
UNIT 1 THE CONTEXTS OF BANKIM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Over this unit and the next one, we will try to locate Bankim within his contexts. It must be understood here that no writer can write in a vacuum, that each writer is shaped by a whole range of factors: the age she/he wrote in, the class into which they were born, the literary and social issues that they were concerned about and the manner in which it shaped their work. We will begin by looking at Bankim's literary context and see his shaping as a writer – we will look at his early and later concerns, his age and the social ethos of the time. And then, in the second part we will see how Bankim changed, how and why he repudiated his early writings and how finally his political ideas became controversial and questionable.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Firstly, we will look at the time of the Bengal Renaissance – the rich and varied literature that emerged from Bengal and the early precursors to the novel as it finally emerged. It is important to see the literary history of the time because Bankim's works must be seen historically as the pioneering works that they were. His novels are the first accomplished realist narratives that we have. The concern with issues of middle class life, the centrality of women, the moral conflicts at the heart of his narratives are all features of his work that gave him the unique position he holds. Even though *Rajmohan's Wife* is not the most evolved of his novels, it is the first of a series of novels that Bankim wrote about the same kinds of issues. He went on to write *Durgeshnandini*, *Bishabhriksha*, *Krsnakanter Uil*, and *Indira* all about the nature of human desire. In one of the later units, we will talk about his treatment of desire: about how desire in his novels is powerful and malevolent. Men are weak in the face of passion – as are women – yet his women characters remain strong and unforgettable even though embedded in a completely patriarchal mode.

This unit will also very briefly look at the literary career of Bankim – of how he stood out not just as a pioneer but also as a maverick political writer. He had a central significance because of his role as a nationalist – he articulated powerfully, the need to arouse the nation against British rule. But in doing so, he used the term Hindu synonymously with Indian. There is an unambiguous anti-Muslim vocabulary in his works. Even though it may have come from an animosity towards the ruling class that was dominantly Muslim, it fuelled communal hatred and showed his inclination to be

on the side of the backward looking Hindus who sought a revival of their somewhat imaginary lost glory. It is not surprising therefore that most writers have tried to either celebrate him as a nationalist or dismiss him as a Hindu revivalist or at least a traditionalist. Sometimes it is rather difficult to pigeonhole him and as students of Literature, we must desist from jumping to such conclusions. The fact that he moved away from his own, earlier, more radical position and moved to a more orthodox position does not mean we can overlook his earlier contribution to the history of ideas. We have therefore tried not to overlook one aspect in favour of another. In this unit however, we will only touch upon some of the views he held on a whole range of social issues.

1.2 BANKIM'S LITERARY CONTEXT

Let us begin with a brief history of Bengali Literature in the nineteenth century focusing on the prose writings and early fiction that were produced as a result of the encounter between the English and the Bengali people. This will hopefully help us in placing Bankim in his literary context and will show us just how central his role was in the literary map of Bengal. Early Bengali prose fiction was inspired by Todd's *Rajasthan* and was written in English in the form of historical stories. Most of these writers belonged to prominent families of Calcutta who were deeply influenced by English learning like, **Sashichandra Dutt** (who wrote the *Tales of Yore* (1848?). Even those who started writing historical fiction in Bengali like **Bhudev Mukherji** often took their subject matter from well-known works by English writers. In that sense perhaps it was **Peary Chand Mitra** (1814- 83) who really initiated the treatment of Bengali life and manners in his prose writings. Interestingly, his education was English even though he was extremely well read in Bengali. His literary activity was largely a consequence of his monthly 'penny' magazine for women. The popularity of cheap magazines that carried features of feminine interest such as episodic fiction is in itself an important factor that contributed to the shaping of the literary tastes and writings of the day. Experimenting with language that led to a more accessible style came from the desire to tap some of this new reading public.

