
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's Changing Conception of the Female Subject

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ABSTRACT

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's representations of women have engendered much criticism and controversy in the light of feminist theory. The sexual objectification of the female body has been a concern of feminists for a number of years. Bankimchandra emphasizes the different positions of women and men in the contemporary social context. Gender is putting in these terms, constrains feminist thought within the framework of a virtually universal sex opposition. His changing conception of the female subject in the relations of subjectivity to society will be the focus of this paper.

KEYWORDS

Subjectivity, representation, female subject, gender and patriarchal power.

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1. Introduction

Bankimchandra's women appear as unitary objects bound to patriarchal power relations in which their interests are subordinated to the interests of men. His representations of normal behavior between women and men establish a hierarchy of values within the narrative, a hierarchy wherein patriarchal cultural values dominate. Bankimchandra's norms of femininity, masculinity and relations between the sexes perpetuate sexual stereotypes. The feminists, including Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Toril Moi, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, advocate the importance of conceiving of the female subject and the relations of subjectivity to society on grounds other than "sexual difference". Many feminists view female representation and self-representation as the product of social technologies such as cinema, narrative and theory.

Subjectivity is always socially produced in language; a close examination of Bankimchandra's emphasizing practices is important for an understanding of fictive representations of gender, which propose norms of femininity and masculinity as well as relations between the sexes. Textual analysis is an exploration of the discursive context and the power relations of the discursive field within which the textual reading is located. A close textual analysis of *Rajmohan's Wife*, *Brishabriksha (The Poison Tree)*, *Krishnakanter Uil*, *Anadmata*, and *Durgeshnandini* will enable us to discover how Bankimchandra's representations of gender were constructed and allow us to realize how these representations changed over time. In justifying Bankimchandra's early, middle and late novel, a gradual shift in the conception of the female subject can be effectively demonstrated. The objectification of women begins to give way to women as subjects constructed in the experience of class, age and sexual relations, a subject no longer unified but multiple, decentered and internally contradictory.

2. Review of Literature

Jayanta Kumar Dasgupta, in *A Critical Study of the Life and Novels of Bankimchandra*, shows the literary creations of Bankimchandra and his life. His novels have dynamic subject matter and themes. His treatment of women is shown partially in this book, but the tragic consequences of women's lives have been focused on. There is no discussion or steps to protest against gender discrimination in society of Bankimchandra's writing delineated in this book. However, the real life issues and contemporary

dilemmas of conjugal life have been expressed. It also depicted women's relationship with men as an interaction emerging from the idealistic and the dogmatic.

Manoranjan Jana represents Bankimchandra's women characters in *Bankim Chandrer Drishtite Nari*. Indian society exhibits the tendency to model women characters from real life with those from the *Kavyas* and *Puranas* who have been acknowledged as standards down the ages, like Sita, Gandhari, Damayanti and Radha. These women have set unprecedented examples in social codes and religious scriptures. Bankimchandra critically shows women's sexuality becomes the central of any consideration of tradition and modernity. The idea of chastity and purity is still the norm, and any kind of deviation is generally deeply disturbing to the male psyche. However, male promiscuity is tolerated and dismissed as a sign of masculinity. Bankimchandra shows the necessity of change and a growing awareness of a woman's sexual needs. But there is no individual freedom and identity of women in the contemporary society.

3. Methodology

This study uses the content analysis method to analyse the contents of Bankimchandra's works and the secondary materials on going. The research work is mainly based on content analysis. A detailed analysis extracted from the primary and secondary sources has been the process of reaching a conclusion. Different techniques of historical methods have been applied to essential contexts; sociological, anthropological and cultural analyses have been brought under observation. The data has been studied in three phases: preparation, organisation and reporting. In the first phase, the primary sources have been carefully pursued to understand the texts in detail. In the second phase, data has been categorised and organised in detail. In the last phase, the research report is prepared on the basis of the data assembled from both sources.

For source citation, the Notes-Bibliography style prescribed by Kate L. Turabian has been followed. British English for spelling and simple transliteration rules for transliterating Bangla expressions are followed.

4. Bankimchandra's Treatment of Women

Bankimchandra's women appear as unitary objects bound to patriarchal power relations in which their interests are subordinated to those of men. His representations of normal behavior between women and men establish a hierarchy of values within the narrative, a hierarchy wherein patriarchal cultural values dominate. Bankimchandra's norms of femininity, masculinity and relations between the sexes perpetuate sexual stereotypes.

