



**Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife: Bridging the Gap Between**

**Naturalistic Philosophy and 19th-Century Indian Literature**

**Dr. T. Raja Sekhar**

**Reader, Department of English**

**Sardar Patel College, Padmarao Nagar**

**Secunderabad**

**Abstract**

There appears to be an intriguing connection between Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a pioneering Indian novelist, and the flourishing trend of naturalistic philosophy in the context of his work, *Rajmohan's Wife*. Bankim Chandra's literary masterpiece serves as a captivating lens through which we explore the convergence of literature and social realism in 19th-century India. The study investigates how Chatterjee skillfully intertwines naturalistic elements in his narrative, portraying characters and society in a more unfiltered and honest light. By delving into the depths of this seminal work, we gain a deeper understanding of Chatterjee's contribution to the evolution of Indian literature and his role in shaping the vogue of naturalistic philosophy in the literary landscape of his time.

**Keywords:** Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Naturalistic Philosophy, Rajmohan's Wife, Literature, Social Realism, Indian Novels.

**Introduction**

"Shallow men believe in luck or circumstance. Strong men believe in cause and effect."

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

The epigraph by Ralph Waldo Emerson is crucial in understanding my argument, which aims to analyze *Rajmohan's Wife* as a work of Naturalistic literature. Before venturing into this tumultuous domain, it is important to first examine the artistic intentions of Naturalism. The term "naturalism" was coined by the French novelist Emile Zola to denote the utilization of the clinical approach of empirical science in examining all aspects of existence. To accurately

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portray life as it truly exists, a writer must adhere to a strict deterministic approach when depicting the thoughts and actions of characters. This approach allows for portraying the causal factors that have inevitably shaped the characters into who they are. It is important to note that Naturalism, unlike realism, aligns itself with the philosophical belief of biological and social determinism. This belief posits that human beings lack free will. (Grieg E. Henderson and Christopher Brown, Glossary of Literary Theory)

Ralph Waldo Emerson indeed serves as a crucial point of departure in understanding the argument that Rajmohan's Wife can be analyzed as a work of Naturalistic literature. Before delving into the intricate aspects of this literary genre, it is imperative to grasp the artistic intentions that underpin Naturalism as a literary movement.

The term "naturalism" was first coined by the eminent French novelist Emile Zola. It encompasses the notion of applying a clinical, empirical scientific approach to the examination of all facets of human existence. Naturalism's core aspiration lies in portraying life as it truly exists, devoid of idealized or romanticized notions. To achieve this, a writer must adopt a strict deterministic perspective when delineating the thoughts and actions of characters within the narrative.

This deterministic approach is instrumental in depicting the causal factors that have inexorably shaped the characters into the individuals they have become. In essence, Naturalism seeks to unravel the intricate web of environmental, genetic, and societal influences that mold human beings. It is, therefore, a literary movement that is deeply rooted in the belief of biological and social determinism.

Unlike realism, which also aims to represent life as accurately as possible, Naturalism goes a step further by aligning itself with the philosophical belief that human beings lack free will to a significant extent. According to the tenets of naturalism, individuals are products of their environment, heredity, and social circumstances. This belief posits that the choices individuals make and the paths they traverse are largely predetermined by these external forces.



Consequently, characters in Naturalistic literature are often portrayed as being subject to forces beyond their control, which shape their destinies in a deterministic manner.

Thus, the epigraph by Ralph Waldo Emerson sets the stage for the examination of Rajmohan's Wife as a work of Naturalistic literature. Understanding the fundamental principles of Naturalism, including its commitment to portraying life realistically, its emphasis on deterministic forces, and its alignment with the concept of human biological and social determinism, is essential for a comprehensive analysis of this literary genre and its application in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's seminal work.

Bankim Chander Chatterji is regarded as the inaugural author in the Indo-Anglian literary tradition. The initial literary creation authored by the individual in question, *Raj Mohan's Wife*, was officially published in 1864. Durgesh Nandini, originally published in Bengali, was then released in English translation in the year 1890. Subsequently, works such as *Kapal Kundala*, *Vishvarasha*, and *Anandmath* were produced. He possessed a notable proficiency in the romance genre while concurrently garnering recognition as a skilled author of comedic and humorous works. Additionally, the individual showed mastery in the composition of historical novels. According to the statements made by K.R.S. Iyengar

"In his lifetime, Bankim became the literary dictator of fiction in Renaissance Bengal. He was the master of the Romantic and Historical Novels" (Iyenger 412).