In Peary Chandra Mitra's novels such as *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, published episodically between 1855- 1857, Bengal first witnessed a narrative dealing with the ways of the middle class gentry in the neighbouring towns on the Hooghly in the early nineteenth century. Though his work was didactic and flawed, Mitra created immortal characters and a lively style in his fictional works. **Kaliprasanna Simha** (1840-76) pioneered satirical sketches of Calcutta life that held up the new rich and their hypocrisies to ridicule. His sketches were hugely popular and led the market being flooded by a regular crop of such scandalous tales or *guptakatha* as they were called. This really was the context in which **Bankim Chandra Chatterji** (1838-94) wrote. He was educated at the Hooghly College and belonged to an orthodox family. The prose style was already standardised; what Chatterji did was to make it less monotonous by stripping it of its verbosity. His first published fictional work was *Rajmohan's Wife*. This was serialised in the *Indian Field* in 1864. *Durgeshnandini* was published the following year and was his first Bengali romance. He wrote some more romances but later, he was no longer content to write romances, so he started a monthly called *Bangadarsan* in 1872. This magazine published a variety of genres with a view to educating the people and bringing about a cultural revival. Chatterji also tried his hand at historical fiction (*Rajsimha*, 1881) and at political fiction (*Anandamath*, 1882).

The idea for *Anandamath* came to Bankim from **Sanjiv Chandra Chatterji's** novel called *Kanthamala* (*The Necklace*, 1877). Sanjiv Chandra Chatterji (1834-89) was the elder brother of Bankim and according to **Sukumar Sen** was a born raconteur or engaging storyteller. He edited Bankim's monthly during the later years from their ancestral village home at Kamthalpada. The first two issues of his own magazine

called *Bhramar* contained two stories by him. *Kanthamala* is a carelessly written novel but it has a chapter that delineates a model of philanthropic society and this chapter is what gave Bankim the idea for *Anandamath*. *Anandamath* (which is usually translated as *The Mission House of the Anandas*) is a political novel with a rather thin plot. It is based on the Sannyasi rebellion that took place in North Bengal in 1773. Bankim made his characters altruistic patriots who were influenced by the *Gita*, who fought against odds with the British. In his depiction the actual historical facts are erased, and he gives the sannyasis justification by making the British responsible for the terrible famine in the previous year. Bankim as an administrative officer could not afford to allow such an estimate to triumph, so he attributed the failure of the Anandas to their own weaknesses. The novel by common consent is one of Bankim's weaker novels – but it is historically significant as it places its finger on the pulse of the people and records the growing restlessness with the British rule which was to gather momentum soon after and become a powerful nationalist sentiment.

Anandamath is best known for the song that appears in it, *Vande Mataram*. The song was to become popular in Bengal only later. It was really during the swadeshi movement that it became a slogan and slowly, its popularity spread through the entire nation during the freedom struggle. This perhaps provided the association of Bankim with Hindu nationalism. But this was only one aspect of the illustrious figure called Bankim. As Sisir Kumar Das says,

When he died in 1894 at the age of 56 he had made Bengali prose a supple instrument of expression, built the structure of the Bengali novel on firm foundations and inspired the growth of the novel in many Indian languages. Whether his influence was totally beneficial or not can be debated, but his role in giving a new direction to Indian literature is not a matter of opinion – it is a historical fact". (Das, ix)