Bankimchandra's *Kapalkundala* focuses on the mysteries of the mind of a woman. Tanika Sarkar in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* emphasizes how in *Kapalkundala*, Bankimchandra endeavours to discuss a sharp, social woman who carries on "undomesticated" despite exploring sexual love.¹ The heroine of this novel incorporates the ideal of a non-attached person having kindness, wisdom, self-sacrifice and concern, but she gets entire fulfillment through self-reliance. *Brishabriksha (The Poison Tree)* deals with the marriage of widows, polygamy, child marriage, the betterment of social conditions and the emancipation of women. *Krishnakanter Uil* revolves around a widow's socially inhibited love and its grim tragedy. Widow remarriage is the main problem in both *Brishabriksha (The Poison Tree)* and *Krishnakanter Uil*.

Anandmath projects a bitter dichotomy of the patriarchal perception of women. In this novel, the nation is considered as the Mother, while women are prohibited from crusading for her cause. *Debi Chaudhurani* deals with the valour and prowess of unfettered womanhood. In this novel, Bankimchandra focuses on a woman character's remark on the holiness of the orthodox Hindu marriage system. The wives regarded the most dominant duty as the devotion to their husbands and household chores. Unfortunately, Prafulla is disappointed to follow the norms of society, and she opposes it forcefully. *Sitaram* deals with unrestrained passion, and it is a tragedy. The negative effects of polygamy are represented in *Sitaram* and *Debi Chaudhurani*. *Sitaram* also shows how the poignant scene of Sita's trial in *Ramayana* is upturned and put through to damnation, question and complaint by another woman who strengthens the trial to close down. These novels are some of the eminent manifestations of Bankimchandra's capability of well-knit plots and representation of women.

Bankimchandra is considered one of the pioneers to portray in his works women as individual characters within the framework of contemporary conservative society. He has also remarkably maintained a balanced view of the two significant religions in India: Hinduism and Islam. Kazi Abdul Wadud has said:

The modern critic of Bankimchandra finds no basis for the charge against him of anti-muslim spite. For one thing, he has created some beautiful Muslim characters; for another, as a socialist, he championed the cause of the have-nots against the haves, irrespective of race or creed.²

In *Durgeshnandini*, Ayesha is courageous and renounces her character. Bankim's keen concern for issues like his eager quest for the truth, his love of humanity and his longing for the abused has aroused multiple critical opinions. Bankim has expressed psycho-

¹ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). P.145.

² Kazi Abdul Wadud, "Bengali" Ed. Bharatan Kumarappa. *Indian Literatures of Today- A Symposium* (Bombay: PEN, 1947). P.14.

analytical views on his women characters. There is a historical romance which mingled with domestic problems in his novel. In most of his novels, he artistically represents beautiful, intelligent and memorable women characters. He also portrays a majestic, grand and chronological history. There are miracles, deus ex machina, thrilling incidents and co-incidences in all of his novels except *Indira* and *Krishnakanter Uil*. For the first time in Bengali literature in *Radharani*, the heroine chooses her life partner and influences him to marry finally. Indira also marries at a young age. Unfortunately, the husband forgets how his wife looks, but she recognizes him when they meet in Calcutta. The heroine Indira is modeled after Kalidas's *Shakuntala*, and it also receives some of the traits of William Shakespeare's *Miranda*. *Rajsimha* is the only mature historical fiction of Bankimchandra.

Bankimchandra creates defiant heroines such as Aysha in *Durgeshnandini* and Shanti in *Anandamath*. However, Kundanandini in *Bishabriksha*, Shaibalini in *Chandrashekhar* and Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil*, the women try to change their destinies but automatically face tragic endings in the patriarchal society. In *Debi Chaudhurani* Bankim's archetype, women of the contemporary conservative society have appeared. Although the heroine, Prafulla, is creative, hardworking, ingenious and a potential leader, she is entirely dependent on her husband. However, lastly, she relinquishes her attitude of challenging the outer world and confines herself in the household along with her husband's other existing wives. The patriarchal society creates obstacles to the fulfillment of womanhood. Bankimchandra shows the complicated condition of women in society with the views of feudal Hindu morality. K. M. George says Bankimchandra's critique of the present day society, which is still hesitant to rehabilitate kidnapped women or molested victims or runaway wives.³ By disobeying society's norms and rules, a woman may lose social security forever. Eventhough, in Bankimchandra's *Bishabriksha*, Suryamukhi returns to her husband and is silently accepted in the village community. Similarly, Indira returns to her husband after being seized by robbers, but the censorious Hindu society, which relishes rumor, spares no hue and cry for her.⁴ T. W. Clark says,

The social life of Bankim's novels is pitched at different levels, according to the status of his principal characters. He himself came from a middle class family, and it is only when dealing with characters of this class that he is at home and that his descriptions are realistic and convincing.⁵

