

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

Chapter 5: "A Letter- A Visit to the Zenana"

- The letter from Madhav's lawyer at the Sadar station of his district promising of success in each of his client's endeavours is met with Madhav's scepticism about the justness of the existing **legal system**: "But it is not in the nature of our courts to be right in every case".
 - Bankim's awareness of the gap between the real and the ideal in the domain of 'law' on account of his close working relationship with institutions of governance. Consequently, Bankim prepares the reader for future incidents of injustice suffered by the novel's more noble characters. This reference to the law is yet another example of the uses of **social realism** in the novel.
 - The suggestion that a landlord's duties often entailed getting dragged into legal disputes with his neighbours [endnotes, Penguin Classics edition].
- The letter carries the warning that Madhav's aunt has brought a legal suit against her nephew in the District Officer's court, challenging the authenticity of her late husband's will which had bequeathed his entire estate to Madhav on the condition that he take upon himself the responsibility of his widowed aunt: "...Great men are there at her back".
 - The suggestion that the woman is not intelligent or literate enough to instigate such a grand conspiracy, that she must have "great men" counselling her in the matter of a legal challenge to Madhav's status within the estate of her dead husband.
 - The theme of conspiracy and intrigue** adds excitement to the plot, creating elements that might help popularize the novel.
 - The question of **money and privilege** enters here, with the post-script in the lawyer's letter explaining the need for additional legal support to strengthen Madhav's case, along with a plea for a thousand rupees. Madhav's status as a landlord gives him this legal power to defend himself which would not be so easily available to a person of lesser means.
- The description of **zenana life**: "Several elegant forms might be seen flitting, not often noiselessly, but always gracefully, across the dalans and veranda with dirty earthen lamps..."
 - Politics of Space**—The divide between the **public and the private spheres** as an aspect of the 'gendering' of spaces within the discourse of patriarchy. The Public sphere is the zone of male privilege, defined by the institutions of trade, politics, legality, education, etc. It is also recognized for its 'productivity', the idea that 'men are the sole bread-winners' of society. In absolute contrast, the Private sphere is the zone of female domesticity, a confined space defined by the protocols of honour and duty towards family

and children. As against the tangible productivity of the male domain (measured in terms of money/profit/success), female domestic labour is not considered as a productive aspect of the economy (economy understood here as the oil running the machineries of the country, the public institutions, contributing to wealth-generation, etc).

-**Bankim's use of irony and satire** in describing the everyday life of the zenana (the domestic feuds among servants over the quantity of ghee to be used for a particular dish, the quarrelling children, the repetitive acts of cleaning and chopping), seeks to strengthen this popular idea of the female space as unimportant, petty and chaotic [end-notes]. The pettiness of this zenana scene, described in ironic hyperbolic/dramatic language to bring out the non-serious nature of domestic work, further strengthens the notion of the male public domain of activity as one of seriousness. (The contrast between the law courts and the zenana could be seen here).

-**Madhav's entry into the zenana** is an intrusion which immediately brings order to a chaotic scene. The suggestion here is that the female space is one of disorder, noisiness, chaos, confusion, bickering women, fighting children ("the veriest of Babels"), and the male presence stands for discipline, orderliness, control. The aunt says "it is woman's nature to be screaming", a reflection of Bankim's misogyny. He suggests here that it is 'natural' and hence inherent to women's disposition that they are always going to be irrational/unreasonable/sentimental, and therefore in constant need of male control. This is a typical male-female binary found in both popular and classical literary Indian traditions as well as in Western discourses. It is what feminist studies have called the '**nature-culture' binary** where women are associated with nature (the woman as the nurturer, the mother, idea of mother earth as passive and in need of protection), and men with culture (creators, philosophers, statesmen—producing 'art' and building civilizations).

-The women in the zenana recognize Madhav's absolute authority; the servant women disappear and all noise ceases. Within the understanding of the gendering of spaces/space politics, the *zenana* or *andarmahal* is constructed as a place where the woman's honour might be secured and at the same time, male authority recognized through certain basic protocols of behaviour (such as, the servant women lowering their voices and disappearing from Madhav's view). This is a space inaccessible to strange men, those who do not belong to the family. This aspect of preserving the notion of 'shame' is a duty of the woman which she performs through her invisibility upon encountering a male presence within the *zenana*. Therefore, even the zenana is not a 'perfect' female space of autonomy or freedom of expression. The zenana is only a part of the larger social space ordered by patriarchal disciplining.

