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## **Bengali Renaissance and First Indian Novel in English:**

### **A (Con)Textual Study of**

### **Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife***

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Received: 21.11.2025; Accepted: 27.11.2025; Available online: 30.11.2025

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#### **Abstract**

*Renaissance as a marker of intellectual awakening on a large scale touched different areas of Globe at different times and brought a fresh lease of life in different aspects –social, cultural and political. In India, this happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of Western education brought by the British colonial power and ushered colonial modernity in Indian culture and literature. In fact, in Indian perspective the term 'renaissance' is coterminous with the term 'modernity'. The influx of Western ideas created a heavy imprint flowering new type of literary output in the field of native culture. Novel as a literary genre made itself conspicuous at about this time in India. Since Bengal was the first part of the country to welcome English education, it was in the able hands of such pioneers as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee that the new genre tasted its first success. In keeping with his background of Western education, Chatterjee wrote the first English novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) in India. This can be interpreted as an inevitable issue of colonial modernity.*

*In the proposed paper, I want to discuss *Rajmohan's Wife* as the direct product of renaissance in India, particularly renaissance in Bengal. During my discussion, I shall focus on those characteristics of the novel which specifically were shaped by the immediate influence of Renaissance on indigenous literary traditions. I shall also try to see and show whether and how far Chatterjee's essay was derivative and/or deviant considering his ambivalent status as an Indian functionary within the colonial system. I shall also zoom in upon the issue of modernity as reflected in the novel.*

**Keywords:** Bengal Renaissance, Novel, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Rajmohan's Wife*

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#### **Introduction:**

'Renaissance' as a marker of intellectual awakening/reawakening spread in and across the continent from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. India experienced this transition (from medieval to modern) under the influence of Western education and ideas brought by the British colonial power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nearly three hundred years after its introduction in England-the originating country. In fact, in Indian perspective the term 'renaissance' is coterminous with the term 'modernity'. This is the reason Raja Rammohan Roy is called 'the pioneer of Bengal Renaissance' as well as 'the first modern man of India.' Bengal is that part of India which came first under this Renaissance-cum-Modernity and in this sense Bengal renaissance plays the pioneering role in the history of Indian Renaissance. As a result, it witnessed flowering of new intellectual ideas. Literature in India filliped by

imitating and assimilating the new learned aspects of the West into creation. In his highly acclaimed book namely, *British Orientalism & the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (1969), David Kopf categorically talked about the transmission of Orientalist Ideals and the intellectual awakening of the Calcutta intelligentsia (Kopf, 1969). The Orientalists, as Kopf further argues, “served as avenues linking the regional elite with the dynamic civilization of contemporary Europe” (Kopf, 1969, p. 275). As a result of this cultural fusion, Indian English literature for the first time produced a novel, completely a new genre, and it was produced by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a prominent figure of Bengal Renaissance.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was born in 1838 in the elder Bengal to a reputed and well-educated family. As was the convention of the day, Bankim was taught English language and literature from early childhood. He graduated from Calcutta University in 1858 and was one of the earliest to do so. This exposure to English education from the early life facilitated his English writing when he started to write fiction. In this regard, he may be compared with another famous Bengali litterateur Michael Madhusudan Dutta who also tried his hand in English language first. The decision to write in mother tongue may have been prompted by the trope of nationalism or rather, as Rosinka Chaudhuri terms it, ‘constructed nationalist trope’ (Chaudhuri, 3).

The socio-cultural milieu that Bankim Chandra lived in also fostered him to try something ingenuous. His encounters with people during his official duties as a magistrate also helped him to have insights into human characters. All the above-mentioned factors resulted Bankim in becoming a monumental figure in the Bengali Renaissance culture, not only in Bengali language and context but in English language and global context as well. In fact, as a literary genius, he can be compared with his contemporary Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and indeed of Dickens, because as Rosinka Chaudhuri contends in her article, ‘Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Inauguration of the Modern Indian Novel’, ‘his work easily rivals theirs in richness and scope’ (Chaudhuri, 1).

