

Bankim's *Rajmohan's Wife* : A Portrayal of Gendered Subaltern

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Abstract

Critical appraisal on the life and works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is abound but, even after more than one hundred and fifty years, a very few studies have delved into studying his first and only novel written in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864;1935), also happened to be the first novel in English by an Asian writer. Among those very few studies, analysis on national allegorical significance is a major and common issue. A few critics have interpreted this novel from colonial perspective. Sufferings of Indian wives and emergence of unshackled womanhood have been upheld in one or two articles. But no researcher has yet attempted to examine the novel from postcolonial perspective by exploring the fact that women are considered as 'subaltern' or 'other'. Under the texture of a typical familial story of nineteenth century Bengal Bankim has knitted another story of exploitation where, within the same social structure, one gender is subverting another from the center to the periphery and making them 'other' as the colonizers, exercising hegemonic power, do to the colonial people. Specially, by depicting male dominating society through the actions of Rajmohan, Mathur and Madhav as well as by depicting vulnerability of female characters in *Rajmohan's Wife*, Bankim has shed some light on the patterns and textures of subalternity, surveillance and subordination that are inscribed and re-inscribed in the social and individual psyche of the then patriarchal society. So, this research, qualitative in nature, will explore the novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, using post-colonial analytical tools alongside the feminist approach, and show how women are considered as "Subaltern or the other".

Keywords: Gendered Subaltern, Hegemony, Subjugation, Women as Other, Althusserian trick.

The concept of subaltern as is used and understood by post-colonial critics and theorists was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci in one of his notebooks titled *Notes on Italian History*. The term subaltern, in Gramsci's content, refers to "any 'low rank' person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same notion" (Louai 5). The term has been adapted to post-colonial studies from the work of the Subaltern Studies group of historians who aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies. Ranajit Guha is one of the core members of this group who, in the 'Preface' to *Subaltern Studies* Vol. I, provides a working definition of 'subaltern'. The term is used "as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha vii). Bankim's major characters in *Rajmohan's Wife* correspond to this concept in terms of gender where women are treated as subaltern.

The ideological heft of hierarchy and power, the problem of subtly generated spaces of binary oppositions, and the dynamics of superiority and inferiority travel across every realm of human experience. Among various forces oppression, law, language and ideology are powerful tools employed by the dominant groups in order to create binary opposites. Prioritizing one group naturally creates the Other. Driving certain groups to the periphery, away from the vibrance of the centre, necessarily involves the process of cultural Othering. Thus 'subaltern' is created, freighted with the dimensions of subordination and always remains on the right side of the binary oppositions. The subaltern is infused with the negative associations at all levels, be it personal, sexual, social, political or cultural. His or her voice or dignity is bereaved, authentic presence is denied and considered as Other or mere zero, a cipher with no sense of being. The sobriety of the situation is aggrandized when the subaltern is a woman. "She is even denied a subject position. Being at the precarious juncture, crisscrossed by multiple forces of oppression, she is the one who occupies the lowest position in the social ladder. Her presence is not even authenticated; if at all it is done, it is only to enforce the superiority of the male counterpart. She is the deviant, the deformed, signifying all the lacks, the voids" (Dhanya). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee has depicted such portrayal of women subaltern in his first and only novel written in English, *Rajmohan's Wife*, where patriarchy as a dominant ideology inscribes inferior status to women and make them signifiers of

frailty and dependence. The very title of the novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, represents the vulnerable, parasite like, condition of women. In spite of having a name Matangini is being identified as Rajmohan's wife, not as an independent entity, as if she exists in response to her husband's existence. All through the plot of the novel, Rajmohan represents the main stream of a patriarchal society whereas Matangini, being a woman and a wife, represents the subaltern or the Other. This is the typical scenery of the patriarchal society where existence of women, the inferior, depends on that of men, the superior. Simone de Beauvoir, in her *Second Sex*, elaborates this process of cultural Othering:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject; he is the Absolute- she is the Other (Beauvoir 16).

