

Women and Agency in Bankim's *Rajmohan's Wife* and Tagore's *The Home and The World*

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Abstract

Written almost half a century apart, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) and *The Home and the World* (1916) can be read as women centric texts written in colonial India. The plot of both the texts is set in Bengal, the cultural and political centre of colonial India. *Rajmohan's Wife*, arguably the first Indian English novel, is one of the first novels to realistically represent 'Woman' in the nineteenth century. Set in a newly emerging society of India, it provides an insight into the status of women, their susceptibility and dependence on men. *The Home and the World*, written at the height of Swadeshi movement in Bengal, presents its woman protagonist in a much progressive space. The paper closely examines these two texts and argues that women enact their agency in relational spaces which leads to the process of their 'becoming'. The paper analyses this journey of the progress of the self, which starts with Matangini and culminates in Bimala. The paper concludes that women's journey to emancipation is symbolic of the journey of the nation to independence.

Key Words: Swadeshi, Nationalism, Female agency, Patriarchy, Liminality

Introduction

Bankim and Tagore occupy a prominent place in the nationalist historiography of India. Whereas Bankim is remembered as the harbinger of Indian Nationalism, Tagore is credited with revisioning nationalism as universal humanism. However, both provided an insider's view on Indian society through the corpus of their works. *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim and *The Home and The World* by Tagore are true representations of Indian society of mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century respectively. Both the texts can be read as 'national allegories', irrespective of the debate on the use of this phrase in western and mainstream Indian academia (See Jameson 1986, Ahmad 1987). These texts, therefore, are read for a deeper understanding of culture, colonization, and representation of the period.

Set in a newly emerging colonially-mediated society, the texts provide on one hand, an insight into the condition of women in the traditional domestic sphere, while on the other, present their emancipatory zeal to break free of the shackles and cultural emblems of society. Matangini, the protagonist of *Rajmohan's Wife* is, strong and spirited, but circumscribed within the boundary of patriarchal order and knows that once she crosses it, can never retrace her steps; whereas Bimala, in *The Home and The World* is, passionate and restless, and enjoys freedom to cross the threshold of her aristocratic household, though she is a bit hesitant in doing so. On one

hand, the self is dictated by morality sanctioned by patriarchy, whereas on the other, there is an attempt to reconstruct it in relation to itself. As a result of which the act of transgression itself becomes problematic. As Sudipta Kaviraj (1998) puts it,

What causes this play around liminality is the conflict between desire and denial, desire seen as man's (or mostly woman's) elemental inclinations, and denial as the system of prohibitions constructed by society to bind and channel them, and render them safe. (p. 6)

Both the characters are symbolic of the eternal desire of the self to break free of this bondage through the act of transgression; an act which leads to their 'becoming' and recreating an identity which is autonomous and devoid of any subjection. To fulfil that desire, Matangini and Bimala enact their agency in relational spaces. The self develops in relationship to other selves in an interactive process and draws from its context to assume subjecthood. Paromita Mukherjee (2017) calls these selves liminal identities which destabilize cultural assumptions about selfhood and challenge traditional notions of female subjectivity. The present paper examines gender liminality and its role in granting agency, autonomy and selfhood to women in relational spaces.

Rajmohan's Wife

Bankim wrote his first novel in English (1864), in which the title itself points at an unequal relationship between a man and a woman. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, as the title suggests, the woman loses her personhood to the relation that she shares with the man. The title manifest relationality as an important construct of a woman's identity. Matangini, is in an unhappy marriage with Rajmohan, who is immoral, cruel and orthodox. He can only invoke fear, dread and contempt in her and keeps her caged in the four walls of the house. Matangini comes across as a fearless, courageous and a daring woman. As with most of his other works, we see Bankim's proclivity for the liminal in this text. Matangini, the protagonist faces the dilemma of choosing between a social world of "permissions and prohibitions", and a world in which she is the agent of her own desire and can venture out without any inhibition (Kaviraj, 1998, p.2). According to Malashri Lal (1995), once she steps "over the bar," she can not come back to her "designated first world" but can only make the "irretrievable choice of making the other world [her] permanent home" (Qtd., in Pranjape, 2002). However Matangini who is bold and daunting, does not hesitate to debunk Rajmohan's authority to save her sister and brother-in-law from robbery planned by him. She has already transgressed the moral boundaries prescribed by patriarchy; when confronted by her husband for going out to fetch water without his permission, she retorts, "I had gone because I thought there was nothing wrong in it" (Chatterjee 2018, p.164). Commenting upon the structure of power in upper-caste Bengali families in the nineteenth century, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1996) comments,

It seems surprising that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of society. (viii)