-Make note of the several **non-English words** used to describe the domestic rituals of a typical Bengali household—*bunti/bouti*, *dalan*, *mall*, etc. these are words which are specific to a certain linguistic culture, a certain way of life familiar to Bankim's indigenous heritage. However, when inserting the same words into an English text, the question of the author's 'readership' comes into play. How successful is Bankim in translating the essence of a typical 19th century Bengali domesticity for his English readers? Is something lost in translation? Or might we say that something is truly gained in being able to provide access to an 'alien' culture to people (the Western readers) who are totally unfamiliar with it? What can we therefore say about the role of literature in crossing geographical and cultural boundaries and bringing people closer imaginatively?

Chapter 6: “Midnight Plotting”

- Matangini, the main protagonist of the novel, is seen in this chapter in the aftermath of the domestic violence suffered at the hands of her brutish husband Rajmohan. The text begins with a description of her mental state and her physical surroundings where the two come together: “Matangini lay in her bed brooding over the sufferings she was doomed forever to bear”.
 - The **description of Matangini’s chamber** is infused with a romantic and erotic essence. The bright moonbeam creeping through a slight crevice in the small window falls on her cold mud floor, reviving fond childhood memories. Here the basic interrelated ideas are:
 - **The play of Light and Darkness**, with references to the moon, is a common literary trope in descriptive literature of both classical Indian and Western Romantic traditions. Bankim uses several such references to Nature in order to reflect on the status of the human mind, its fantasies and fears. The brightness of the moonlight is also suggestive of a ray of hope in Matangini’s inner darkness. It stands in contrast to the humble chamber in which she appears captivated without any future prospects. It must be remembered that Rajmohan’s financial status is equally epitomized by the humble nature of the chamber. The moonlight also brings to her mind a longing for more innocent carefree days.
 - **Eroticism and Sensuality** become the subjects of Bankim’s description of Matangini’s physical form and her emotional state-- “her head raised from the pillow and supported on her hand her *anchal* thrown off from her bosom towards the waist on account of the sultry heat”, offering a contrast between her youth (the passionate heat of youthfulness), and the coldness/deadness of her circumstances as Rajmohan’s wife. Youth is also associated with freedom, life, longing and revolution, all of which are repressed within Matangini at the moment. As noted in earlier chapters, Matangini is constantly tormented by an inner conflict between expressing her heart’s will and following the sacred rules of patriarchal society. This conflict is central to her characterization.
 - **Memory, Nostalgia and Lost Innocence of Childhood**—Matangini reflects on her childhood as a time of happiness, “the days when she could sport beneath the evening beams with the gay and light heart of childhood”. The representation of childhood as a time of purity and innocence (in Biblical references childhood is often imagined as a ‘prelapsarian’ state of mankind, i.e., a time before the fall of Man from God’s grace and his banishment from the Garden of Eden according to the Genesis), is common to both Western and Indian narrative traditions. Particularly in the novelistic tradition of Bankim’s time and even before that, the portrayal of the ‘coming-of-age’ woman, her transition from a state of innocence to one of experience, is often the central theme. Matangini’s memories of her time spent with her sister Hemangini out in the open air under the moon is in sharp contrast to her imprisonment within the four walls of domesticity as a married woman. The reference to the several tales told by their “affectionate grandmother”

recalls another lost love, the **oral tradition of storytelling** cultures replaced by print technology in the modern age. This could be read metatextually (where a certain text consciously comments on what it is doing) as the transition from the anonymous grandmother's oral storytelling to Bankim's writing of the printed text bearing his name as the absolute authority.

- **Sisterhood or Homosocial Female Bonding** – This is a repetitive trope in the novel, seen in the female-female bonding between Matangini and Kanakmayee, Matangini and Hemangini, and so on. The idea is that these female friendships are healthy, creative and affirmative, as against the lack of trust between Madhav and Mathur or Rajmohan's inability to build any sort of male friendships with the other characters. In this particular chapter, the two sisters' childhood memories of togetherness are represented in terms of a lost paradise because the woman is constantly asked to sacrifice these kinds of relationships for the sake of her marriage and marital responsibilities. In that sense, sisterhood or homosocial female bonding become subversive (challenging established institutions of authority) in their efforts at preserving such ties of love and trust. According to feminist criticism, female friendships within patriarchy are often seen as a threat to the order of patriarchy itself.

-The plot starts developing in this chapter, connecting the events of chapter 5 with the present one, where Matangini learns of **Rajmohan's secret plotting** with a group of **dacoits** to loot Madhav's estate. Additionally, it is revealed by the dacoit chief that a third party is interested in Madhav's uncle's will, the subject of the previous chapter. It is possible to see in Rajmohan's secret exchange outside Matangini's chamber, his extreme avarice, immorality, lack of gratitude for Madhav who has been nothing but helpful towards him, and a calculating nature. Furthermore, the plotting with the dacoits exposes the zamindar's pretence of 'nobility' and his public display of class consciousness, because the dacoit belong to the margins of society, operating as an 'outcast' and anti-social who would hardly be considered the 'social equal' of a zamindar.