The predicament of the women subaltern is the most pitiable of all oppressive states. It is a pernicious combination for the subaltern to be a woman. Her life, hope, even, the basic right to an esteemed survival are contravened by multiple forces of oppression. And oppression is the strongest tool to subvert and make her subaltern. A number of signs of oppression to women by men and the male dominated society prevail in *Rajmohan's Wife* that have worked as the catalyst of subjugation and perversion of women. In the very first chapter of the novel, listening the question about her husband asked by Kanak, her neighbor, Matangini's face turns unusual. Bankim has depicted this in the following quoted extract:

[...] the other laughed and said, "Oh, it's Didi. What kindness! Whose face was it that I first saw on getting up this morning?" The guest laughed back and retorted, "Who else but the person you see every morning?" At this, the face of the younger woman clouded over for a moment, while the smile half-lingered on the lips of the other (Bankim 2-3).

This is the first implication that indicates the notion of oppression which is followed by many others:

[...] Yet even those keen glances charged with fire of youth betrayed anxiety. The small lips indicated the sorrow nursed in her

heart. The beauty of her figure and limbs had been greatly spoilt by her physical or mental suffering (4).

Alongside the racism and classism women are victim of subjugation and subversion manipulated by the patriarchal ideology. Lois Tyson explains that “patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive” (Tyson 85). They cannot transcend the threatening power of oppression rather, more pathetically, the dominant forces naturalize the subjugation with such a craftsmanship that women often fail to recognize the snare with which they are circumvented. They lose power even over own selves for which Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication of the rights of woman*, sais “I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft 68). Consequently, they doom and repine at that dungeon forever, considering it as their preordained destiny. Actually, women are brought up in such a manner that they themselves feel right or comfortable in a shackled situation. They consider the life in the *zenana*, a different place in a home especially for women where men are not allowed to enter without permission and which remains aloof from rest of the world, as safe and right from every manner- socially, morally even religiously. As Matangini thinks fetching water from the river is a derogatory task. Good women never do this. She even thinks it as dangerous for she has heard that there are crocodiles in the river Madhumati that may drag her away. This notion is found in the following quoted conversation of Matangini, the protagonist of the novel, and Kanak:

[...] At this the speaker invited the young woman to come with her to fetch water. She had in fact come there with a view to making that invitation. The younger woman refused, and when her companion began to press her, said, “There are crocodiles in the Madhumati. They will drag me away.” [...] Kanak pointed to the sun which was still above the trees and said, “It’s still noon.” At this the younger woman became grave and said, “You know, Kanak Didi, I never fetch water.” “That’s 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 younger woman said, disdainfully, “That’s a work for servant- girls (Bankim 5).

This concept doesn't grow in Matangini's mind simply, rather it is a result of continuous frightening attitude of a male dominated society where a woman leads her life under the surveillance of her father, brother and husband respectively who always want to keep the women inside the zenana, aloof from outside world. That's why '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" (6). As this has turned into a conventional collective behavior to women, they can't understand the trick rather they think that they are leading a safe life according to their own choice. This is actually the Althusserian 'trick' (Barry 158) where the *other* think that they are choosing their choice whereas the system is built in such a way that they have no other way to choose anything else. Besides, femininity and womanhood appear to them as identical. They cannot perceive the fact that these two are different and it is patriarchy that has made them identical. Besides this male chauvinistic ideology have marginalized women from the supremacy of the phallogocentric order. Consequently, they have occupied a position allied to inferiority, fragility, irrationality, chaos and so on. Women imbibe these negative images from the vibes of the society and they acclimate themselves to the male definitions of ideal womanhood. And so, they consider the behavior of going beyond the established system set by the main stream of a patriarchal society as wrong, sometimes as sin. That's why, even when Matangini is convinced to fetch water she says to Kanak, "Let us go, but is it wrong?" To avoid this man-made moral crisis women choose the so-called safe, conventional and shackled way of living which push them to the margin, to the periphery, away from the vitality and vivacity of the centre necessarily involves the process of cultural Othering.

