

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

Chapter 7: "Love Can Conquer Fear"

- This chapter begins with a **prefatory note** characteristic of 18th century British novels where the author steps in to comment on the forthcoming action, anticipating the readers' expectations of horror, thrill and suspense. Bankim will follow this method in the remaining chapters as well. [End-notes, Penguin edition].
- This chapter is significant because it signals a break in the **development of Matangini's character**, so far seen as a mostly apprehensive, docile, repressed character caught between her heart's desire and the duties of an obedient wife. After learning about her husband's criminal intentions (the plotting with the dacoits to loot Madhav), Matangini sets out to warn Madhav and Hemangini of the impending danger. Two factors contribute towards her sudden desperation and boldness- Rajmohan's morally corrupt nature and Matangini's sense of duty and love for Madhav and Hemangini:
 - "A new and terrible light had just been thrown on the life and character of her husband"— As a tragic romantic figure who is equally bound by the patriarchal belief in the husband's divine status (the husband as god), Matangini had believed in Rajmohan's goodness, despite his "mad heart" and "brutal temper". After the revelation in chapter 6, she seems to have lost all faith in her husband's humanity. This knowledge is a corruption of her hopes of a better future with Rajmohan. Imagining her husband as a dacoit himself makes her shudder at the memory of all the times he had cohabited with her. At this point Matangini and Rajmohan could be seen as absolute opposites of each other in terms of their humanity and goodness of heart.
 - However, what is at risk is **Matangini's 'character'**. By leaving the house in the middle of the night without the knowledge of her husband, she crosses a metaphorical line imagined in popular Hindu mythology as the *laxman rekha* denoting the preservation of female honour. On crossing this line the woman risks her reputation and by extension, the reputation of her family. The question of the female protagonist's 'character', a central theme in the 18th and 19th century English novels revolving around the tragic fate of heroines, is always marked by the fear of a loss of honour. The woman faces several challenges to her honour, in the form of threats as well as temptations, and ultimately she is judged by the moral code of the mostly male author and her society in terms of her success or failure as an 'honourable' woman (as against the trope of the 'fallen woman' of 19th century Victorian novel- a woman who transgresses the laws of morality set by her society and is punished accordingly by fate or otherwise).

- **Matangini's courage is exemplary**- She is able to suppress the tragic realization of her own fate (“her own accursed future and degraded womanhood”) for the sake of her loved ones. Her selflessness and determination must be analyzed against its specific patriarchal backdrop. The fact that she does not share her terrible knowledge with either her sister-in-law or Rajmohan's sister testifies to a woman's inability to become the bearer of truth within a society where history-writing *as* truth-telling is majorly a male-dominated role. Matangini is afraid that the others would think she is “crazed, delirious or dreaming”- typical gender stereotypes historically used to falsify women's stories, histories and testimonies.
- **Matangini's journey through the woods** is significant in terms of the descriptive power of the episode and the transformation in Matangini's character during the course of her journey:
 - Matangini's fear of a double obstacle- unreal unearthly beings/ghosts fed into her imagination by superstition and childhood stories, and actual dacoits.
 - Matangini's journey through the dark dangerous woods is an important **exception to the 'male quest'** represented in literature and performed in real life as a conquest of 'nature' (associated with the female in the 'nature-culture' binary) by the brave enterprising man. Matangini's journey through unknown territory in the night is also a 'rite of passage' (an important event marking an important stage in someone's life) which challenges the idea of the '*laxman rekha*'. The woman is always told to stay within the limits of her private domestic space and discouraged from venturing out on her own. This moral directive is tied to the question of the woman's reputation and shame.
 - Bankim's detailed description of the natural space around Matangini- At the same time, he adds elements of horror and suspense into this physical landscape by depicting the play of shadows to reflect on the dangers in Matangini's way. The **influences of Romantic poetry and the Gothic novel** (a mix of supernatural elements, horror and romance. The Gothic form is seen as an extension of the Romantic tradition), are strongly felt in Bankim's use of these elements.
 - **Matangini's "presence of mind"** in the face of real danger- Her ready intelligence and her ability to make use of the unfamiliar environment to her advantage. In getting rid of the coarse cloth with which she had covered her light sari, Matangini enacts a symbolic divesting/stripping of her burden of female shame. By entering the pool and using her dark hair as camouflage, Matangini becomes one with nature in a subversive way. She uses nature creatively to defend herself and in the process, blurs the boundary between Nature and Culture traditionally denoted by the gender stereotype. The imagery of water denoting flexibility and fluidity complements Matangini's transgression. Furthermore, she is able to overcome her ignorance of the geographical territory by recalling a mental map in which the sight of the tops of the tall *devdaru* trees brings to her observant mind memories of the *devdaru* trees in front of Madhav's house. In this way Matangini is able to challenge the limits of her knowledge out in the wilderness by using every other resource she can find. This makes her a survivor in the wild.
 - **Matangini's relationship with Madhav** is one of secret painful love which cannot be fulfilled in their lifetime since they are both married to other people. In this