Bankim's novels were usually marked by unhappy endings. This seems to have made him somewhat less popular than he might have been – or so it is speculated. Whatever might be the truth of these observations what is well known is that another writer **Damodar Mukherji** (1853-1907) wrote his first novel *Mrnmayi* (1874) which was a rewriting of Bankim's rather well known and successful tragic story called *Kapalkundala* - in which he changed the end to make it happy. Bankim influenced, in one way or the other, the generations that succeeded him. For instance, the novels of **Nagendranath Gupta** (1861 –1940) such as *Parvatavasini* and *Lila* follow Bankim's pattern of romance with the dramatic element predominating. The daily life of lower middle class people with their mean and petty jealousies and their simple, uncomplicated joys and sufferings was first introduced to Bengali Literature by **Taraknath Ganguli** (1845-91), in his novel *Svarnalata* (1873). According to Sukumar Sen, this was the first domestic novel with realistic touches. The characters are what the common man identifies with and not aristocratic or historical figures. Here there is no evidence to be found of Bankim's influence in that, it has a different readership in mind. The upper class, aristocratic life and its moral dilemmas that Bankim so excelled at, are nowhere to be seen in this new kind of novel that Ganguli popularised. **Svarna Kumari Devi** (1855-1932), the elder sister of **Rabindranath Tagore**, is the most well known literary woman of the time. She wrote novels, short stories, poetry and drama. Her first novel *Dipnirvan* (1876) is a historical fiction about the life of **Prithviraj**. She also wrote about sisterly love – but her unique contribution was perhaps in her later novel *Snehalata* (1892) where the problems of the upper middle class society are first taken up. Svarna Kumari Devi also edited the monthly magazine *Bharati* which was started by her brothers in 1877.

1.3 BANKIM'S LIFE AND VIEWS

Born into an established family in Kanthalpura on 26 June 1838, Bankim had an upbringing that was largely representative of the provincial Bengali life of his time and class. His education began with a private tutor who came home to teach him with his brothers. In 1849, Bankim was sent to Hugli College where he studied for seven years. Here he read the essays of **Goldsmith** and **Addison**, the poems of **Pope** and the Romantics and the drama of **Shakespeare**. He however combined an interest in English with a love for Sanskrit that he undertook to study seriously. In this way he was different from his other two contemporaries – **Michael Madhusudan Datta** (1824-73) and **Iswarchandra Vidyasagar** (1820-91) who did not have Bankim's facility with the three languages – English, Bengali and Sanskrit. Bankim was from a very traditional family that still practiced child marriage and he was married to his bride at the age of 11. At the age of 15, he was a widower – not unlike Kundanandini in his novel *The Poison Tree* – except that he was a man, and could marry again without much ado- which he did. This time he had a say in his marriage and opted for an older women. He was not in favour of child marriages and looked for a more companionate notion of a partner than most in his community.

He started writing poetry quite early and a lot of it was composed when he worked for a journal called *Sambad Prabhakar* in 1853. The editor he worked under was called **Iswar Gupta**. Gupta was an interesting literary figure himself – condemned by the younger generation for his obscenity. It might be noted that the younger generation were Victorian in their prudishness – they distanced themselves from the frank, even ribald sexual humour in a lot of native writing, as they felt constrained by the 'propriety' and sexual ethos of the ruling Victorian class. Bankim himself inherited some of this anxiety to try and avoid erotic overtones. That is why in Bankim the eroticism is only a strong undercurrent – never explicitly stated and his humour is never bawdy. Bankim came to Calcutta in 1856 to study law at Presidency College. Calcutta stunned him with its difference – this was no provincial town – it was his first glimpse of a metropolis. As **Das** points out,

Unlike the other big cities of India, Calcutta had no lineage with either the Hindu or Muslim past. It was a British made town, its houses built by British architects, its streets designed by British town planners. The people who controlled its social life belonged to the new class of landlords who flourished soon after the Permanent Settlement of 1793. (10)

Calcutta had also been witnessing a series of reformist influences and the Brahmo Samaj was an established influence. In his earlier phase, Bankim's writings were relatively more influenced by Western Enlightenment ideas and he remained affiliated to Rationalism. But **Tanika Sarkar** writes about how this phase ended and Bankim was never to return to these concerns,

He made no secret of his rationalist affiliation and unambiguously proclaimed his lineage within Enlightenment universalism. ...Bankim gave up these positions, never to return to them, after his debate with Reverend Hastie. The themes of class, caste and gender abruptly disappear from his writing, their absence filled by reflections on all that constitutes authentic and fully historicized Hinduism, on the culpability of the Muslim in Indian history, on how the Hindu nation may be imagined and constructed. (Sarkar, 156)