Indoctrination is a naturalizing process that caters patriarchy to the consumption of women and makes them the supporters of an ideology that enslaves them and keeps them secluded in zenana, a forceful exclusion by the dominant group from the outer world. Among the women, married ones are more wretched, especially the married women of Indian subcontinent and of course of nineteenth century Bengal. They feel they have been doomed forever as Matangini feels lying in her bed and recollecting her past with wet eyes. She even finds that her eight years of married life has made her forget to laugh loudly, suppress the wish to see her loving faces. She feels that her life will be continued through misery (Bankim 36- 37). And this scenery of suppression is so common and conventional that it is treated as granted. The

typical Bengali wives like Hemangini couldn't speak to her husband freely rather she becomes afraid. When Matangini asks Hemangini to inform her husband about the conspiracy of dacoity she refused it at once with an alarming tone saying, "Ah! sister, do you want to frighten me only [...] I confess I am frightened" (55- 56). It seems husband is someone superior to wife and she is someone subordinate to him. Actually, this fear was a common fear among nineteenth century Bengali wives generated by the dominating system of keeping the subaltern silent, under the veil and maintaining the so-called order of society. At that time wives were not allowed to meet their husband during the day. Talking to husband publicly was considered as derogatory. So, wives felt so ashamed and afraid that they wouldn't talk to their husbands publicly even if their lives were at stake. They would rather die than think of unveiling themselves. In *Abordh-Bashini*, Begum Rokeya has recorded a number of stories of socially granted suppression of nineteenth century Bengali women (Rokeya). Among those horrible stories one can be noted to make the scenario vivid which has been quoted and translated by Ghulam Murshid in his *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali women to Modernization*:

Accompanied by a maidservant and veiled by a heavy burkha, an upper-class Muslim woman, a relation of Rokeya, was boarding a train at Kiul station. She accidentally fell down in the space between the train and the platform. The maidservant pulled her by the burkha. But the burkha caught and the woman was unable to rise. Some porters present there offered to help, but the maidservant would not allow them to do so. The train was due to leave. However, it waited for about half an hour and at last ran her over (Murshid 32).

Though this fact of choosing death than raising voice or unveiling her was a horrible accident, apparently, it was actually an incident groomed and executed by the ideology made by patriarchal society. That's why neither the lady nor her maidservant didn't act differently. At that time, for women, so many do's and don'ts were considered as derogatory and praiseworthy respectively. Such as going outside the home, speaking to men, speaking and laughing loudly, eating before male members of the family, studying, boarded on vehicle, wearing shoes, involvement with any sort of income source etc. were considered as derogatory. Whereas keeping under veil, obedience to male members of the family, not playing outside, low voice,

smiling, passing the life within home, doing house-hold chores, rearing children, not to join any source of income etc. would have been praised and considered as qualities of a good lady. This ideology made them more vulnerable and drove them to the periphery, aloof from the central contribution to the society which generates power. Ideology is always created by the dominant group to run the process of domination smoothly, as Karl Marx proclaims, and it works more subtly with rigorous intensity of manipulating the dominated people to be dominated willingly and becoming the 'other'. Nineteenth century men used the same tool, ideology, to make the women other. Such specimen is also found in the observation of H. A. D. Phillips, an officer in the Bengal Civil Service of that period:

As any caste or portion of a caste becomes wealthy or influential, the seclusion and jealous appropriation of the weaker sex becomes stricter... The upper classes of cultivators are introducing the purda system more and more and a low caste man, on becoming well-to-do, invariably builds his pukka (masonry) house, with a brick wall surrounding it, constructs a private privy, and has a well dug in his yard, so that his women shall not have to go out (Phillips 128-129).

Although this seclusion of women was not a unique invention of Bengali or Indian men, as both in ancient Greece and Rome women were kept in seclusion like the Muslim women, nineteenth century Bengali women experienced possibly the worst kind of seclusion. Apart from physical seclusion like a caged bird they had no mental freedom (Murshid 30-32). They even didn't have any religious freedom rather they had to worship as their husbands did and follow the superstitions of their husbands blindly (Ghosh 138). This seclusion made them dependent, powerless and subaltern.