context, Matangini's flight towards Madhav's house also takes on the form of the romantic quest defined in Classical Sanskrit tradition by the idea of the *abhisara* (in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*- his Sanskrit treatise on performing arts- the *Ashta-Nayika* is a term for the eight types of *nayikas* or heroines, representing eight different states or *avasthas* in relation to her hero or the *nayaka*.) Matangini is said to fulfill the role of the *Abhisarika* in Sanskrit love poetry- the heroine who goes out to meet her lover secretly and against all odds, natural and human. In Meenakshi Mukherjee's 'Afterword' to the Penguin edition of *Rajmohan's Wife*, she compares Matangini's journey to that of "Radha's abhisara in Vaishnava poetry when she braved the elements to meet Krishna secretly". In *Rajmohan's Wife* however, this classical trope is mixed with the modern idea of female empowerment and resolution evolving in 19th century Bengal as depicted in Matangini's journey.

Chapter 8: "Forewarned and Forearmed"

- This is the first time in the novel that Matangini and Madhav come face to face against the backdrop of extraordinary circumstances- the impending attack by the dacoits. Certain factors are to be noted in here:
 - The **protocols** which must be maintained within the private sphere where the husband is considered the patriarch of the household- Hemangini observes these internalized social rules by refusing to appear before her own husband in the presence of her sister. Bankim calls her "modest", attesting to Hemangini's shame as a virtue, a positive expression of her utmost reverence for her husband and an acknowledgement of his authority. Matangini is hesitant and nervous while approaching Madhav, but for quite different reasons, although she too observes "the modesty of her sex and age"- this is also the first time that the readers will be given an idea of the doomed love angle between the two.
 - The **description of Madhav's apartment** as "gaily decorated", with the "young Babu" reclining on a rich sofa serves as a commentary on the lifestyle of the social class of zamindars of 19th century Bengal. Bankim's use of descriptive words points to the opulence and the generally idle station of this class.
 - Madhav's first words for Matangini- "I wish you were an English Memshahib, sister-in-law, that I might offer you a seat."- exposes the crisis at the heart of the 19th century social reform project begun by the category of the '**intellectual Bengali man**' of which the subject of 'women's empowerment' was a crucial aspect. The Indian intellectual, influenced by **liberal humanist Western education and culture**, felt that they needed to make changes within the private sphere as well so that the ideas of equality and freedom might be applied in a more real sense. This meant transforming the role of the Indian woman, so far seen as the

servile opposite of her patriarchal husband, limited to the sphere of her *zenana* life, unable to become her husband's equal in any sense. The European 'memshahib' was often seen as an inspiration for the Indian intellectual man, and many tried making their wives and the women in their household take up Western cultural habits which would make *him* particularly proud. Often this became a project for the man and also led to a crisis. **Indian traditional society** in its negotiations with **Western modernity** has been the theatre of several conflicts. **The 'woman's question'** became one of them. Often the man could not decide exactly how far would he 'allow' his wife to 'Westernize' without losing his control over her. The European memshahib was often seen as 'too Western' for the Indian intellectual man's image of his wife. This crisis played out in the man's inability to become the completely liberal intellectual when it came to the question of women's freedom and agency within marriage. This problem is central to the novel. Matangini's fate at the end of the novel attests to **Bankim's inability to resolve the crisis of the 'modern Indian woman'**- Should he allow her to be rewarded for following her heart with courage and determination? Or should Matangini be punished for transgressing the limits set by traditional patriarchal society? Ultimately (to return to Madhav's confusion), this Bengali intellectual man cannot reconcile the 'English Memshahib' with the native Indian woman.

- The preparation for fighting the dacoits and Madhav's ultimate success- Bankim's detailed realistic depiction of the scene and the use of culturally specific references (the 'call and response' technique to signal warnings at the enemy).