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) is the first novel in Indian literature if not in Asian literature. It was first serialized in 1864 in *Indian Field*, a small-circulation journal edited by Kishori Chand Mitra. As a book, it was published much later, only in 1935, from Ramananda Chattopadhyay’s famous press “Prabasi” in Allahabad. As the age did not have a model of novel writing in Bengali or any other native languages, Chatterjee was emulating examples from English literature particularly Victorian literature. Perhaps for this very reason he made his debut in novel writing in English language as Amitav Ghosh pointed out that “*Rajmohan’s Wife* was clearly a rehearsal, a preparation for something else” (Ghosh in Paranjape, 2013, p. 87) that is to attempt to domesticate the European novel into Bengali “to mount a spring-board that would allow him to vault the gap between two entirely different conventions of narrative” (Paranjape, 2013, p. 87).

### **Novel: a novel genre in the milieu of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee:**

Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), observed that the birth of the novel in Europe, particularly England, was made possible by certain social, economic, and religious phenomena that brought the rights of the individual to the forefront (Watt, 1957). Similarly in the nineteenth century Renaissance Bengal, the new genre novel arose fuelled by different social, political, cultural and economic factors. It saw a surge of new ideas in every aspect of life. The idea of nation was one of the important ideas to emerge and

engage literary practitioners. In her introduction to the book *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration*, Priyamvada Gopal contends, "It is a genre that has been distinguished from its inception by a preoccupation with both history and nation as these come together to shape what political scientist, Sunil Khilnani (1997) terms, after Nehru, 'the idea of India.'" (Gopal, 5) It is not that other genres have not dealt with the theme of nation and history but its uniqueness lies in the fact that "the rise of nation-states and the flowering of the genre have coincided across cultural contexts" (Gopal, 5)

There was rise of an educated middle-class that modelled its tastes on the literature and manners of the West. Chatterjee was one among this bunch of elite intellectuals. During his working life as a government employee, he periodically resided in Kolkata (Calcutta) and ran a printing press in the city. Chatterjee's intellectual life was shaped largely by the vibrant social, political, and cultural currents of the city.

### **Matangini, the New Woman:**

*Rajmohan's Wife* is significant in the history of Indian English literature for capturing this essence of Renaissance. In fact, Matangini, the heroine of the novel, can be viewed as the New Woman of emerging India. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that the novel on the whole marks a beginning of 'mimetic rendering of domestic life in fiction, or of weaving a plot out of contemporary social and familial situations.' (Mukherjee, 2009, p. vii) Matangini, Rajmohan's wife, is a very beautiful and passionate woman of eighteen. Rajmohan is a villainous character who acts as an aide of Mathur Ghosh's plan of dacoity to his cousin Madhav Ghosh's house. Matangini overhears the plan. Concerned as she is about Madhav and his wife Hema, who happens to be her own sister, Matangini makes a solitary journey in the dark night to alert Madhav and thus saved the family from danger. After returning, she is welcomed by furious Rajmohan who attempts to kill her. She escapes and incidentally takes refuge at Mathur Ghosh's house. Dramatically she disappears when she is sent back to her husband's house on his request. Madhav, in the meantime, is treacherously held captive. It is later found that Matangini is also held captive by the same captor and that is none other than Mathur Ghosh. Ultimately justice is established and the miscreants are punished duly.

### **Realistic Description of the Novel (Characteristic of Renaissance Bengal):**

Although there are elements of romance like mystery, suspense, devious intrigues, passionate but forbidden love, solitary journey through forest, water, storm and lightning, redolent of echoes of Radha's 'abhisara', abduction, sudden turns of events, unexpected revelations and challenges, this novel presents a realistic description of the contemporary social and familial life of rural Bengal. Priyamvada Gopal rightly points out that early Indian English novels were 'written with an implied European or English reader in mind,'; they can be read as 'guided forays, not just into Indian life, but more specifically, into a domestic sphere largely hidden from the European and colonial gaze' (Gopal, 28). Frequently planned attacks of loot and burglary by dacoits in those evil days of 'zamindari' system were faithfully represented in the novel. It is characteristic of the transition from romance to realism which was afoot in the literature of Renaissance Bengal. In fact, *Rajmohan's Wife* as a novel, as Supriya Choudhuri, in her scholarly article namely, 'Beginnings: Rajmohan's Wife and the Novel in India' argues, 'stands at various intersections [too]: between 'original' composition and translation, between realism and romance, between linguistic choices in periodical publication, and between modernity and

tradition.’ (Chaudhuri, 2015, 31) It is written in the style of gothic novel. There is a blending of tragic romance and a study of an unhappy marriage (bitter realistic description). Matangini, the eponymous heroine, is passionate and is romantically involved with Madhav who marries her sister. And she herself was married to Rajmohan, a corrupt and unscrupulous person.

