Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and the Vogue of Naturalistic Philosophy:
A Study of Rajmohan’s Wife

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“Shallow men believe in luck or in circumstance. Strong men believe in cause and effect.”
--Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s line which serves here as an epigraph is a key to my point of contention which is to dissect Rajmohan’s Wife as a Naturalistic discourse. Before trespassing into this volatile realm, let’s first see what Naturalism tries to paint. Naturalism is a term used by (French novelist Emile Zola) to describe the application of the clinical method of empirical science to all of life. . . . If a writer wishes to depict life as it really is, he or she must be rigorously deterministic in the representation of the characters’ thoughts and actions in order to show forth the causal factors that have made the characters inevitably what they are. . . . Unlike realism, which also seeks to represent human life as it is actually lived, Naturalism specifically connects itself to the philosophical doctrine of biological and social determinism, according to which human beings are devoid of free will” (Grieg E. Henderson and Christopher Brown, Glossary of Literary Theory).

Bankim Chander Chatterji is considered to be the first Indo-Anglian novelist. His first work Raj Mohan’s Wife was published in 1864. It was followed next year by Durgesh Nandini in Bengali which appeared in English translation in 1890. Later on Kapal Kundala, Vishvarasha and Anandmath followed. Romance was his forte but he was also famous as a writer of comedy and humour, he was also the master of historical novel. In the words of K.R.S. Iyengar:

“In his lifetime Bankim became the literary dictator of fiction in Renaissance Bengal. He was the master of the Romantic as well as Historical Novels”(Iyenger 412).

The modern form of the novel appeared in the latter half of the nineteenth century when the western impact on Indian’s cultural front had resulted in the development of formal written prose and fiction. In the 20th century, many novels had been written in English and in the regional languages. Bengal became the centre for Indo-Anglian fiction in the beginning, later novels in English were written in Madras, Bombay and in the southern parts of India. Though Indian fiction has a long past but the way an Indian novel is dissected by western scholars is with a preconceived notion making the judgments partial and fractured. For a long time in west which may be still prevalent here and there, the mainstream critics shy away from reading an Oriental text from its fountains of motifs. There is long legacy to this, which is perhaps created by many critics like the one who is mentioned below.

Fredric Jameson once claimed that, “All third world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I want call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say’ particularly when their forms develop out of
predominantly western machines of representation, such as the novel” (69). Proceeding on these lines, is it justified to label Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s epoch making novel *Rajmohan's Wife*, as a mere national allegory? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in negative. The novel is on a closer look just the replica of National Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlett Letter*. The way Hawthorne portrays the mid nineteenth Century puritan America has a one to one relationship with the plot of this novel. As in Hawthorne’s Novel we see that Hester labors forth her daughter Pearl but at the cost of a sin. Hester Pryne, who is married to a callous and materialistic person Chillingworth, commits the sin of adultery and is accordingly banished from the society reminding us of the exile of Adam and Eve. In this novel of Bankim we have a similar kind of a story but with a slight difference. The protagonist of novel Madhav Ghose is a timid fellow in love with a beautiful charismatic heroine Matangini. The novel has a melodramatic plot with two villains Mathur and Rajmohan. Mathur is seduced by Matangini’s sensual beauty while as Rajmohan the epitome of aristocracy has finally Matangini as his wife. Rajmohan reminds us of the Hawthornian character of Chillingworth, he is portrayed with extreme depth making him a heterodox villainous character.

The secret love between Matangini and that of Madhav Ghose doesn’t end up in a happy marriage. They are rather torn apart as Rajmohan marries the helpless Matangini, setting the whole plot in motion. For a curious reader the plot of the novel is just a replica of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlett Letter*. The Two novels have a close birth history, with Hawthorne’s novel being published in 1850 and Chatterjee’s novel being serialized in 1864. Chatterjee’s novels have usually an unhappy ending which made his novels less popular in his own life time. Another factor which contributes towards Chatterjee’s novels is the turbulent political period of that time. On one side India was reeling under the colonial yoke and on the other hand the orthodox Hindu culture was haunted by western ideas and Enlightenment. Tanika Sarkar comments upon Chatterjee’s art of fictionalizing history as, “He made no secret of his rationalistic affiliation and unambiguously proclaimed his lineage within enlightenment universalism…. Bankim gave up theses positions, never to return to them, after his debate with reverend Hastile. The themes of class, caste and gender abruptly disappear from his writing, their absence filled by reflections on all that constitutes authentic and fully historicized Hinduism, on culpability of the Muslim in Indian history, on how the Hindu society may be imagined and constructed” (Sarkar, 156). When Bankim switched to Bengali, he experimented with historical romances. At the core of Bankim’s fiction was a deep curiosity to portray the wild beauty and rebel against accepted conventions. At the core of his novels is a constant war between passion and duty. Passion is the same force which drags Hawthorne’s heroine Hester to fall in love with Arthur Dimmesdale. My point of contention in this research paper is to trace the similar line of development in these two novels one written in a poor and culturally backward part of the world and the other in a country that celebrated modern thinking. Before going further let’s trace the similar plot development in Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* and Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter*. Both the two novels have the motifs of femenine anguish and rebellion. Here is an extract from Hawthorn’s classic in which the author paints Hester’s transformation and rebellion which lurkes beneath her skin.

Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. Such is frequently the fate, and such the stern development, of the feminine character and person, when the woman has encountered, and lived through, an experience of peculiar severity. If she be all tenderness, she will die. If she survive, the tenderness will either
be crushed out of her, or—and the outward semblance is the same—crushed so deeply into her
heart that it can never show itself more. The latter is perhaps the truest theory. She who has once
been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were
only the magic touch to effect the transformation. (13.5-6)

The narrator is telling us that living through tough times can crush the tenderness out of
women—or crush it so far down into their hearts that it might as well be gone. Hester might
nurse the sick and clothe the poor just like any charitable Puritan woman, but all the soft,
womanly feelings are gone from her heart. In their place? Rebellion. Now let us look keenly
towards the plot of the novel. The novel through its compressed language sets the tragic fate of
our heroine, Matangini. At the novel’s outset, Bankim portrays Matangini as: “Some sorrow of
deep anxiety had dimmed the lusture of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was a full 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 forehead and cheeks” (3). What’s the implication of this portrayal,
perhaps Bankim is trying to show us the vision of tragic future. This seductive beauty of
Matangini could be regarded as the lethal beauty; a source of destruction like that of Helen of
Troy. Matangini loves Madhav but can’t express it openly due to the taboos of the society.
Matangini is an emblem of self-annihilation.

Analyze the following description of Matangini, The dainty limbs of woman of eighteen
were not burdened with such abundance of ornaments, not did her speech betray any trace of east
being at accent, which dearly showed this perfect flower of beauty was no daughter of the banks
of Madhumati, but was born and brought up on the Bhaghirathi in some places near the capital.”
(3) When her face is revealed, it is accidental because of a gust of wind, her immodesty is
punished by her cruel husband and we don’t see her to retaliate, all this places her in the tradition
of a good Indian Woman, accepting the patriarchal code silently. Slowly Matangini transforms
herself into a character similar to that of Hester Pryne. Was this change eccentric or the
inclination was always there to revert and act, is a worthy question. For me Matangini as a
character is Bankim’s mouthpiece for that class of Indian woman that were treated as just
commodities and never given a voice. Matangini, I believe is a culmination point of many
centuries’ psychological traumas that were stitched in the stereotypical Indian woman. She
stands against the established code were vice and virtues are kept in separate compartments.
Another important character in the novel, who holds one corner of the plot is that of Madhav
Ghose, the secret dark lover. He is the silent seducer who drags our heroine Matangini behind
him like a hypnotized person. Consider Matangini’s confession towards Madhav: “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—deeply do I love you still, to part with you for even without
struggle.

The driving force in the tragedy is the struggle between passion and duty. Bankim wants
to present Matangini in such a way that we feel sympathetic towards her. Thus when Matangini
finally blurs out her doubly forbidden love (violently in one fell swoop both martial and familial
boundaries), she is at once forgiven. Hawthorne in his novel produces a stereotyped, callous and
non-sensual image of Hester’s legal husband Chillingworth. Similarly over her we see
Rajmohan’s character as a stereotyped tyrannous character. He is first introduced to us as a self-
possessive character, very much robbed by Matangini’s seducing features. But once he gets a legal hold of Matangini, he is filled with an insecurity of losing Matangini not physically but psychologically. He is successful in his first desire to get hold of Matangini as an object of ornamentation. But he constantly fails in securing her psychologically. Isn’t here the Hawthornian echo of a woman transgressing the limits on account of stormy passion and untamed wild nature. Now let us consider Rajmohan’s fury on Matangini: “woman he said fiercely, deceive me not, can’t thou? Thou little knowst now I have watched thee; how from the earliest day that thy beauty became the curse, I have followed every footstep of thine-caught every shot from thine eye.” (60)

Meenakshi Mukherjee an important critic of Bankim’s works goes to an extent to label the savage fury of Rajmohan as an echo of Othello type of jealousy. To some extent her assertion is a bit justified as there is a fierce power behind Rahjmohan’s words. A good parallelism could be traced between the characters of Rajmohan and that of the Roger Chillingworth. Both are callous and ill-treating their wives but Rajmohan’s character is more interesting and charismatic. He is transformed into a more living a more living character due a compulsive artist in Bankim. Bankim has portrayed him into a real person rather than a card board villain. He is filled with a fury and constant threat to lose Matangini due to his lack to establish a sensual and fleshy contact with her wife. These and various other factors make his character more interesting in the novel. At one side he is filled with a sense of duty to act as the epitome of patriarchy and at the other side he is torn apart due to sense of insecurity of losing Matangini. In all this fuss where does our heroine finds herself is the realm of an alien world. It is the same world which Hawthorne’s Hester stepped in and achieved that which was before her a dream for an ordinary woman. Through she had to sacrifice a lot for this brave step.

Another important theme in the novel is the theme of morality. The 18th century India was a society of serious and complicated nature. It was a society dominated by strict codes and social taboos. An important critic of Bankim Sudipto Kaviraj writes about Bankim’s experimentation in his novels as, “Stories of his novels often turn around a conflict between two inevitabilities, two things that are equally necessary truths of human life. A social world requires definitions, a kind of a basic social map which defines permissions and prohibitions, at the same time, there are elemental drives of human nature which these social constructs are meant to discipline into reasonably safe forms but hardly can. The social and moral worlds in which men actually live are made up of these two dissimilar and contradictory element—the desire that controls men and the constructs that make society. Much of Bankim’s fictional movement arises from this central conflict between the inevitability of moral orders and inevitability of their transgressions.” (Kaviraj, (2). What we gather from this scintillating commentary is that Bankim while portraying his iconoclastic heroine, Matangini, gives her means of expression. She is not just showed as in a dilemma of to be or not be but as a character full of passionate intensity. The way Matangini transgresses makes us sympathetic towards her. As a naturalistic writer, Bankim has put out all the codes and taboos of that society in which he portrays the contemporary life where characters like Matangini are setting out to challenge the established codes and ethics.

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