UNIT 2 THEMES IN RAJMOHAN’S WIFE - PART 1

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will take up a detailed textual analysis of the novel Rajmohan’s Wife. First we will look very briefly at some of the questions that arise from the fact that this is the first ever novel Bankim wrote and the only one he wrote in the master language or if you like, the language of the colonisers. Two very important questions need to be asked here: Why does he choose to write in English and not in Bengali? And secondly, why did he cease to write in English? One could say English was (and still is) the language of power – in the sense that it was the master’s language and all serious business was conducted in English. Let us explore this further.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the first things that any middle class family aspired to do was to educate their sons in English. To write in it was to assert or at least aspire for the power that it represented.

However, if it was empowering, why did Bankim not carry on using it in his other novels? In his use of the master language, Bankim was anything but slavish. He adapted it boldly, wrote it with a confidence and defiantly chose not to translate some words that he very easily could have: these are the choices every writer makes and none of these choices are “innocent”. That is, each choice made by a writer should be understood as motivated by his/her overt or covert politics. It is not as if the choice of language can be seen as a simple choice without political implications. If, for instance Bankim writes English as if he is translating ancient Sanskrit Kavya literature, it must be seen as his assertion of that indigenous model of writing over that of other western models which he was also familiar with. At any rate it shows his acknowledging the influence that Indian writing had over him. It also shows that he chooses not to copy the style of his western contemporaries whom he had also read. Thus his adapting of English in a manner that made it his own tongue is a significant choice.

After a cursory look at these kinds of issues, we will take up a close textual analysis focusing on the characters of Matangini and Rajmohan in the novel and the treatment of marriage in the text. This was a theme that Bankim persisted with through more than half a dozen of his novels. We will look at Matangini’s near transgression and to what extent it is justified by the parameters of the text. Does the fact that she has a brutal husband extenuate her circumstances or is there a sub text, another underlying
logic in the narrative that undermines her moral position? In the section that follows we shall try and determine why Bankim chose to write this particular novel in English and also address the question of who Bankim was really writing for. Was it the Indian readership that he had in mind or was he writing for the English reading and speaking public?

2.2 LANGUAGE AND AUDIENCE

In this section, let us familiarise ourselves with the peculiar relation between an author’s choice of a language and his audience. The issue is quite problematic. We should try and see how questions of this nature emerge from such a consideration.

Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half-scorched and half-radiant under the noonday sun. Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder; but some loose tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks.

This is the description of our eponymous heroine, Matangini – and it is certainly not in the tradition of the purest English prose. Here we have Bankimchandra Chatterjee experimenting with the alien language of the coloniser. The aesthetics of the language quite apart, there is certainly an interesting politics in the choices involved. Most obviously, the writer’s vocabulary reveals a deeply rooted, culture-specific content. Clearly the culture specific nature of the story does not permit a simple mimicry of more purist styles – it is a story that is so deeply rooted in rural Bengal that to write English is only possible if he makes it his own. When he writes about “loose tresses which had thrown away the bondage” or about the “land lotus”, what he is doing is introducing images from his own culture into a language that belongs to his rulers – an act which requires a great deal of confidence. The author attempts a prose that tries to knit together different cultural images into the master’s language – he is appropriating English into the service of his own culture. This particular passage reads more like Sanskrit prose in translation. Sanskrit Kavya literature is not the only influence at work in the novel – in fact the novel contains a whole range of cross-cultural influences ranging from Fielding, Richardson and Thackeray to regional and native literature closer home. This is revealed not just in the ideas, but also in the vocabulary used which remains fairly multilingual.

Meenakshi Mukherjee talks about “the contradictory signs embedded in the text” which make it difficult to construct the identity of the reader”. She points out the use of Bangla words like Thakurpo, mol, Jama-dut – words which to us seem to insist on a specific cultural nuance where the author refuses to use the equivalent terms in English. But what is more baffling is the use of certain Hindustani words like zenana and Bur trees which have Bangla equivalents but are preferred over them. This preference of multilingual over monolingual vocabulary seems to point towards a wider audience – or at any rate a more cosmopolitan audience. But the most puzzling use is of terms like ‘Go to Jericho’ that seems to pretend momentarily that the characters are really speaking in English whereas for the most part the characters sound as though they have been translated. The only conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the only reader familiar with all these vocabularies would have to be from a socio-linguistic background identical with that of the author. The reader would have to be English educated and therefore upper class. It is actually difficult to assess the number of readers – but it is not hard to see here a notion of a community that is specifically targeted. What we should try to do is to see the ramifications of the creation of such a community. It is hard to actually assess the number of readers Bankim imagined writing for. If he wanted to include all English speaking Indians, then was he disappointed – was his disappointment the cause of his having switched back to his native Bengali?
2.2.1 Bankim’s Use Of Language