The challenging heroines of Bankimchandra are Shanti's disguises outside as a woman in *Anandmath* and Bimala in her adventures, exploits and vindictive stalkings in *Durgeshnandini*. Bankimchandra disapproved of portraying 'unreal' women characters in Pyari Chad Mitra and Dinabandhu Mitra's works. He thought that Pyari Chad Mitra's women characters were 'very faintly drawn' and they were all identical, and they gave very little idea of the influence which the walls of the 'zenana' exercised in Indian daily life. S. N. Mukherjee, in *The Poison Tree: Three Novellas by Bankimchandra Chatterjee*, says,

Bankim observed that Dinabandhu Mitra's women characters from English novels and *Sanskrit Kavya*, quite distinct from the 'real Bengali women who were strong and independent.'⁶

It has marked that the diversity of human nature attracted Bankimchandra the most. He also greatly emphasized characterization in his novels. His women characters are "complex and exciting. Unlike his men, the women are flexible, kind or cruel, active, diplomatic, sometimes conniving and speak in a simple and informal language."⁷ In his women, characters like Suryamukhi, Kundanandini, Sundari, Shaibalini, Bhramar and Rohini represent the universal characteristics of a woman, but it also focuses on how womanhood is lent particular definition by the soil of Bengal, its climate, its fields, natural beauty, family and social life.

Bankimchandra's dissatisfaction with social norms explored a sharp control in the literary representations of women transcended the limits of both the orthodox customs and the reformists. His women characters were naturally a chaste wife, an accomplice in a crime, an ambitious widow and an adulterous wife. They have faced inequity in the male dominated society. Such women assert themselves individually independent of men and occasionally uphold themselves as human beings who are superior to men in ability and thinking. In *Debi Chaudhurani*, Prafulla represents her rise as a woman who is in defiance of accepted social codes. Bankim also prosecutes the culprits who have diminished from the humane codes of morality. Similarly, Bankimchandra proceeds beyond the codes of practice. He also admitted by Hindu texts, and he critically analyzed how society perceives the advances of progressive women as whimsical aberrations. It is noticeable in *Durgeshnandini* for Bimala and in *Debi Chaudhurani* for Prafulla. Tanika Sarkar says,

Bankimchandra's objection to the impact of domesticity on a woman's inner self and his radical representation of the powerful, assertive and self-sufficient woman are more inherital than the reformist agendas of his time.⁸

³ K. M. George, *Comparative Indian Literature* (Madras: Macmillan India Ltd., 1984). P.611.

⁴ Ibid. p.611.

⁵ T. W. Clark, *The Novel in India: Its Birth and its Development* (London: Geroge Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970). P.69.

⁶ S. N. Mukherjee, "Introduction", *The Poison Tree: Three Novellas by Bankimchandra Chatterjee* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996). P.xxviii.

⁷ Ibid. p.45.

⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). P.148.

Bankimchandra does not protest against the traditional structural changes in women's immediate social predicament. The sense of guilt towards women has been focused on as reformable aspects of women's social existence or as normal human beings in his novels. It also showed the individual tragic situations which result in mental insanity or imbalance in psychotic situations rather than in social ones. His novels tend to throw open-ended, conflicting points of view. Jayanta Kumar Dasgupta, in *A Critical Study of the Life and Novels of Bankimchandra*, says,

The novels of Bankimchandra represent the inclusion of alternative, even transgressive possibilities within the narrated world; and this world as a whole reveals a range of unrealized possibilities that throws a particular form of existence into sharper relief through a series of comparisons and controls.⁹

Bankimchandra's essay *Prachina O Nabine* (The Old-Fashioned and the Modern Woman) explores the view under the pretext of improving the condition of women; men actually confine them to their own standards and manipulate to accommodate them according to their changed views and expectations.¹⁰

5. Conclusion

Bankimchandra observes that the reformist plans of harmonious marriage use women in an instrumental manner. Such courageous feminism is thus directed not so much against the orthodox Hindu who focuses on the advancement of women but against the reformer who shows the need for change. Bankimchandra has protest for the radical structural changes in society regarding the treatment of women. Women have faced a lot of troubles from society, which shatters their existence as a human. They have a psychological imbalance, which creates conflict with social norms.

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⁹ Jayanta Kumar Dasgupta, *A Critical Study of the Life and Novels of Bankimchandra* (Calcutta: The Calcutta Press, 1937),p.145.

¹⁰ S. C. Sengupta, *The Makers of Literature Bankim Chandra Chaterjee*. 3rd Ed. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997),p.151.