

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

Chapter 11: "When Thieves Fall Out"

- The author's prefatory comment- "In which is discussed the physical possibility of a robber being robbed and an assassin assassinated"- uses wit to create an atmosphere of anticipation.
- We have already learnt in the previous chapter that Matangini is about to be attacked by her husband because of her transgressions and bold confession of love for Madhav, when there is a sudden interruption in the form of "two dark and athletic forms" springing into the chamber. It must be remembered that *Rajmohan's Wife* was published in serialized form by Bankim and the novel appeared only after the author's death. Therefore, the purpose of creating suspense and anticipation in the readers so that they keep coming back for the next chapters is served by such "cliffhanger" endings (when a chapter or a narrative ends without resolving the tension or ends with a suspenseful event).
- Introduction to the **dacoits**- In his essay titled "Behind the Blackened Faces: The 19th Century Bengali Dacoits" [[uploaded on the website](#)], historian Suranjan Das locates the period of the 19th century as a time when dacoity was a very common phenomenon in Bengal. "Dacoity" is understood as a legal term used by the colonial administration to categorize a system of robbery in India organized by gangs. The term itself is derived from *daka parna*, meaning "plunder". As a civil servant himself, Bankim must have been familiar with the rising law and order crisis in the rural parts of Bengal and the colonial government's attempts at addressing this issue. According to Das, these dacoits did not operate in isolation and neither did all of them trace their ancestry to dacoity. They were very much a part of the socioeconomic structure of society, where rural Bengal's intensely exploitative system formed the backdrop to their antisocial activities. Popularly seen as existing outside "polite" society as a "social aberration", these dacoits were in reality often seen to work within a nexus involving zamindars, *gomosthas*, officials of the law and the local police. Although the dacoits themselves were largely from subordinate social groups of both Hindu and Muslim communities, most of whom were not literate, they had however well-established connections with influential members of society who participated indirectly in the business of dacoity. Often zamindars organized dacoities

with the help of such groups in order to “teach lessons” to a rival zamindar. This aspect of the social history of dacoity is visible in *Rajmohan’s Wife* where both Rajmohan and Mathur enlist the services of dacoits to loot Madhav:

- “You think of killing your wife, ruffian?”- The “ruffian” in question here is not the dacoit but Rajmohan. Contrary to popular notions of dacoits as rough and brutish criminals, it is the so-called respectable zamindar that is identified as the heartless brute in this part of the chapter. In fact, the dacoits’ entry proves fortunate for Matangini because it saves her life. The reversal of roles in this scene where the wife is protected from her husband’s brutality by the interruption is significant because not only does it expose the violence at the heart of domesticity but also reveals the fact that dacoits are not an alien ethnicity but members of a society in which words such as “criminal” and “respectable” become interchangeable. When the chief dacoit calls Rajmohan “friend” and uses the nickname “Raju” to address him, this nexus between dacoits and members of the upper classes becomes clearer.
- After an episode of physical combat between Rajmohan and two of the dacoits in which the former is overpowered and imprisoned, the sardar holds Rajmohan accountable for being a traitor and warning Madhav of the attack by the dacoits. The trust issues revealed in this altercation needs to be understood within the context of the dacoits’ circle of trust and dependency. The dacoit rings operating in 19th century rural Bengal rarely registered cases of backstabbing, betrayal or defection of members from one group to another. The sardar was the chief who commanded absolute respect and discipline of the other members of the group according to a strict hierarchy. Rajmohan is an outsider to this group, its protocols and rituals. Apart from the obvious class divide between him and the dacoits, the fact that Madhav is Rajmohan’s brother-in-law adds to the sardar’s suspicion. Ultimately it’s a relationship based solely on transactions and no inherent code of honour or trust binds the two parties. The sardar also feels the need to punish Rajmohan with death because there is the fear that he might inform the police and protect his own life by seeking Madhav’s help. At this point in the narrative Rajmohan is in a strange place. While he would probably need to convince his wife and family that he is innocent of the charges of conspiring with dacoits against Madhav, he also needs to assure the sardar that he is to be trusted with the plan. Of course he does not think it necessary to convince Matangini of anything since his moral compass is missing, but it is fear for his own life that drives him to try convincing the sardar that he is innocent.
- “But! Out! Wicked woman”- Matangini is able to outsmart both her husband and the dacoits by taking advantage of the commotion between the two parties and escaping the chamber. Once again, her presence of mind and steady nerves are on display for the readers. She is able to adapt to her environment and use it to camouflage her presence right before escaping, both during her adventurous journey through the unknown forest and in the restricted space of her bed chamber. It is interesting that the

dacoits and Rajmohan mistake the pile of clothes for Matangini, imagining her to have probably fainted in fright and incapacitated like inanimate articles of clothing. As a woman she is not the obvious suspect in the dacoits' estimation and this is exactly what Matangini takes advantage of. The play of light and shadow in the room also aids in her escape just as the moon and the dark night had been her allies in the forest. Being recognized as a **“wicked” woman** actually adds to Matangini's credibility as a heroine. It is by breaking through the ideal image of the domesticated wife as a passive, “angelic”, unthinking being that Matangini could be seen appropriating the title “wicked” as not a term of abuse but rather, a symbol of her agency which scares and perplexes men. The Victorian period was in fact characterized by the idealized image of **“the angel in the house”**, understood as the pure woman bound to her domestic duties as wife and mother, “angelic” because she does not challenge authority and instead lives by society's expectations of her. In that sense, Matangini is “wicked” because she has the capacity to fool her own husband and the dacoits into thinking that she is not the actual brains behind the whole operation to sabotage the dacoity. Her disappearance from the room makes her a magician who tricks the audience by exercising her talent and not revealing her methods. The woman who is traditionally expected to remain in the “background” conjures herself away by using that patriarchal order to her own advantage. Once again, it is possible to contrast Matangini's passive image of fragile ethereal beauty with her image as an active agent.