The language used, with a lively mix of the colloquial and the proverbial styles, raises questions about the implied reader of Bankim’s novel. We shall use the term “implied” to indicate that all writers address a specific community. For instance, sometimes we find French and Latin words in an English novel, this implies that the reader was assumed to be familiar with these languages. Similarly we might come across a vernacular word in a novel by an Indian in English, while at other times, a word of common usage is translated—for instance, a writer might say “vermilion in her hair” or she/he may use the term “sindoor”, one implies a readership that is confined to an unfamiliar linguistic background, the other implies a readership with a similar linguistic background. Thus an Indian writing English may be writing for a limited Hindi-speaking readership, or for a wider international market. The most important point about Bankim’s use of language is the one raised by Meenakshi Mukerjee, when she says that from the vocabulary he employs, which are borrowed from different languages, it is not possible to single out the exact nature of the readership. The only thing we can actually conclude is that Bankim aspired for a wider audience here, than in his later novels where he used only English.

2.3 THE LOCATION OF THIS COMMUNITY

Before we study the intricacies of the text, let us offer at least one of the readings of Rajmohan’s Wife. The opening of this story is in an old fashioned rural landscape. Two women are carrying pitchers to fetch water. There are “numerous roses and mallika buds caressing the eyes of the passers-by”, the men watching them were as “fascinated by the sight as a deer is by the sound of the flute”, even the manner in which the villainous Mathur glimpses the heroine tells of a rural landscape. Matangini’s beauty draws on old fashioned folklore where a strong gust of wind blows away the veil, thereby exonerating the woman completely of blame and making her as innocent as the damsels in the days of yore. Matangini here is not admired merely through simple description she is also contrasted rather favourably with her companion Kanakmayee. We are told that Kanakmayee is coarse and her accent is East Bengali, while Matangini is refined and bears no trace of the poorer, rustic East Bengali accent. That her features, gait and attitudes are also superior only follows. We are now lulled into expecting an easy correlation between the submissive Hindu wife and a refinement of manner. Our heroine disdains the defiance suggested by the rather rustic Kanakmayee with amusement. The contrasting manners of the two women are seen not merely as regional, but also in terms of class difference. In the chapter entitled “A Letter – Visit to the Zenana”, we have a very perturbed Madhav searching for his aunt. He finds to his chagrin that his voice is drowned by the melee created by the team of women engaged in domestic chores. The women labouring are shown to be ‘hurling dire anathemas, demanding, eloquent, active engine in mouth’. When Madhav complains about his house resembling a bazaar, the masi replies: ‘It is a woman’s nature to be screaming’, (27) Clearly this is not a statement meant to be universally true – as much as it is meant to be class specific.

The readers for whom Bankim wrote would perhaps not have thought twice about such a statement. But it is the preceding chapter that looks at the origins of the zemindar family that is rather bold and unusual. The chapter sets out to trace the family history of Madhav and Mathur Ghose. The chapter begins with a scathing observation ‘It is a notorious fact that many eminent zemindar families in Bengal owe their rise to some ignoble origin’. In this case, it is revealed that it was their grandfather who rose to acquire land and wealth. We are told he was a crafty menial in the house of a wealthy young widow. He used his youth and virility with tact and then discretely moved to his village. He however inherited her property, while leaving her to die, and ‘soon she got a fever from unintelligible or rather very
intelligible causes, became fearfully violent, forced (the anxious widow) to part with her domestic and with the world before age had chilled her fires; (16).

This digression, structurally, very close to Fielding, has far greater sting than the rest of the story put together. Its profound insight on female sexuality and its irreverence towards the aristocracy signal the changing times and the shifting class dynamic in Bengal as well as usher for a new set of social values. The demythification of the aristocracy – by exposing the ignoble origins of the Ghose family is also interesting not just because it debunks the privileged position that the zemindar families have occupied for centuries but in another way as well...It refuses the didacticism of rewarding the good son and punishing the prodigal. The usual story with a moral tells us that we get what we deserve, but in this digression, the lazy son gets a good son and the hard working son has the bad son. This seems to suggest the reverse of the usual moral fable. The hard working, diligent son of the erstwhile servant has a son who he sends to a provincial school (Mathur) and the prodigal son sends his son (Madhav) to a western school. The complete contrast between the two cousins is offered to us largely as a product of their education. We are told that the eldest son i.e. Mathur Ghose’s father was suspicious of western education and so the upbringing is provincial and very clearly, the implication is that the horizons are very narrow. While Madhav’s father produces a worthy son despite his improvident ways – or because of them – the implication very clearly is that colonial education expands civilisation and brings in a new, vigorously needed set of values. The novel does not shy away from using western / colonial / metropolitan education synonymously with good education. In the chapter “A zemindar family”, we are told:

One good result however had followed Ramkanai’s residence in the metropolis. Influenced by the example of the metropolitans, he had bestowed on his son Madhav as good an education as he could receive in Calcutta. (17).

This point is made by Nirad C Chaudhuri as well when he talks about how the word ejoo was applied only to those well educated in English and never to those who were learned in any other native language. Let us now turn to an examination of the character of Matangini in the following section.

2.4 MATANGINI

Of particular importance in the novel, as we have seen, is the character of Matangini. How should we view her? To put it in another way: the men are the products of their education – but what about the women?

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 dearly 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).

Which tradition does our heroine Matangini come from?

When we see her 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 splendour to the gaping idiots.’ Hang you, monkey cried the other and hid her blushing face in her veil. (6)
When her face is revealed, it is only accidental – because of a gust of wind. her
“immodesty” is punished by her cruel husband and we do not see her retaliate, all this
can only place her in the tradition of good Hindu wives – compliant, 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)

As was said earlier, the scenes that frame her at the beginning depict her as docile and
sacrificing – entirely conforming to good Hindu notions of womanhood. But the story
later develops in quite another way. In the chapter entitled “Love Can Conquer
Fear”, she runs away from home at night in order to save the fortunes of her sister
and brother-in-law. In doing so she puts everything she has at considerable 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)

When she is later alone with Madhav Ghose, she confesses her passion for him.

‘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 do I love you still, to part with you for even
without a struggle. (53)

In fact this outburst of passion and her recklessness here is in sharp contrast with the
way she is portrayed in the beginning. What brings about this transformation? The
transformation is a fairly obvious violation of psychological plausibility. One of the
basic rules of traditional story telling is surely a consistency of character – but this is
defied. But this appears to be a very deliberate choice. The narrator could have shown
her as defiant to begin with – or he could have had her simmer with silent, sinful
passion that remains unarticulated. But the writer forgoes both these options. This is a
very revealing choice – it offers only one explanation. We shall consider this option
in the next section.

2.5 PASSION VERSUS DUTY

What is the impact of this early portrayal of Matangini as long suffering oppressed
and victimised? It seems that Bankim wants to create a character whose suffering is
unjustified. The reader is thus perforce made to give unqualified support to
Matangini. The villainy of Rajmohan – cruel, surly and a man of unmitigated evil
(attempting to rob his benefactors) – further this agenda. Thus, when Matangini
finally blurts out her doubly forbidden love (violating in one fell swoop both marital
and familial boundaries), she is at once forgiven. In fact, there is an anticipation of
the reader’s judgement.

Yes reproach me, Madhav”, she continued, “censure me, teach me, for I
have been sinful; sinful in the eyes of my God, and I must say it, Madhav, of
my God on earth, of yourself. But you cannot hate me more than I hate
myself ...” (55)

Bankim has risked the traditional reader’s disapproval by having Matangini defy her
husband. However, before the reader can judge her, she condemns herself. How does
she do this? She does this by submitting herself to Madhav and admitting the wrong
that she has done. Her expression of an extra-marital love here is an obvious rejection
of traditional values. But her simultaneous submission to Madhav and the vocabulary that she uses, that sees man as a godlike figure, undermines the rebellion of her earlier rejection. Once again, it makes her more traditional than rebellious and undermines her defiance as makes her acceptable to the traditional reader.

