

## Expostulating the Patriarchal Structures in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*

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*Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), the debut novel of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, deals with the rebellion of Matangini, a beautiful and passionate woman protagonist, against the oppression and dominance of stereotypical patriarchal trope. The novel delineates Matangini's life, essentially revolving around the patriarchal framework, and negotiating with its various impositions, demands, and exploitations till the very end. Seized between the forces of temptation, transgression and the conventional image of the obedient and chaste Indian wife, Matangini outlines the birth of modern Indian woman who struggles for selfhood and dignity. The female protagonist goes against the traditions through raising her voice against her cruel husband and loving the husband of her own sister.

Matangini is a brave, impetuous and transgressive character of Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife*. She can not be controlled by power or force. Matangini hates any idea of dominance. Matangini gradually goes to the extent of hating her husband for his dominating trait and ferocious behavior. Though Matangini violates traditional social codes by raising her voice against patriarchy and by expressing her love for the husband of her sister, she wins the sympathy of society. In the introduction to *Rajmohan's Wife*, Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments:

Inscribed in the text we also find an early statement about the helplessness and claustrophobia of women in incompatible marriage that was going to be a recurrent concern of Indian fiction for many years to come. Given the rigidness of the power structure within the family among upper caste Bengalis in the nineteenth century, it seems surprising that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of society. (Mukherjee viii)

Matangini overcomes the barriers of conventions. Matangini rejects the traditional concept of a woman's subservient position and endurance of her husband's tortures and villainous activities. Matangini is a victim of an incompatible marriage that deprives her of due honour as a wife. Matangini defies tradition and pays a lot for her struggle for independence and autonomy. Matangini loses her place at her husband's house; she abrogates her identity as a wife of a

villainous and cruel man. Consequently, Matangini is led to the territory of uncertainty, shame and depression. She is punished for her rebellion against patriarchy and tradition.

In most cultures, social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man, her identity generally constructed in terms of her relationship with men, as daughter, wife, mother. Matangini's identity is irrevocably connected to her marital status. Simone De Beauvoir in her pioneering work *The Second Sex* (1974) seeks primary inquiries in a critical venture where a woman tries to seek her identity, she tries to define herself by saying 'I am a woman'. The factual analysis suggests the basic asymmetry between the terms feminine and masculine. These terms represent socially constructed patterns, imposed by cultural and social norms. Simone De Beauvoir states that men have always given a secondary place to woman. She, further, shows how woman is forced to behave in so-called feminine way by constant cultural conditioning :

Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as autonomous being ...Man can think of himself without woman. She can not think of herself without man.(Beauvoir 102)

Betty Friedan expressed the view that, like the east and the west, the twin worlds of masculine and the feminine would never meet. She challenges woman's role inside her home, that she should find fulfillment only in domesticity and motherhood. She mentions :

For a woman as for man, the need for self fulfillment, autonomy, self realization, independent individuality, self actualization is as important as sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted. (Friedan 282)

The novel is rich in details in the depiction of interiors and the quotidian routine of women's lives. Women are supposed to engage in their works every time. Their ambitions are suppressed under the strict male domination. In other terms, the suffering of women is central to *Rajmohan's Wife*. They don't have the freedom to continue their amusements in the presence of their male counterparts. In the chapter 14, when the slanting rays of the later afternoon sun fall at regular intervals through the balcony rails in an upstairs veranda where women sit around dressing each others' hair or painting

their feet with 'red lac', discussing the different ways of braiding hair in Radhaganj and Calcutta. This relaxed scene is shattered by the unexpected arrivals of the masters of the houses, abruptly silencing the women into awe and making them scurry and hide from the authoritarian male gaze. In positions of absolute power, the masters of the house, depending on their mood, can order instant obedience, punish defiance or confer favour. In the novel, the equations among the women across the classes have a more nuanced texture – of mutual bonding, subtle rivalry, friendship, sympathy. As the image of women throughout all civilizations has been damaged and distorted under the overpowering male domination, Sarah Grimke (1970) comments :

Man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but he never desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all could do to debase and enslave her mind and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought, and says the being, he has thus deeply injured, is his inferior. (Grimke 10)

Matangini suffers a lot at the hands of Rajmohan. Matangini has to conform to the typical patriarchal societal structure, which expects a woman to be obedient, submissive. Matangini religiously follows her husband's instructions to stay indoor throughout the day and denies the invitation of Kanakmayee to go out to fetch water from outside:

At this the younger woman became grave and said, 'You know, Kanak Didi, I never fetch water.'

'That is why I am asking you to,' replied Kanak. 'Why should you remain in a cage all the day. Do not all other housewives draw water?'

The young woman said firmly, 'I cannot argue about it, Kanak. You know my husband has forbidden me to fetch water, and you know him well.' ( Chatterjee 4-5)

Matangini, at the insinuation of Kanakmayee, steps outside her familiar terrain. The first trace of rebellion, in the tone of Matangini, reflects when she retorts to her husband's chiding for going out to fetch water:

'Well, queen, where have you been?'

The woman firmly whispered back, 'I had gone to fetch water.' She was standing like a statue exactly on the spot where her husband had asked her to stop.

