delves into describing the old structure of Mathur's house and the village life contained within it. The elaborate architectural descriptions of outer and inner household spaces provide with a detailed realistic picture of nineteenth century domestic atmosphere in East Bengal.

Apart from the above passage, which gives a detailed picture of Mathur's house and its geographical location, we come across a more relaxed scene in chapter xiv, when the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun fall at regular intervals through the balcony rails in an upstairs veranda where women sit around dressing each other's hair or painting their feet with "lac dye" (57), discussing the different ways of braiding hair in Radhaganj and Calcutta, reiterating a recurring concern of the novelist – the relative merits of rural East Bengal and the urbanized West Bengal dominated by Calcutta:

This sun was shedding in mellowed parting beams on the house of Mathur Ghose, and the day which had been ushered in amidst the gloomy deeds which threatened the fate of Matangini was hastening to a close. The slanting rays fell at intervals on an open veranda, on the second floor. Tara was seated on the bare ground and was employed in tying the hair of her daughter into a *Khompa* the knots and bends of which however satisfied neither herself nor the child. Matangini sat close by answering with reserve to some very provoking and impertinent questions,

which Champak, employed in painting her little feet with the lac-dye, by the aid of a barber's garrulous wife, was pouring upon her, without the consciousness that a refugee to whom her husband had afforded shelter from mere compassion and whom she herself could turn out any movement, could ever entertain reluctance to answer questions coming from herself direct. Matangini was answering with meekness and reserve, which however had merely the effect of provoking further impertinence from the haughty beauty. Tara saw the vexation of her protégée and delicately interfered by drawing off the attention of both.

(57)

Compared to this predictable man-woman relationship, the equations among the women across the classes have a more nuanced texture in the novel – of mutual bonding, subtle rivalry, friendship, sympathy or betrayal. Bankimchandra, in the manner of narrating a real picture of nineteenth century East Bengal, builds a sociological thesis at the same time.

Conclusion

Poetic justice in literature, as we know, is the just distribution of rewards and penalties. A deviation is noticed in the novels which are pictures of the real world where justice rarely prevails. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, we find that the criminals are punished. But the British legal system is powerless to redeem

Matangini. When in the last chapter, all the characters meet their deserts according to the conventions of British Victorian novels, Matangini poses an ethical problem for the author. She cannot return to the conjugal space again after dislocation from Rajmohan through an emotionally sanctioned but socially unforgivable act. Interestingly, as it turns out, for the author, sending her back to her parent's house is not a solution. The novelist tells us that "she died an early death" (88). With the death of Matangini, our hope to get a new India is postponed, but not lost altogether. Her union with Madhav is impossible, though both personally and ideologically, they constitute the basis of the new India, that is to come.

Another interesting observation in the novel we discover is that the colonial power is seen as benign. The English magistrate, who is explained as the "shrewd and restlessly active Irishman" (87) delivered justice by punishing Mathur. He could not escape by bribing the police and finally committed suicide.

The novel ends with a note of self-reflexivity by the author, but with the abrupt ending which seems to be unconvincing at the end: "As to Madhav, Champak and the rest, some are dead, and the others will die. Throwing this flood of light on their past and future history, I bid you, good reader, FAREWELL" (88).

In spite of adverse comments given by critics on the first Indian English novel, writing it off as "a false start" (30), or "no sign of genius" (Gangopadhyay 390), the novel gains "immediate readership" (Nandakumar

400) and elevates the humdrum life of the middle classes to heroic proportions. As Prema Nandakumar observes, “it transcended the linguistic barrier” (400). This no doubt has been made possible by the portrayal of Matangini as the “forerunner of India’s emancipated woman” (400). And, as this chapter has attempted to show, the novel opens up several discourses on a new nation, a new woman, and, above all, on realistic representation, indicating a new way of writing in the Indian narrative ethos, thus giving it a decisive change of direction.

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