Madhav accepts his godlike status without flinching — thereby reinforcing the very patriarchy which the text seeks to question. He makes a predictable speech that places him firmly in the tradition of 19th century Bhadralok heroes who remain benevolent, progressive, liberal and deeply patriarchal. He is not unsentimental because he repeatedly bursts into tears, but the emotion is kept under check by an irrefutably reasonable mind. That is why at the cost of making him sound priggish, the author has him say:

Listen to me Matangini,' replied Madhav, scarcely cool himself, ‘listen and spare both of us this sore affliction. At your father’s house the flame was kindled which seems fated to consume us both and which then we were too young to quench by desperate efforts, but if even then we never flinched from the path of duty, shall we not, now that years of affliction have schooled our hearts, eradicate from them the evil which corrodes and blisters them? Oh! Matangini, let us forget each other. Let us separate ’, (55)

We have quoted Madhav here at length because we want to pick on his vocabulary here which uses fate, desperate efforts, path of duty and evil — all of this places him squarely on the side of tradition and convention. His understanding is simple: theirs is an illicit love that is corrosive — it must therefore be forgotten and eradicated. To do otherwise would be evil. But is this voice authorial? It would not be wrong to suggest that even if it has some authorial approval, it does not have all of it. The next passage amply illustrates the point we are trying to make.

Matangini rose and stood erect in the splendour of new flushed beauty. ‘Yes if the human mind can be taught to forget, I will forget you. We part now and for ever’ (55-56).

Her answer to Madhav recognises the superior claims of duty over illicit passion. But this is only one part of the story. Every other sign in the text indicates that the author’s imaginative sympathy lies with her. Her beauty at this point is celebrated. Just a little earlier we were told that the

distant and reserved demeanour, the air of dejection and broken-heartedness which had marked her from the first had disappeared ... for the wild current of passion had hurried her to that region where naught but the present was visible , and in which all knowledge of right and wrong is whirled and merged in the vortex of intense present felicity ...(54).

The reader is first drawn into the vortex of the “intense present felicity” and then before one can censure this transgression, Matangini admonishes herself. But her last words to Madhav hauntingly contest the claims of duty. When Madhav says to her that they must forget each other, she bows to him, but her whisper “If the human mind can be taught to forgive” remains unanswered, ultimately leaving open-ended any attempt on Madhav’s part to seek closure here. Because what Madhav has said implies an end — a termination of their feelings for each other. He says it must end because their feelings for each other are somehow not permissible. Matangini agrees that their relationship has no future, but her words here undercut Madhav — if reason must dictate their behaviour, then so be it. What she says is that feelings will not be governed by reason, that the human heart will follow its own course. And this is the nature of transgression that we will discuss at length in a later unit. But for the moment let it suffice to say that while the story through Madhav tries to bring their feelings to an end, Matangini’s words which talk about the impossibility of reason governing emotion prevent the neat ending that Madhav wants.
Here, we shall acquaint ourselves with the viewpoint that governs the text. In one way or another, all literature has a morality—most writing consciously or unconsciously expressing a world-view. But when we use the term “conduct literature” we do not refer to all literature. We are specifically referring to a lot of early writing that was produced for popular consumption that took upon itself the role of educating its readers. It could be directly or indirectly didactic. For instance it could tell us how to eat or bring up our daughters, or it could tell us a story in which the path of virtue is rewarded. We use this term conduct literature to include all forms of didactic writing—but particularly the kind of writing that became popular with the rising number of middle class readers.

What is contained in Rajmohan’s Wife are contradictory positions: it remains finally ambiguous about its attitude to women and marriage. We will talk later about why the story seems to be on the brink of a radical break with social norms, but then withdraws and concludes on a sober, rather conservative note. The contradictory signs embedded in the text on women’s issues and on morality as a whole are a product of an attempt to grapple with a change visualised at the core of the situation. The complexity of the historical process underpinning such an attempt is best put forward by Raymond Williams. He talks of the residual, dominant, and emergent elements that coexist at any cultural moment, (Marxism and Literature, 121-7). Williams means that culture is not a unitary phenomenon—it is not a homogeneous unit that can be located in a single category. For instance, if we were to say that the culture that dominates our society is the urban upper class one, we would be right. But to say that society is shaped only by the middle class would not be true. There is also the rural poor, the urban poor, the zamindars, and the urban upper class. The zamindars and the bonded labour that can be found in rural areas could be seen as the residual class, the class that remains from an older feudal structure. The urban middle class could then be seen as the class that is on the make and the class that is about to be the dominant class.