In *Rajmohan's wife*, Bankim has narrated the story of women subaltern. All the female characters are depicted as precarious which indicates the vulnerable condition of women as a whole in a patriarchal society where they either continue a veiled existence in a twilight zone or lost themselves. Along with Matangini and Hemangini Madhab's aunt, Rajmohan's aunt, Rajmohan's sister, Kanak, Tara, Champak, Karunamayee, Suki's mother all are living in this metaphoric twilight zone. They have no place, no voice, no right of their own. That's why despite being nephew Madhab dares to show male chauvinism threatening his aunt to drive out her from house. He says, "My aunt! [...] The wretch! I'll kick her out of the house" (Bankim 29). So

does Rajmohan with his aunt. When fetching water Matangini returns home Rajmohan blazes up with anger and pours all the water on the dust-heap. His aunt scolds him for wasting water. But instead of remaining quite Rajmohan shouts at his aunt, "Shut up, you old hag" (Bankim 14). Both Rajmohan and Madhav dare to show their male chauvinism because they know that Indian widows have no place to live except their father's home. They have to depend on and lead their lives according to the wish of the members of that home, especially of the male members. Even if she has a son that son gets the authoritative power over her. But if the lady doesn't have any son her property automatically goes to her nephew. So, these two elder ladies are bound to depend on Madhav and Rajmohan respectively. This dependency has paved the way to suppression, exclusion and humiliation they have experienced later in the novel. Actually, this social custom is made by the men and for the men which empowers them to subordinate women. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak has discussed the problems of Indian widow and their sacrifice in detail. She has reiterated her vantage point that subaltern cannot speak and among them condition of the woman is more complicated, since, though women abide by the whims and fancies of their men, they have a voice within themselves. For Spivak, this voice is a voice of dissent and disapproval which is always denied by men, the hegemonic power holders of the patriarchal society, using the trick of ideology as well as social and economic exclusion (Spivak).

Such phenomena of denial, exclusion or limited access of women to social, economic and cultural institutions are very common and also happen to other female characters of the novel. All through the novel no voice of Rajmohan's sister, Karunamayee, Suki's mother is found. Bankim has depicted them just as the beck and call. When Rajmohan tortures Matangini his sister never come to save her though their relation is not bad. The reason is fear to her brother. The same fear, fear of a subaltern, to be excluded from the family or to get the stigma of a disloyal, bad girl as father or brother is the authority of the family. She even doesn't get any name in the novel rather she has been acquainted with the reader as Rajmohan's sister. As if her existence depends on her brother. Kanak and Suki's mother are also experiencing such kind of vulnerability with poor status. Whereas Karunamayee doesn't have poor status, yet she is poorer than Suki's mother as her husband has died childless and so she can't be the owner of the property that her husband has left behind. The law doesn't allow this. She

can be just a pensioner depending on some other male persons. As Bankim narrated:

[...]his ample estates must be left to the enjoyment of those who had been to him almost strangers, and that though they might remain in the possession of his wife during her lifetime, she could not, with her hands fettered by the law, be anything more than a pensioner on her own estate (Bankim 18).

Karunamayee had to obey the law and depend on Bangshibadan, new owner of her husband's wealth, till death. But this widow doesn't get enough favor rather she dies before her age - "A fever originally slight, but which 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" (Bankim 19). This 'unintelligible or rather very intelligible causes' conceive the implications of denial, suppression and exclusion that drive her to death, the ill conclusion of a subaltern.

Tara and Champak are also wives of a wealthy family and have no power to execute anything as their own wish. They have to obey their husband, Mathur. Mathur's second marriage with Champak and living with Tara, his first wife, together in the same home testify the denial of feelings and voice of both the ladies considering them as powerless, the 'other'. Besides, despite passing so many years in the family Tara doesn't get the power to execute her word as she wishes. She can't keep the distressed Matangini at home for long time though she assured Matangini to live with her as long as she wishes. Mathur neither cares about her word nor her request. He drives away Matangini while she was badly needed a shelter. Mathur takes the side of Rajmohan, another oppressor of the novel, and exercises the hegemonic power over these ladies as usually because of the patriarchal ideology that justifies him as right.