Through the character of Matangini, the author tries to bring our attention to the new image of unshackled womanhood, who is symbolic of a new nation in the making. Just as India became conscious but at the same time confident of its position under British rule, the women in colonial India became more assertive of their rights as a result of the Indian renaissance initiated in the early nineteenth century. When grilled by her husband if she had gone to Madhav's house, she retaliates, "I shall not answer to questions which I ought not to be asked" (Chatterjee, 2018, p.203). Portrayal of Matangini is symbolic of the nation-in-the-making, which is shaky, but trying to get firm footing as things unravel to its advantage. Matangini embodies the vitality, glamour, and appeal of an emerging new India trying to break free of its social and cultural ills. Makarand

Paranjape (2002) postulates an exaggerated analogy in this regard. According to him, Matangini "is not just Rajmohan's wife, but the "spirit" or personification of modern India itself". He says:

This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India... The defining features of modern India are thus its energy, its adventurousness, its unwillingness to be confined by tradition, and its desire to break free. The restlessness, vitality, charm, and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini. (Makarand Paranjape Website).

As the narrative gradually unfolds, Matangini, having transgressed the moral boundaries of society, evolves from being a fearful, hesitant, and dutiful wife to a brave, resolute and bold woman who listens to the dictates of her heart and mind to do what seems right to her. However, the society was not yet ready to accept woman's morality or her individuality. Tanika Sarkar (1987) points out,

The woman's body was the ultimate site of virtue, of stability, the last refuge of freedom... Through a steady process of regression, this independent self-hood had been folded back from the public domain to the interior space of the household, and then further pushed back into the hidden depths of an inviolate, chaste, pure female body. (qtd. in Mitra, 1995, 247).

At the end, when the author becomes unsure of where to place her in a society still under the shadow of patriarchy, she is sent back to her father's house where she dies an early death. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1996) writes,

... the abruptness and the ambivalence of the ending, may be the result of an anxiety such women of energy generated, by posing a threat to the social order and creating a moral dilemma for the author. (Introduction ix)

Though Matangini could be seen as a predecessor of emancipation of Indian women, the text situates women in a feudal Indian social order which allows them little or no privilege. Relationality plays an important role in ensuring well-being and happiness of women. Hemangini is a happy woman because her husband, Madhav is a compassionate, moral and responsible man. The laws of the land prohibited a woman to own property; she could only become a pensioner on her own estate after the death of her husband. The feudal and backward society did not let women to step out of the house unaccompanied or unveiled. Women were expected to maintain distance and avert their gaze while talking to strangers. Wives spoke timidly with their husbands and that too about trivial matters. It was a humongous task for the author to show radical changes in a society still inflicted with the evils of class and gender discrimination. Makrand Paranjape (2002) neatly sums up the fate of women in feudal society as he comments,

Matangini's transgressions are thus only partially successful. The dream of creating a new society from the remnants of a decaying older order is thus a failed experiment in this novel. Like Hester Prynne, Matangini will have to wait for another time and space before she or someone like her can live happily with her chosen mate. (Makarand R. Paranjape Website)

The Home and The World

Written by Tagore, a key figure of Bengali renaissance, *The Home and The World* (1916) is a nationalist discourse of colonial India. Set in Bengal at the height of Swadeshi movement, the text embodies Tagore's views on nationalism, swadeshi, east-west encounter and emancipation of women. As Swadeshi gained momentum with the war cry of Vande Mataram, the image of India as the mother goddess, a symbol of Shakti, penetrated the subconscious of the nation. The incorporation of women in the nationalist discourse was a strategy adopted by the nationalists to project Indian nationalism different from the western one yet inherently sovereign. There was an onus on the nationalists to project an image of a woman who embodies traditional Indian values, yet is modern and a subject of her own identity. As Mrinalini Sinha (2000) observes,

The cultural-nationalist project of fashioning the modern Indian woman, therefore, necessarily included some limited emancipation of, and even self-emancipation by, women within its own gendered logic. (p. 624-625)

In *The Home and The World*, Bimala represents this image of womanhood and thus becomes the site of construction of the pro and anti-nationalist discourse. Nikhil and Sandip, embody the two alternative ideologies of swadeshi- militant nationalism and peaceful negotiation for political and economic reconstruction. Nikhil, Bimala's husband is an aristocratic landowner, and a liberal humanist. A true nationalist at heart, he is against using coercive methods on the marginalized, be it women or the peasants on his estate.