Williams acknowledges that there is a dominant culture that is the most powerful, but it is not the only element that constitutes culture. At any given moment there are less powerful elements that either resist the dominant culture or run counter to it. Dollimore elaborates Williams’ categories, and he defines residual as that which

denotes . . . experiences, meanings and values which have been formed in the past, which cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture and may even be in opposition to it, yet are still active. Emergent culture on the other hand involves the finding of new forms, in the process of which there occurs ‘pre-emergence’, that is an expression which is ‘active and pressing but not yet fully articulated’”. (Radical Tragedy: Jonathan Dollimore, 7)

What we are trying to suggest is a relationship between emergent culture and the grappling of the text with an incipient change in social mores. This happens subtly in the process of literary composition. To the reader, a fictional work poses numerous challenges. Read at one level, the story may seem as a cautionary tale that is one kind of conduct literature. For what else does Samuel Richardson attempt if not a rewarding of virtue? By cautioning his female readers of the pitfalls of lust, he is steering the emergent bourgeois morality away from the path of dalliance. In the case of Bankim, the readers are a newly colonised class, negotiating tradition and modernity. The author is then targeting an audience which might be receptive to a questioning of traditional boundaries—but this interrogation is done not blatantly but with circumspection. The structure of the tale is like several others in its genre, i.e. didactic. In Rajmohan’s Wife, an unhappily married and much oppressed woman is consumed with an illicit passion for her brother-in-law. All this is silent till finally
Matangini confesses all. Madhav acknowledges a diluted version of the same. He reminds her of the path of righteousness, she sighs and agrees, (well almost). And then? As the story unfolds, we discover she suffers. While all other characters get the ends they deserve, Matangini’s suffering is unmitigated. We are told that Mathur Ghose hanged himself, Rajmohan was apprehended, Matangini was dispatched to her father’s house, “History does not say how her life was terminated, but it is known that she died an early death” (124). As if this were not bad enough, we are told that while she lived with her father ‘Madhav increased the pension he allowed the old man, on her account.’ If this is not the most patriarchal and convenient of all ways of extenuating himself, we may never know what is.

The point of course is that given its historical juncture, this was the most cautious end possible. An adulterous, incestuous passion can neither be forgotten (even though our hero urges Matangini to do so) nor consummated. It cannot be forgotten because there is too much emotion there that Matangini confesses cannot be wished away. Yet to have them give in to such a passion would be to take the risk of defying tradition. The end Matangini meets here vindicates the moral status in traditional terms. The conservative section of society would perhaps approve of this end. (We have talked about the outcome of transgression in Bankim as always tragic). Matangini’s unhappy brief life and her early death echoes, the fate of the woman who bestowed all her fortune on the grandfather of the Ghose cousins. So far everything fits. The imagined reader Bankim wrote for would probably have understood Matangini’s plight and appreciated the end as inevitable. The story addresses the fundamental anxiety that monogamy imposes: what happens when you are attracted to someone and neither of you is unattached. But there are different possible ends:

- Matangini and Madhav consummate their love and live happily ever after.
- They acknowledge their love and die of unhappiness.
- They concede that they both must go back and suffer their respective marriages and maybe suffer their thwarted passion equally.
- That the woman suffers the solitude silently and the man resumes at least a seeming normalcy.

We could perhaps go on, but the truth is that Bankim selects the last possibility – perhaps the most unfair as well as the most psychologically plausible one. To have a happy end would be to defy common sense and middle class morality. To have them both dissolve their marriages is always possible (and as was said earlier, Bankim plays a lot with different versions of that) – but here the woman is clearly the greater victim.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have delineated some of the important questions this book raises for us as students of literature written in English. We have to try to see why we have been asked to study some books over others. Why should we read an apparently unsuccessful book written by some 19th century Bengali? To take these questions in the order that they appear to us, we have first taken up its significance as the first novel Bankim wrote in English. His choice interesting – yet the fact that he takes liberties with the language of the British masters, by following the influence of Sanskrit writings is an anticipation of what was to later become a full-fledged nationalist streak in him. From questions of language and audience, we have gone on to discuss the portrayal of Matangini and her relationship with Madhav, her brother-in-law. The delineation of her character is extremely strategic. Bankim has tried to locate the core of the problem with marriage, but in order that the conservative section of his audience should not feel too alienated from her, he has shown her initially timid and virtuous. The passion she later articulates therefore makes her sympathetic, rather than immoral. We have argued that the role Bankim took upon
himself was one of a moral guide for his community. He is divided between his desire to talk about the nature of suffering, and a contradictory pull to try and school this weakness in the human heart. The novel then becomes a useful demonstration of the politics of Bankim, which is progressive in some ways, and traditional in some.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Bankim chose to write his first novel in English? Does the novel betray a sensibility that is informed by Western education? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Discuss the way in which Matagini has been characterised in Rajmohan’s Wife.
3. What role does the choice of language play in the writing of a novel, particularly when one of the available languages enjoys social power?