For the most part, Bankim remained traditional and took little interest in the Brahmo Samaj. It is disappointing to see the lack of interest he took in progressive movements of his age. Vidyasagar had launched his movement advocating the remarriage of young widows. In later years Bankim criticised Vidyasagar and this is pertinent

1.4 BANKIM'S EARLY CONCERNS

Sisir Kumar Das talks about how Bankim remained ambivalent to both reformist movements that were influential in his time: widow remarriage and the abolition of polygamy. The early Bankim wrote two powerful essays: 'Bangadesher Krishak' and 'Samya'. The former is a critique of the notion of progress. He saw modernisation and technology as only a partial means to achieve the end of progress – because the real producers i.e. the peasants who toiled were not the ones who benefited from the distribution of wealth. His arguments were influenced by **John Stuart Mill** (1806-73) and his theory of Utilitarianism. Sarkar quotes him saying, "We admit that the country as a whole has progressed but peasants do not share in that progress". ('Bangadesher Krishak', *Vividha Prabandha, Bankim Rachnabali*, II, 289). His critique is centred here mainly on the Permanent Settlement that equipped the landlord with absolute power. In 'Samya' however, it is a broader canvas that covers Indian Society as a whole. He talks about the rampant nature of inequality in the country. He highlights caste divisions as India's special contribution to inequality. He writes about the extent of oppression of women and exposes the double standards inherent in the patriarchal fabric of society. In his essay, "Samya" Bankim writes, "If eternal widowhood is beneficial to the society, why don't you favour eternal widowerhood as well". He notes that laws are beneficial to men because they are drafted by men. But he adds a cryptic clause saying though everybody ought to have the right to remarry, "a widow who was devoted to her former husband would never remarry. As Das sums it up, "his defense of widow remarriage is marred by his most unfair innuendos". (62) Notwithstanding the radical potential of these essays, the fact remains that Bankim in his later years distanced himself completely from what he wrote earlier in fact, he is believed to have rued the fact that he ever wrote them.

Similarly, Bankim concedes the reprehensibility of polygamy – but does not support the movement to abolish it, saying the reprehensible practice would die a natural death.

Bankim felt that the enactment of laws would not change social practice. He ridiculed **Rammohan Roy** and Vidyasagar's ways of constantly seeking support from the ancient texts – he maintained that the scriptures were not the supreme authorities they were being made to be.

1.4.1 Bankim's Later Themes

While Bankim remained traditional in most of his views, he also appreciated what he saw as progressive about western education. In the first issue of *Bangadarshan*, he tried to analyse why India was in such an ignominious position. He saw in the Hindus a lack of desire for freedom and an inability to stand together with other Hindus against the British. He felt it was the enervating climate and the philosophical systems, which combined to encourage inaction and valorised salvation. He saw nationalism as a contribution of western or specifically English education. Later in this block, we have discussed how in *Rajmohan's Wife*, the hero is a product of English education and the villains are completely provincial. Bankim also wrote against the nature of Brahmin domination in India that denied all other castes, particularly the untouchables (shudras) all fundamental human rights. Bankim raised the hackles of the orthodox population – even as he distanced himself from the more progressive figures like Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy.

In his later writings, the "themes of class, caste and gender abruptly disappear ...their absence filled by reflections on all that constitutes authentic and fully

historicized Hinduism, on how the Hindu nation maybe imagined and constructed. For Bankim now the resolution of social and national malaise seemed to lie in imagining an apocalyptic war with Muslims through which Hindus would ingest their valour and prove their ability to make a nation". (Sarkar, 156) Bankim then, propagated the practice of devotion where eventually his overriding involvement with Hindu nationalism made him forsake all other liberal concerns he had articulated earlier. "In the process, Bankim's self-critical, radical sensibility was transformed to an authoritarian, totalitarian, and intolerant voice". (Sarkar, 156). The contribution of Bankim to Indian nationalism is a subject which requires a great deal of thought and which we are going to take up later. But for the moment let us simply say that he was representative of his age in that, he felt it was the duty of the intellectual to defend his race and culture in the face of the colonisers. The problem with Bankim's politics comes from the fact that he did not distinguish between Hindu and Indian nationalism.