The emergence of the contemporary novel may be traced back to the later part of the 19th century, a period marked by the influence of Western culture on India's cultural landscape. This influence led to the growth and maturation of formal written prose and the fiction genre. Throughout the 20th century, a plethora of books were composed in both the English language and many regional languages. Bengal emerged as a prominent hub for Indo-Anglian fiction first, but subsequent English novels were authored in Madras, Bombay, and other southern regions of India. While Indian fiction boasts a rich historical background, Western researchers often approach the analysis of Indian novels with preconceived notions, resulting in biased and fragmented judgements. In Western society, there has been a longstanding tendency among



mainstream critics to avoid engaging with Oriental texts and their rich array of motifs. This tendency may persist in some contexts. A substantial historical tradition about this matter is potentially influenced by numerous critics, including the one referenced after that.

The influence played a pivotal role in the growth and maturation of formal written prose and the fiction genre within the country. As India underwent a period of social and cultural transformation, the literary scene also evolved to reflect these changes.

Throughout the 20th century, a myriad of books were composed in both the English language and numerous regional languages of India. Initially, Bengal emerged as a prominent hub for Indo-Anglian fiction, with luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee contributing significantly to this literary tradition. However, as time progressed, English novels began to be authored in other regions of India, including Madras, Bombay, and various southern regions.

While Indian fiction boasts a rich historical and cultural background, Western researchers and critics often approach the analysis of Indian novels with preconceived notions, which can result in biased and fragmented judgments. This predisposition stems from a longstanding tendency among mainstream Western critics to avoid engaging deeply with Oriental texts and their rich array of motifs. This tendency can persist in certain contexts, where the understanding of Indian literature is influenced by preconceived Western notions of what constitutes "good" or "meaningful" literature.

Furthermore, this historical tradition of bias in Western literary analysis has been perpetuated by numerous critics over time. These critics may have contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings when it comes to Indian literature, hindering a more holistic and culturally sensitive appreciation of the depth and diversity of Indian novels. The emergence of the contemporary novel in India is a product of complex historical and cultural influences. While Indian literature offers a rich tapestry of narratives and perspectives, it often faces challenges when interpreted through the lens of Western preconceptions. Recognizing and addressing these biases is essential to fostering a more

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inclusive and accurate understanding of Indian literature and its contributions to the global literary landscape.

In his work, Fredric Jameson posited that texts from the third world inherently possess a symbolic nature. Specifically, he argued that these texts should be interpreted as what he referred to as "national allegories." This holds even when their structures are derived from predominantly Western modes of representation, such as the novel (Jameson 69). Based on the arguments above, is it justifiable to categorize Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's influential work *Rajmohan's Wife* solely as a national allegory? The potential resolution to this inquiry may reside in the realm of negativity. Upon closer examination, the novel can be seen as a duplicate of Nathaniel Hawthorne's renowned work, *The Scarlet Letter*. How Hawthorne depicts the mid-nineteenth century Puritan America exhibits a direct correlation with the narrative structure of this novel. In Hawthorne's novel, it is evident that Hester endures the arduous process of giving birth to her daughter, Pearl, though at the expense of committing a sinful act. Hester Prynne, who is wedded to an indifferent and materialistic individual named Chillingworth, engages in the transgression of adultery and is subsequently expelled from the community, evoking parallels to the expulsion of Adam and Eve. Bankim's novel presents a narrative resembling another story, albeit with a subtle variation. The central character of the literary work Madhav Ghose is portrayed as an individual who exhibits timidity while experiencing romantic feelings for the captivating and charming female lead, Matangini. The story exhibits a plot characterized by melodrama, with two antagonistic characters named Mathur and Rajmohan. Mathur finds himself captivated by Matangini's alluring physical attractiveness, while Rajmohan, representing the ideal of aristocratic status, ultimately takes Matangini as his spouse. Rajmohan is a reminiscent figure of Chillingworth from Hawthorne's work, exhibiting a profound characterization that positions him as a morally unorthodox antagonist.