Sumit Sarkar (2002) argues that while projecting Nikhil, Tagore had actually configured an alternative form of masculinity different from the mainstream belligerent one. Educated and liberal in his views, Nikhil envisions a true union with Bimala not in the restrictive space of zenana but in the outside world, "If we meet and recognize each other in the real world, then only will our love be true" (Tagore, 1919, p.6). He treats Bimala as an equal respecting her freedom as an individual. In the figure of Nikhil, Tagore projects, "the individual's freedom to choose his own way of serving the cause of social and political emancipation" (Guha, 1993, p.78). As he realizes Bimala's attraction towards Sandip, he questions his own construction of Bimala as an object of his desire and tries to emancipate her, "I created an angel of Bimala, in order to exaggerate my own enjoyment. But Bimala is what she is..." (Tagore, 1919 p. 35).

Bimala is a devoted wife to Nikhil for whom devotion is beauty itself. Every morning she covertly takes dust of her husband's feet and applies on her forehead and feels, "the vermilion mark upon her forehead shining out like the morning star" (p.2). Her home is her world. Though she had heard that daughters-in-laws in aristocratic families were considered as caged birds, she feels that she had so much in that cage of hers "that there was not room in it for the universe" (p. 6). However, once Sandip, the radical nationalist leader visits their home, she gets so enamoured by his swadeshi sentiment, that she starts rethinking about her domestic duties.

On one hand is Nikhil, who embodies all that is traditional, on the other is Sandip, impetuous, immoral and rash, an image of abstract, nationalist Indian modernity. Nikhil is the agent of preservation, whereas Sandip stands for change, brought by the whirlwind of swadeshi movement. Bimala, who is symbolically at the centre of her home, is suddenly awakened to this new change brought by swadeshi. She, for whom her home was her universe, now, "stood looking over into the distance" (p.7) as if looking for possibilities to contribute to the nationalist project. It is in this role that Bimala sees her liberation. Though she is a devoted wife to Nikhil but her self-reflection as a saviour of the nation directs her to transcend the domestic boundaries in the service of the nation.

Relationality plays an important role in re-creating Bimala's identity from a traditional, devoted wife to a woman with agency and voice in the affairs of the nation. Once persuaded by Sandeep, she rather willingly tries to live up to the image of mother India created by the nationalists. In the nationalist fervour thus created, Bimala's identity gets intertwined with the national identity; one becomes symbolic of the other. Initially her moving from the inner to the outer world, insisted upon by her husband, seems to her, "such an extraordinarily out-of-the-way thing to do... in the light of the zenana code," (p. 41) but later it becomes crucial as she becomes the voice of the entire womanhood of the country. The intoxication of the suddenly acquired power makes it necessary for her to dismantle all domestic appearances. "Is this power of yours to be kept veiled in a zenana? ...Take your plunge today into the freedom of the outer world", Sandip tells her. Now the only way for her is to move forward; she, who once believed that salvation lay in surrendering one's pride in devotion to one's husband, becomes an agent of her own destiny.

Conclusion

In *The Home and the World*, Bimala is constructed by both Nikhil and Sandip. Both men try to fit Bimala in an image of their liking, thereby denying her individuality and autonomy. Bimala who was happy being confined to the zenana in the beginning of the narrative, asks herself if she really desires emancipation. Bimala is hesitant to move out of 'andarmahal' but does so, on her husband's insistence. From the queen of Nikhil's home, she becomes the queen bee of the nationalist movement. Once she confronts the reality, she realizes the sham of fake nationalism. Having realized its abject nature, Bimala undergoes spiritual enlightenment as she understands the true nature of her reality, "When I am merged in its blackness, neither I, nor good and bad, nor laughter, nor tears, shall be any more!" (Tagore, p.55).

She reinforces the narrative ideology that women can gain happiness only if they exercise agency in relational spaces. She muses as the novel opens, "Can there be any real happiness for a woman in merely feeling that she has power over a man? To surrender one's pride in devotion is woman's only salvation" (Tagore, P.3). She comes across a truly emancipated woman in the end as she discovers herself in the agency of her own freedom. As Indrani Mitra (1995) puts it, "Bimala has already passionately embraced the cultural script of what a woman should be" (p. 244-245).

Emancipation of Matangini is of a different nature. She gets liberated based on her self-reliant power and courage in dismantling patriarchal shackles imposed on her. She is a self-in-the-making in spite of the denial of the social, cultural, and political rights given to women during her times. Both the texts are interspersed with common metaphors of women confinement like 'caged birds', zenana and purdah. In both the texts, relationality, which is largely governed by man-woman relationship, plays out an important role in deciding freedom and agency of women. Whereas Rajmohan is a cruel, brutish man of degraded morality who knows how to chain women, Nikhil comes across as a man who is generous, liberal and modern in his outlook. Since men, who are themselves products of society, play an important role in women's lives, it won't be inappropriate to say that India has evolved as a society in granting more rights to women since the mid-nineteenth century.

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