'To fetch water!' taunted Rajmohan. 'But with whose permission did you go out?'

'With nobody's permission.'

'With nobody's permission!' he shouted. 'Have I not forbidden you a thousand times?'

The woman replied in the same even tone, 'You have.'

'Then, wretched girl, why did you go?'

The woman proudly replied, 'I am your wife.' Her face reddened and her voice began to be choked. 'I had gone because I thought there was nothing wrong in it.' (Chatterjee 12)

Matangini endures all kinds of sufferings but when she overhears the nefarious plan of robbery in Madhav's house by Rajmohan and his dacoits friends, she takes upon the most hazardous and perilous midnight adventure to save Madhav's life. She goes against the conventions, breaks all the bondages and emerges like a new woman. The concept of new woman challenges the traditional notions of 'Angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious image'. The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society. She is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential. Matangini typifies the new Indian woman seeking her release from the cruelties and tyrannies of a medieval past.

Matangini's solitary journey in the dark night through forest, water, storm and lightning shows her courage who dares to venture out in the dark night at the cost of her life. Though Matangini thinks of the appalling dangers of the journey : "what would happen if the band of desperate robbers were stationed somewhere in the forest and who would understand her, even what would Madhav think ! All these questions came into her mind but she gathers all her energy and summons her resolution. Like a delirious river, her immense inner strength is revealed in the language when she knocks the household of Madhav with the hope of informing him well before about the dacoity : "I am a woman and no thief, come and see." ( Chatterjee 29) Now Matangini frees herself from her socially constructed identity as Rajmohan's wife and establishes her self-image. In fact, that courage of Rajmohan's wife, her defy of social norms, the act of informing Madhav at midnight- all these create trouble in establishing the typical image of a woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. That established social construction further breaks down when, in one of the key scenes of the novel, Matangini reassures her love for Madhav, her former paramour and brother-in-law, in an unequivocal language. At this point, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

"Given the rigidity of the power structure within the family among the upper caste Bengalis in the nineteenth century, it seems surprising that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of the society. Matangini's unrequited love for her own sister's husband is presented with authorial sympathy but the abruptness and the ambivalence of the ending may be the result of an anxiety such a woman of energy generated, by posing a threat to the social order and

creating a moral dilemma for the author." (Mukherjee vi)

Matangini challenges the image of woman as 'Angel in the house' and like Nora, the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who leaves her home in search of her identity, crosses the threshold to save the life of Madhav. Matangini shows highly alertness and cleverness when she lets her long hair loose in the water of the pond around her fair face to avoid detection in the moonlight. In this context, Simone De Beauvoir's words can be quoted :

Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have challenges this unjust society, a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful works.(Beauvoir 18)

After saving Madhav from the robbery, when Matangini returns home and finds that her husband is ready to kill her, she confesses her love for Madhav. In such a crucial time, the confession of her love depicts that woman should have the right to love the person, to whomsoever she wants. This shows Matangini as a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of society. Even in the captivity of Mathur Ghose, Matangini does not surrender herself before him and introduces her boldness. When Mathur determines to gratify at once both revenge and lust, Matangini says :

'Never !' said Matangini, concentrating the energy of twenty men in her look, 'Never yours. Look here', and she placed herself immediately in front of him 'Look ! I am a full grown woman, and at least your equal in brute force. Will you call in allies?' Mathur Ghose stood bewildered at this wonderful challenge.(Chatterjee 119)

Matangini can not be returned to the conjugal space because of socially unforgivable step which was taken by her. This depicts the dark side of the patriarchal society. In such

society, whenever a woman tries to assert her subjectivity then her love is thwarted, her aspirations are crushed and her life is threatened. Matangini's young death indicates the refusal towards the radical changes made by the woman in a patriarchal society. Matangini's dream of creating a new society, her struggle and sacrifice do leave a mark on the society. Besides Matangini, Tara, wife of a powerful landlord Mathur, also passes through such a condition in which she receives the inferiority complex, suppression and betrayal. Tara, who noticing her husband's restlessness, steals his keys when he is asleep, opens the forbidden rooms and rescues Madhav. Without Tara, Madhav and Matangini's secret of kidnapping can not be disclosed. Tara voices her inner conscience, suspects on her husband's activities and takes steps against him. Thus, Tara also asserts her existence, individuality.

Thus, at the core of Matangini's character, lies a rebel against accepted conventions. At first, Matangini is portrayed as a stereotyped housewife of any Indian village ready to accept the patriarchal codes silently and uncritically. However, as the plot develops, Matangini is transformed. Matangini abhors her husband because of his intention of dominating over and suppressing her and robbing of her inner self. Makarand Paranjape states :

Matangini is not just Rajmohan's wife, but the spirit or personification of modern India itself. This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India... The defining features of modern India are thus its energy, its adventurousness, its unwillingness to be confined by tradition, and its desire to break free. The restlessness, vitality, charm, and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini. (Paranjape 150)

Matangini revolts against patriarchal oppression. Despite the society's denial of her basic rights, she accommodates her rights by choosing her interests and listening to her own inner voice.

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