The secret affection shared between Matangini and Madhav Ghose culminates in an unfortunate lack of marital bliss. The marriage between Rajmohan and Matangini catalyzes the subsequent events, leading to a significant division among the characters. The novel's premise resembles Nathaniel Hawthorne's renowned work, *The Scarlet Letter*, which may pique a curious



reader's interest. The two books share a closely intertwined publication history, as Hawthorne's novel was released in 1850 while Chatterjee's tale was serialized in 1864. Chatterjee's literary works typically conclude with a sad resolution, a characteristic that contributed to their relatively diminished popularity during the author's lifetime. Another contributing aspect to Chatterjee's novels is the politically tumultuous period during which they were written. India was experiencing the burdensome effects of colonial rule while simultaneously grappling with the influence of Western ideals and Enlightenment on its traditional Hindu culture.

Tanika Sarkar (2001) analyses Chatterjee's approach to fictionalizing history, noting that he openly aligns himself with rationalistic principles and explicitly acknowledges his connection to enlightenment universalism. Bankim relinquished these roles permanently following his discourse with Reverend Hastile. According to Sarkar (p.156), the author's writing undergoes a sudden shift as it no longer addresses the topics of class, caste, and gender. Instead, the focus is on the comprehensive understanding and contextualization of Hinduism, the responsibility of Muslims in Indian history, and the conceptualization and formation of Hindu society. Bankim, upon transitioning to the Bengali language, engaged in the exploration of historical romances.

Bankim's literature was primarily driven by a profound inclination to depict untamed aesthetics and challenge established norms. His writings' central theme is an enduring conflict between the forces of desire and duty obligations. Passion is the driving force that compels Hawthorne's protagonist, Hester, to develop romantic feelings for Arthur Dimmesdale. This study examines the parallel growth trajectory in two novels, one from a socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally conservative region. At the same time, the other emerges from a nation that embraces progressive ideologies. Before delving deeper, it is good to examine the analogous progression of the plot in Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Both of the novels exhibit recurring themes of feminine agony and revolt. The following passage is an excerpt from Hawthorne's renowned work, wherein the author skillfully portrays Hester's metamorphosis and her underlying inclination towards defiance.

A certain characteristic had dissipated from her, crucial in maintaining her femininity. This often proves to be the destiny and rigorous maturation process of the feminine disposition

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and individual when a woman has faced and endured an experience of distinctive severity. If she exhibits excessive sensitivity, she will perish. In the event of her survival, the tenderness within her will undergo one of two outcomes: it will either be eradicated or suppressed so profoundly within her heart that its manifestation becomes permanently concealed. The latter theory may be considered the most accurate. She who has previously identified as a woman but no longer does so has the potential to revert to identifying as a woman once more, provided that a transformative process, including a magical intervention, were to occur.

The narrator asserts that enduring challenging circumstances can erode the delicate nature of women, either extinguishing it entirely or burying it deep inside their hearts. Hester is willing to provide care for the ill and support the impoverished, aligning with the philanthropic actions commonly associated with Puritan women. However, her heart no longer harbours the tender and nurturing emotions typically associated with femininity.

The novel effectively conveys the tragic destiny of the protagonist, Matangini, through its concise language. At the beginning of the work, Bankim depicts Matangini as someone whose fair complexion has lost its radiance due to a profound sense of concern and despair. However, her beauty resembled a land lotus, which appeared partially withered and partially vibrant under the intense midday sun. Her lengthy hair was casually gathered into a knot on her shoulder, although a few stray strands had escaped their confinement and gently caressed her forehead and cheeks (3). The captivating allure possessed by Matangini may be perceived as a dangerous form of beauty akin to the destructive allure attributed to Helen of Troy. Matangini harbours affection for Madhav, although she cannot publicly articulate her emotions due to societal taboos. Matangini serves as a symbol of self-sacrifice.

The young woman, who was eighteen years old, did not adorn herself with excessive ornaments, nor did her speech reveal any indication of an Eastern accent. These observations indicated that this exceptionally beautiful individual was not a native of the Madhumati region but had been born and raised near the capital city, specifically in areas close to the Bhagirathi River.



In the narrative, the protagonist's face is inadvertently exposed due to a sudden gust of wind, leading to an unintended revelation. Subsequently, her husband, displaying cruelty, punishes her for her immodesty. Notably, the text does not depict any retaliation on her part, so she is situated within the framework of a traditional Indian woman who silently accepts the prevailing patriarchal norms. Matangini undergoes a gradual transformation, assuming a persona like Hester Prynne's. Matangini, as a literary figure, serves as Bankim's representative for a marginalized group of Indian women who were objectified and denied agency. Matangini, in my perspective, represents the culmination of psychological traumas spanning several centuries that have become ingrained in the archetype of the Indian lady. She opposes the prevailing system in which vices and virtues are segregated into distinct categories. Another significant character in the story which plays a pivotal role in the narrative is Madhav Ghose, the clandestine paramour. He assumes the role of a tacit seducer, compelling our protagonist, Matangini, to follow in his wake as if under a hypnotic spell. Matangini says to Madhav:

"I implore you, do not hate me, do not despise me," she exclaimed with a profound emotional intensity that visibly affected her fragile physique. "Do not reject me for this final display of weakness, Madhav. This may very well be our last encounter; it must be so. I have loved you intensely, and I continue to love you deeply. I cannot bear to part with you without a fight." (28)

The central conflict in the tragedy revolves around the inherent tension between intense emotions and moral obligations. Bankim aims to portray Matangini in a manner that elicits sympathy from the audience. Therefore, when Matangini expresses her love, which transgresses martial and familial norms, she is immediately pardoned. In his novel, Hawthorne presents a portrayal of Hester's legal husband, Chillingworth, that can be characterized as stereotypical, lacking empathy, and devoid of sensuality. In the same vein, Rajmohan's character in this context can be perceived as a stereotypical portrayal of an authoritative figure. The character is initially presented to the reader as self-possessed yet greatly affected by Matangini's alluring qualities. However, upon gaining legal custody of Matangini, he experiences a sense of insecurity at the





potential loss of Matangini, both physically and psychologically. He has achieved achievement in his first pursuit of acquiring Matangini as an object of adornment.

Meenakshi Mukherjee (1998), a prominent critic of Bankim's literary works, asserts that the intense and untamed rage depicted in Rajmohan might be interpreted as reminiscent of the jealousy portrayed in Shakespeare's *Othello*. To a certain degree, her claim possesses a measure of validity, as Rajmohan's remarks exhibit a formidable force. A notable parallelism may be discerned between the characters of Rajmohan and Roger Chillingworth. Both individuals exhibit harsh behaviour and mistreat their respective spouses, yet it may be argued that Rajmohan's character possesses a greater degree of intrigue and charisma. The protagonist transforms into a more dynamic and vibrant figure due to the influence of a compulsive artist in the works of Bankim. Bankim has shown the character as a three-dimensional individual rather than a one-dimensional antagonist. He experiences intense anger and a persistent fear of losing Matangini due to his inability to build a physical and intimate connection with his wife. Including these aspects and several more contributes to the enhanced complexity and intrigue around the character within the story's context.

On the one hand, he experiences a profound obligation to embody the ideals of patriarchy. Still, on the other hand, he grapples with a deep-seated fear of losing Matangini, which generates a sense of inner turmoil. Amidst the commotion, the protagonist locates herself within the domain of an extraterrestrial realm. Hawthorne's protagonist, Hester, entered into a realm that allowed her to attain what was before an unattainable aspiration for an average woman. However, she had to make significant sacrifices for this courageous decision.

The novel also explores the issue of morality as a significant aspect. The civilization of 18th-century India exhibited characteristics that were both serious and intricate. Stringent regulations and cultural prohibitions characterized the prevailing social structure. Bankim Sudipto Kaviraj, a prominent literary critic, has been extensively analyzed by an influential critic highlighting Bankim's inclination towards experimentation in his novels. The critic observes that Bankim's narratives frequently revolve around a profound struggle arising from the coexistence



of two essential and inescapable aspects of human existence, which are equally indispensable facts.

## **Conclusion**

To navigate the complexities of a social environment, it is necessary to establish definitions that serve as a fundamental framework for delineating permissible and impermissible actions. Simultaneously, these social constructions aim to regulate innate human instincts; however, their efficacy in ensuring complete safety is limited. The social and moral realms in which individuals exist comprise two distinct and conflicting components: the individual desires that govern human behaviour and the societal constructions that shape the functioning of communities. Bankim's narrative movement is largely driven by the core conflict that emerges from the inescapable presence of moral orders and the inescapable occurrence of their violations. According to Kaviraj (1998), The analysis of this captivating commentary reveals that Bankim provides his contrary heroine, Matangini, with various avenues for self-expression. The portrayal of the character goes beyond a mere depiction of indecision, instead presenting her as a figure imbued with genuine emotion. (2)Matangini's transgressive actions elicit a sense of sympathy within us. Bankim, as a writer adhering to Naturalism, effectively presents the prevailing societal norms and restrictions within the context of his portrayal of current life. Individuals such as Matangini emerge as catalysts for challenging the established rules and ethical standards.



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