Through the character of Matangini, the female protagonist, Bankim has epitomized the 'otherness' attributed by the male characters, especially by her husband Rajmohan, and the male dominated society as well. This tone of 'otherness' pervades all through the novel. Matangini has been suppressed, oppressed, denied and secluded. She has to obey Rajmohan's constitution otherwise is tortured badly. At the beginning of the novel, she has been tortured for ignoring the order of Rajmohan and going out to fetch water for

the first time. Though Matangini raise her voice it is denied by Rajmohan with blazed eyes and firm fist. She is forced to obey him:

“To fetch water!” taunted Rajmohan, “but with whose permission did you go out?” “With nobody’s permission!” he shouted, “have I not forbidden you a thousand times?” [...] 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.” At this display of boldness, Rajmohan absolutely blazed up. [...] She didn’t move away one step [...] After a moment’s silence Rajmohan dropped his wife’s hand, but immediately shouted out, “I’ll kick you to death” Even then the chidden woman did not reply. Only tears were streaming down her face (Bankim 15).

The oppression continues. At the midst of the novel, it is found that Matangini is being tortured again for going out of home and saving her sister and sister’s husband from the conspiracy of Rajmohan with the dacoits- “knowest thou, harlot, why I have whetted my knife tonight? You answer not and I will kill you” (Bankim 73-74). Despite being threatened to death several times Matangini has to live with Rajmohan suppressing her voice since, like other women, she knows there is no other place for her in this male dominated society which always try to keep women secluded from everything and make ‘other’. This vulnerable feeling of homelessness becomes obvious when Kanak says to Suki’s mother, “[...] no women ought to go. She will never trust herself again to that house to receive insults and reproaches. But alas, poor woman, whither, else can she go. Is her father’s hut close by to give her shelter?” (Bankim 87). Still, she tries to save her life, her prestige leaving Rajmohan’s home but later she is forced to return by Mathur and Rajmohan, the representatives of patriarchal society. At the end of the novel, Matangini dies in her father’s home. So, it is very open-and-shut that despite several attempts to establish her own voice, own identity Matangini is forcefully subverted and secluded by the male members who hold the hegemonic power of the patriarchal society. Kanak also tries to walk along her own road but for this she has been condemned and stigmatized as ‘bad woman’. In fact, in the whole novel, only Matangini, Kanak and, to some extent, Tara try to fight against the dominant group but all of them are subjugated and treated as subaltern. Moreover, unlike all the male characters, no female character is engaged in any economic, social and cultural institution which paves her way to contribute to family and the nation as well as to find her own voice, confidence and power. It also

manifests that women are considered as subaltern who are deliberately excluded from the centre of the power and driven to the periphery.

No position is neutral, no product is apolitical. A sensitized seeking eye can recognize the overt and covert play of power and politics in the multifarious systems by which patterns and textures of subalternity and subordination are inscribed and re-inscribed in the social and individual psyche. All the cultural artifacts, social relationships, multifaceted institutions including family, education, religion, as well as art, literature, sports, sexuality – all bear the imprint of hegemony and subjugation (Dhanya). Like ideology with some other tools of hegemonic power the dominant group subjugates the subaltern people both implicitly and explicitly. Four major characteristics: exclusion from socio-economic institution by the powerful group, denial of the voice by the dominants, limited access to cultural imperialism and being subverted by the social groups who hold the hegemonic power are engraved in the definition of ‘subaltern’. All these characteristics are inscribed in the plot of the novel, especially in the actions of male and female characters. Here, the phallogentric, patriarchal world has seized every means of control and expression to itself that the women, as self-respecting individuals, find themselves at loss and eventually become subaltern. Apparently, this novel is a portrayal of the oppression of women but allegorically *Rajmohan’s Wife* is a portrayal of gendered subaltern where women are considered as the ‘Other’.

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