

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

### Chapter 9: "We Meet To Part"

- This chapter gives a detailed insight into **Matangini and Madhav's doomed love**. The title suggests the tragic outcome of the meeting between the two in Madhav's house under exceptional circumstances. It is revealed to Madhav here that Matangini has travelled all the way to his house without the knowledge of her husband. As the endnotes state, so far the reader has not been given any hint about a special relationship between the two protagonists.
- The reference to Matangini's "large, **blue**, sorrowful eyes" is imitative of **European standards of beauty**- This, along with Bankim's previous description of Matangini's "fair skin", suggests a commonplace notion of physical beauty which is both **racist** in terms of its Western aspirations, as well as **casteist** in the sense of its association of "fairness" with upper caste identities. While we are not given an idea of Matangini's caste identity in the novel, it is important to note that most imaginative literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has focused on upper caste protagonists as central figures. The representation of lower caste or dalit identities has been mostly absent in the fiction of these times. Additionally, the influences of the aesthetic categories employed in the English novel and the Romantic tradition to describe female beauty, along with the treatment of beauty in Classical Sanskrit *kavya* allows Bankim to illustrate Matangini's physical form in such familiar terms.
- **Matangini's emotional outburst**- Right before leaving Madhav's presence, "as if under the influence of a maddening agony of soul, she grasped his hands in her own and bending over them her lily face...she bathed them in a flood of warm and gushing tears".  
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➤ [from Meenakshi Mukherjee's end-notes]- Matangini's turbulent passion and her speech signify the **genre of passionate romantic love** which is the staple of the English model available to Bankim. Mere husbandly oppression or wifely forbearance would not make a novel. The theme of desire predicated on the love angle between a man and a woman is the catalyst in making a novel popular, no matter how strange this kind of passionate outburst might seem in the novel's particular cultural context.  
➤ Significantly, Matangini is not just the heroine within this love narrative, but she is also **the sinful transgressor**. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, even while becoming the heroine of a novel she simultaneously becomes the "carnal scapegoat

for the *bhadrolok's* fear of the flesh"- This needs to be understood clearly to make a proper character sketch of the "heroine". As has been pointed out in the notes to chapter 8 [provided by me], the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali intellectual *bhadralok* was caught in a dilemma when it came to the question of the Bengali woman of their household. The conflict was between implementing the lessons of European cultural modernity in "modernizing" the Bengali woman in the fullest sense, and holding on to certain traditional aspects of Indian society by not allowing the woman to become fully modernized or Europeanized. The *bhadrolok's* "fear of the flesh" refers to this dilemma in a sexual context- The stereotypical idea of the "English memsahib" is of one who is fully liberated and is able to express her sexuality just as freely as a man. In the *bhadrolok's* imagination the memsahib figure is a subject of admiration, attraction and of fear. The fear comes from the Indian male's repressed sexuality in a society which considers the subject of "sex" taboo/sinful/not to be discussed in public. In this context, the Indian woman expressing herself as passionately and erotically as Matangini does, especially because it is directed at a man who is not her lawfully wedded husband, becomes a source of anxiety and discomfort for both Bankim and the general category of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *bhadrolok*. It must be remembered that the very word "*bhadrolok*" suggests "civility" on account of his modern education and liberal ideals, but is also often used as a satirical reference to his hypocrisies especially in dealing with the question of women's agency. Therefore, by denying Matangini a happy ending with Madhav, the novel seems to make her into a cautionary tale, a story meant to warn other women against similar acts of transgression and indulgence in illicit love. She thus becomes the "carnal scapegoat" for the *bhadralok's* fear of the flesh (a person blamed/punished for the anxieties and mistakes of others, especially because it is convenient to do so).

- Matangini's inner conflict dramatized in her passionate outburst can be understood by the kinds of descriptive terms used by Bankim-  
Words/terms denoting passion:

Impetuosity, fervor, the wild current of passion, vortex of intense present felicity (intense happiness of the moment), fire in that voluptuous eye, her melancholy features beaming with the light of an unutterable feeling.

Bankim situates **Matangini in a moral dilemma**. The wild current of passion is seen as an instinctive reaction which divorces her from all considerations of right and wrong and makes her live dangerously and falsely in the moment- "...for a moment the memory of duty, virtue, principle ceased to fling its somber shadow on the brightness of the impure felicity in which her heart reveled". Notice the use of the word "impure" applied to the wild and passionate expression of romantic love. It suggests that this kind of love is immoral and sinful in the case of the married woman who is bound by the sacred ties of matrimonial duty towards her husband and marital abode. The words "duty", "virtue", "principle" are used as opposites to denote the extreme recklessness and unprincipled behavior in which Matangini indulges by verbally and physically expressing her love for Madhav. Matangini's inability to control and regulate her own body and its expressions causes a disruption in the very structure of 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal society where women are expected to remain passive and dutiful. Female passion is therefore seen to be dangerous for society because it makes the woman question her traditional role within it. The eroticized description of

Matangini's fiery eyes, her heaving bosom and the wild luxuriant tresses of her hair give physical expression to that danger posed by her passionate outburst.

When Matangini confesses before Madhav, "I had thought that never again would human ears...hear from my lips the language I breathed tonight, ah! I know not what I felt", she recognizes the alien nature of her own words because she has been repressed for so long, unable to speak freely what her heart actually desires. As a symbol of a captured animal, her utterance of the word "love" constitutes a kind of **transgressive language** (words that break out of imprisonment through the act of speaking). Not knowing what she felt is equally a part of her repressed nature- these are her unexplored, unarticulated feelings that have suddenly come to the surface after seeing Madhav.

