

# Representation of Indian Society in the First Indian English novel

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Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first published novel in English by an Indian. The beautiful and brave Matangini, married to a

reprehensible man and in love with her sister's husband, represents the vitality of women who remain strong against brutality and restrictive expectations of middle class Indian society at that time.

Matangini who risks her life to save her love, Madhav isn't rewarded at the end of the book, she was sent to her father's house and there she died an

early death. The novel has two villains Mathur and Rajmohan. The protagonist

, Matangini is a representation of brave Indian woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who doesn't fear to take risks.

Two major themes of the novel- the role of women in nineteenth century India as they struggle against oppression and the symbolic representation of the new spirit of India trying to make strenuous efforts to assert itself over patriarchal and colonial rule. Matangini knows what is right and what is wrong and she won't move along with the wrong. Matangini, like the new India, is willing to strive in new ways and to assert her independence.

One of the novel's villain Mathur is a cruel, vulgar man who is the originator of the plot against Madhav. Rajmohan too, opposes Matangini and Madhav and is involved in the plot.

*Rajmohan's Wife* provides an image of a traditional Indian society and all its intricate ideological, political, social and cultural aspects. The novelist presents Matangini's courage, passion and righteousness against the limiting and socially judgemental society of old India. This difference beautifully explains the difference between confining Indian society of that time and the newly emergent modern Indian society of the kind that Bankim visualizes. Each character is embodiment of social conditions and ideological configurations rather than merely the portrayal or representation of an individual.

*Rajmohan's Wife* is very nearly realistic in its representation of Bengali middle class life of nineteenth century. The novel's plots and characters symbolically illustrate the birth of modern India that was struggling for selfhood and dignity as well as the modern Indian woman through political, cultural and social contexts. There is a touch of informality and intimacy in the novel. The novel reflects on the positive and negative issues of society through the characters. The novelist projects how women long for freedom in a male dominated society.

The simple writing style of the novel is one of the best things about the novel. The story is gripping as it has its historic significance and its well written plot. Bankim's writing changed and influenced the history of the realist as well as the historical novel. The age in which Bankim wrote was a transitional age- in many ways foreign rule accelerated the transformation of Indian society from medieval to modern. An English educated middle class created a new literature in different Indian languages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bankim writes English as if he is translating ancient Sanskrit literature, it shows his acknowledging the influence of the Indian writings. He chooses not to copy the style of the Western writings. The language used in the novel was a mix of the colloquial and proverbial styles.

The novel has melodramatic style of writing. The word "melodrama" comes from Greek and means "song drama".

"The flourishing of melodrama in the 19<sup>th</sup> century produced a kind of naively sensational entertainment in which the main characters were excessively virtuous and exceptionally evil (hence the luminously good hero or heroine and the villain of deepest and darkest dye), an abundance of blood, thunder, thrills and violent action....and also .... Realism in the shape of extravagant tales of the wickedness of drinking, gambling and murdering" (J A Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms 387-388)

About Matangini- "The dainty limbs of the woman of eighteen were not burdened with such abundance of ornaments, nor did her speech betray any trace of the East Bengal accent, which clearly showed that this perfect flower of beauty was no daughter of the banks of the Madhumati, but was born and brought up on the Bhagirathi in some place near the capital....Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder, but some tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks."(3)

In the beginning she is contrasted with her companion Kanakmayee – she is reluctant to even part with her veil.

"Kanak laughed and said, 'come now, my proud girl, let's go and show beauty's splendor to the gaping idiots.' Hang you, monkey cried the other and hid her blushing face in her veil."(6)

When her face is revealed, accidentally because of wind, she was punished by her cruel husband and she didn't fight back. This can place her in the tradition of good Hindu wives- submissive, modest and long suffering.

"Only tears were streaming down her face. At the sight of her silent suffering, the cruel man softened a little. He no longer tried to beat her, but continued his abuse." (13)

But the story later progresses in quite another way. She runs away from home at night in order to save her sister and brother-in-law putting everything in risk.

"Then summoning all her resolutions, she made rapid but noiseless steps. Her heart beat as she walked through the jungly path.

The dreary silence and the dark shadows appalled her." (39)

Matangini confesses her passion for Madhav Ghose: "'Ah, hate me not, despise me not,' cried she with an intensity of feeling which shook her delicate frame, 'Spurn me not for this last weakness; this, Madhav, this, may be our last meeting; it must be so, and too, too deeply have I loved you – too deeply I love you still, to part with you for even without a struggle.'" (53)

When Matangini returns to Rajmohan after saving Madhav, Rajmohan turns on her savagely: "Woman, 'he said fiercely, deceive

me not. Canst thou ? Thou little knowst how I have watched thee; how from the earliest day that thy beauty became thy curse, I have followed every footstep of thine- caught every look that shot from thine eyes. Brute thou I be, 'continued he again becoming gentle, I was proud of my beautiful wife.....Did I not see before thou wert a woman, thou didst already become fond of that cursed wretch ? Did I not see how time ripened thy fondness into sin?.' ” (60)

Mathur Ghosh's lust for Matangini makes him become really reprehensible. The novel has the message that to live by desire alone can't lead to happiness because there is no end to it. The novel proves the destructive nature of desire. Matangini suffers, Mathur Ghosh hangs himself and Rajmohan ends up in jail. The situation prevailing in the relationship between Madhav and Matangini seems to point out that love needs no rationalization as: “ On the threshold of my heart.....I wrote –‘No thoroughfare’ .....Love came laughing by and said..... 'I enter everywhere.' ”

In the novel, the novelist is concerned about the drawbacks linked with such social institutions like family and marriage and their impacts on the individual's life. Such social institutions are threatened by some villainous people which results into unhappiness and suffering of all.

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