- Rajmohan asserts his proprietorial attitude towards his wife even when swearing to kill her for ruining him- As a symbol of an extreme form of **toxic masculinity** Rajmohan exercises his exclusive patriarchal “right” to kill her in a gesture of preserving his own honour. When he warns the dacoits that no one should touch Matangini, it is definitely not an expression of love but of ownership. As the symbol of honour, any act of transgression on the part of the woman is always seen as a violation of the honour of her entire family. Killing Matangini would therefore be a ritual sacrifice or an “honour killing” where Rajmohan's lost honour would be preserved by eliminating his wife. In feminist studies, violence against women is often read as an expression of a feeling of impotency where the man needs to assert his masculinity by exploring its very limits. Rajmohan's feeling of impotency comes from the fact that Matangini has not only fooled him but also exposed his inability to “control” her before the dacoits.

Chapter 12: “The Friends and the Stranger”

- Bankim’s elaborate **description of Nature** with which this chapter begins could be analyzed in metaphoric terms as **a reflection on Matangini’s evolution** from a docile wife to a brave agent of change. In stark contrast to the gloomy inclement weather in which Matangini had returned from Madhav’s house, her escape from death at the hands of Rajmohan and the dacoits in this chapter is cast in the imagery of light and hope- “The recent shower had lent to the morning a delightful and invigorating freshness”. Bankim’s use of descriptive terms such as “invigorating freshness”, “splendid light”, “a thousand radiant gems”, “newly awakened and joyous birds”, “light fleecy clouds of white” and “the now purified blue of the heavens”, paints an image of rebirth and rejuvenation which is celebrated in Matangini’s personal growth. The trajectory of Nature’s cycle traced by Bankim’s prose, from a gathering of the menacing storm clouds to the cathartic rains which purifies the physical world, can be paralleled with the heroine’s state of mind as she navigates through extremely conflicting emotional stresses. In a sense the introductory paragraph presents the possibility of hope, and in the movement of the description of Nature from a monochrome to a more colorful palate, the reader could expect a brighter future for Matangini.
- **Matangini’s desperate condition**- Having escaped her husband’s house, Matangini realizes the lack of alternatives for a married woman. According to the strict rules of patriarchal societies pertaining to traditional notions of marriage, a married woman is supposed to accept her husband’s home as her sole refuge and she leaves it only upon her death. If Matangini is imagined as movable property within the economy of the matrimonial system, then her transference from her father’s house to her husband’s house is sealed in sacred terms by the Hindu scriptures invoked as part of the wedding rituals. According to the sacred literature on marriage, the husband declares his intention to take responsibility of his wife’s *bhaat-kapor*, i.e., her food and clothing, which is basic sustenance. The dynamic of dependency is clearly outlined in this arrangement where the husband will be the sole provider of food, clothing and shelter to the wife and she will fulfill her domestic and other marital duties within the confines of her husband’s home. Matangini violates that basic sacred principle of dependency through her transgressive actions and is left with nowhere to go. This entire situation can be read either as a criticism of patriarchy which ensures that women remain helpless and dependent on their fathers and husbands, or it could be read as Bankim’s anxiety about Matangini’s feminist possibilities within his traditional society. The conflict is played out in Matangini’s own words- “I know my death is inevitable, but who can help fate? Who will tell me how I can find a shelter elsewhere?” The reference to “fate” highlights the other **conflict between a passive submission to “destiny” (*kopal/ bhaggo*), and an active participation in “human will”**. “Death” in the sense that Matangini uses it is not just literal, but also a symbolic death for the married woman who has broken out of her marital role and will now be marked as an outcast or a pariah in society. Matangini herself internalizes the shame which society imposes on such women when she confesses, “To what depth am I fallen, Kanak!”

- **Affirmative homosocial female bonding** – In contrast to the self-seeking distrustful male dynamics in the novel, Kanak and Matangini's friendship is represented in positive terms. Kanak is able to share Matangini's burden of grief and lessen her anxiety to a large extent by being her constant support in times of crisis. Kanak's role is significant here because she does not play the part of moral guardian or the keeper of patriarchy by scolding Matangini for her transgressions and ordering her to return to Rajmohan. Kanak values her friend's life and health over everything else and in this she is able to secure their friendship from being dictated by a society which anyway views female bonding with a lot of suspicion. Suki's mother is another such character who might be considered as a brief but important element in the idea of homosocial female bonding. Although she shares Matangini's fate of being reduced to someone's wife or mother, yet, like Kanak she also believes that "if she be worthy of the name of woman, she cannot return home", thereby sympathizing with Matangini's misfortune even though she does not know the whole truth. Ultimately, it is out of her goodness of heart that Suki's mother suggests a temporary refuge for Matangini at her elder Thakurani's house.