- **Madhav blames Matangini-** Although he reserves his love and longing for her and recognizes all the sacrifices she has made in her tragic life, he ultimately sees her as a transgressor by saying "...you see what you have done?" He tells her "root out the feeling from a heart on which no impurity should leave a spot. Forget."- This is Madhav's way of disciplining Matangini and shaming her into submitting to her traditional duties within society as a married woman. Here she is also identified with the patriarchal image of the "pure" woman who must preserve her heart from any "impurity" caused by indulging in an illicit love affair.
- **Matangini battles with her own feelings**, seeing them as an expression of her pure noble love for Madhav ("Blame me not"). At the same time she also receives Madhav's disciplining as necessary- "Yes, reproach me, Madhav...censure me, teach me, for I have been sinful, sinful in the eyes of my God, and...of my God on earth, of yourself". By equating Madhav with God, Matangini gives him the authority to guide her towards the morally-right path. This is in fact the Biblical language of salvation among Catholics where the sinner enters the confession box and speaks of her transgression to a priest who operates as the medium of God on earth. The priest delivers her from evil. Bankim uses this **Christian vocabulary** to stress on the seriousness of Matangini's moral lapse. At the same time, it absolves Madhav of any sharing in the blame. He takes on the role of the disciplinarian patriarch, the male teacher and moral guide of the "weaker sex". Here, the prudery of the bhadralok class often appears inspired by such Christian dogma. Once again, the fear of female power makes the bhadralok recoil and take on the role of the disciplinarian. Therefore, any critique of Matangini's 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali society and her position within it must be understood in these terms as well. Additionally, Matangini's self-hatred ("But you cannot hate me more than I hate myself") is a mark of her helplessness and inability to reconcile with this passionate side of her own personality. She is so used to being dominated by men that she cannot help blaming herself. It is also quite clear that Madhav himself is hardly able to control his own feelings for Matangini. Yet, in censoring his heart's desire, he calls their shared love "this sore affliction", a kind of disease or abnormality that must be rooted out of the body to make the body healthy again. This is an expression of extreme guilt and repression.
- The novel produces a number of **binaries or opposites between passion and control-** Here too, Madhav reminds Matangini of the "path of duty" which they must follow. He also refers to the "years of affliction" that have "schooled our hearts", thereby

suggesting that practice and the force of habit ensures that a person is able to lead a controlled life as against any form of temptation (expressed as “the evil which corrodes and blisters”). Their final parting words and the decision to make the human mind forget their true feelings for each other, presents a very tragic picture of a society where human beings are not able to express their natural instinctive selves but must always be mindful of rules and protocols of behavior. Matangini’s additional tragedy is not just that she is a woman in a patriarchal society, but that she is a woman who also has desire burning within her which she cannot express.

## Chapter 10: “The Return”

- **Matangini’s return journey** from Madhav’s house describes her meditative state of mind, caught between the exciting memories of her last meeting with Madhav and opposite thoughts of her sinfulness before God. Bankim’s **use of Nature** as a mirror upon which the heroine’s gloomy distressing thoughts might be reflected is typical of Romantic literature in its close poetic association between human spirit and the sublime spirit of Nature. The somber grey, the dark woods and the rain contribute to the melancholic state of Matangini’s heart and also warn of her meeting with Rajmohan (“the growing blackness of the skies announced that a storm was near”).
- **Matangini’s encounter with her husband**- She reveals to him her reason for flying to Madhav’s house. Rajmohan in turn curses her womanhood, seeing her beauty as dangerous because it inspires her to immoral acts. This suggests the innate **misogyny** in Rajmohan, his inability to consider women beyond their physicality and his need to assume authority in his relations with women- “I was proud of my beautiful wife”. For a man like Rajmohan, pride in his wife consists in assuming that the wife is a possession, always in need of being protected from committing sin if left to her own devices. In this reading, Matangini is not her husband’s “equal” or “partner”, but a subject meant to be controlled and disciplined. In a sense, both Madhav and Rajmohan perform this role of administering discipline as a right given to them by society. Only their methods of disciplining Matangini are radically different. Like Madhav, Rajmohan too uses the Biblical language of “sin” to refer to her love for Madhav. He also reveals the jealous side of his personality by revealing that he had followed Matangini when she had gone to draw water and later when she visited Madhav. Surveillance of this kind is a common trope in stories of obsessive jealous love which is often extremely violent and misogynistic as well. The man following the woman without her knowledge of being pursued could be cast in the **hunter-hunted imagery**, particularly since Matangini often appears as a caged animal. The limits to her freedom- both physical and emotional- is a

topic which binds this chapter with the previous one. While Rajmohan stops her physical mobility, Madhav censors her passionate feelings.

- Matangini elevates her love for Madhav to a plane of nobility by expressing it with courage before Rajmohan's uncontrollable rage and determination to murder her- "I love him...the uncontrollable madness of a love you cannot understand". By refusing to identify her love as sinful, she is also able to shame Rajmohan by pointing to his inability to even comprehend a love that is as passionate and spontaneous as hers. This is a moment of victory for her when she can dispose of the fetters on her lips and express herself so clearly even in the face of death.