### **Victorian Narrative Model:**

Modernity in Bengal, as said earlier, didn’t coincide with that of Europe. Rather, it bore the marks of Victorianism. As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it in the afterword of the book ‘*Rajmohan’s Wife, a Novel*’, *Rajmohan’s Wife* was Bankim’s initial and tentative attempt to write fiction based on a Victorian narrative model to which colonial education had exposed a new generation of urban Indians (Mukherjee, Afterword) including the author. Influence of Renaissance pulp literature is easily discernible since his novel served as a powerful, “sermon-like” platform and advocated for social reformation through a literary campaign that ignited the spirit of the time. Shakespeare was also a common inspiration for the young writers of this period writing in English.

Naming of the chapters also carry the sign of Victorian influence. ‘Midnight Plotting’, ‘Between rival charmers’, ‘What befell our hero’, ‘Captors and captive’, ‘Some women are the Equals of Some men’, ‘The Last Chapter in Life’s Book’ etc are some chapters of this novel. The most immediate influence of Victorian novelists however is found in the Conclusion:

“And now good reader, I have brought my story to a close. Lest, however, you fall to censuring me for leaving your curiosity unsatisfied, I will tell you what happened to the other persons who have figured themselves in this tale...

...Throwing this flood of light on their past and future history, I bid you, good reader, FAREWELL. (*Rajmohan’s Wife: A Novel*, p. 82)

This type of ‘tying up the threads of a story neatly at the end and meeting with just rewards was a convention of Victorian fiction, as seen in the last chapters of the novels of Dickens, Thackeray or George Eliot.’ (Mukherjee, 2009, p. 158)

### **Nationalism as a Theme of Renaissance Literature:**

Much of Chatterjee’s life and certainly most of his writing was employed in the creation of a national culture. Now Renaissance and the rise of nationalism-these two facts are interrelated. In fact, rise of nationalism is one of the many characteristics of Renaissance literature. Makarand R. Paranjape has argued that *Rajmohan’s Wife* can very well be read as part of this project of national culture. Matangini, Paranjape asserts, is ‘an entirely new kind of heroine, someone who is not timid and weak, but strong and spirited’ (Paranjape, 149). However, this spirit is not personal; rather it is the spirit of modern India. Hence, Matangini embodies modern India itself. Like Matangini, the new woman, India as a nation was also new, ‘yet strong-willed and attractive’ like the heroine of Bankimchandra (Matangini). Paranjape aptly elaborates,

It is not the India of villages or the old India of feudal times. This India has been born near the capital, Calcutta, and is full of new possibilities. But this beautiful and powerfully drawn image of India is also shown as burdened by sorrow and anxiety. It is neither free nor happy, but its energies and

powers are under the control of an unworthy husband. (Paranjape, 2002, p.149)

Freedom of individual expression and opposition to authority was first brought to the surface through the character of Matangini. This aspect of Matangini is also rightly observed by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her afterword to the book *Rajmohan's Wife, a Novel*: 'Matangini is the first in a series of strong and transgressive women in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel.' (Mukherjee, Afterword)

### Conclusion:

Thus, this novel, the first of its kind in Indian literature, can very much be considered as a part of the great creative surge fuelled by Renaissance brought through the introduction of colonial modernity and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee can be regarded as the cornerstone of this Renaissance-cum-Modernity package in Bengal as well as Indian literature. Matangini as a creation of an amalgamation of classical, medieval, European and a totally unprecedented imaginative leap constitutes a significant position and the novel with its plot and characters map the birth of modern India as well as modern Indian woman through political, cultural and social contexts. There is not an iota of doubt that the genre (novel) itself as well as its typical features was imported through European knowledge pool (including Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Keats, Hardy, Dickens, Scott etc.) made available through colonial education during early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal.

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