But he was not representative of his age in that he remained distant from most movements of his time. He ignored the **Brahmo Samaj** that was a reformist Hindu movement - he maintained his differences with the **Arya Samaj**. Bankim had synthesised the *Gita* with European thinkers like **Auguste Comte** (1798-1857). Thus he was not propagating a traditional position and could not be ignored by the Brahmo Samaj. Equally, he made the orthodox Hindus uncomfortable by challenging their unshakeable faith in the Vedas. As Das says, his "approach to the Vedas was closer to the Western Indologist than the traditional Hindu ..." (198). The underlying truth was that Bankim's mind was not appropriated by any one single truth or philosophical vision; he distanced himself from both ancient Hindu beliefs and modern, western beliefs - but he also partially accepted some truths from each. Bankim made his last public appearance in March 1894 - after which his already fragile health began to fail him - in the April of the same year, he lost consciousness and died after suffering acutely for many days.

1.5 BANKIM'S AGE AND SOCIAL ETHOS

The new system of education was intended to produce 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect'. (Macaulay as quoted by Das, 200)

The age in which Bankim lived and wrote was a transitional age - in many ways foreign rule expedited the transformation of Indian society from medieval to modern. The coming together of two cultures threw up several accepted beliefs for questioning. The whole traditional system of education had been gradually rehailed - by the time Bankim was born; English education was a well-established fact. The split between those who had benefited from it and those who had not was very pronounced (and is something which we will talk about in our discussion of *Rajmohan's Wife*). Bankim started his career as a deputy magistrate in 1858 - by which time, the quelled Rebellion of 1857 had made British Rule something of an accepted reality. There was an admiration for the ruling race which ran contrary to the discrimination the Indians felt. Bankim was a product of these two strongly opposed national sentiments. It was this English educated middle class which created a new literature in different Indian languages in the 19th century. Pearychand Mitra (*Alaler Gharer Dulal*, 1858), whom we mentioned earlier, was the director of a British Trading Company. The novel in India was a contribution of the middle class - but with the spread of vernacular education, the number of readers grew widely. While so far, only the elite sections of society could afford an education, slowly regional languages also became a medium of imparting education and the readership grew and expanded. Early Indian novels were unabashedly didactic. **Gauridatt's** Hindi work *Devarani Jethani ki Kahani* (1870) tries to prove the value of female education and raises questions such as widow remarriage. **Chandu Menon's**

Indulekha (1889) proves the usefulness of an English education. Bankim managed to write both social / didactic novels as well as romances and gave both types of novels a new lease of life.

Bankim's first novel (*Rajmohan's Wife*) is written in English and in many ways looks forward to a trend of English educated heroes with modern values as opposed to traditional heroes. The Bengali novel in coming years was to produce a spate of anglicised graduates from Calcutta University, wearing European clothes and eating food forbidden to Hindus as a gesture towards progressive English values. The lukewarm success of *Rajmohan's Wife* and perhaps Bankim's own sense of unease made him switch to Bengali as his medium for writing.

1.6 BANKIM'S OTHER WORKS

When Bankim switched to Bengali – he began writing historical romances. Das writes about the prevalence of romanticism in Bankim's works. His challenging of certain accepted conventions, his passion for beauty and his restless mind are all symptoms of romanticism – but he did not actually react against society in the way the European Romantics did. His desire for change remained strictly guarded by conventional notions of morality. There is at the heart of his novels an unresolved tension between passion and duty – which we will examine in the context of *Rajmohan's Wife* as well as a couple of his other stories. According to Das, most of Bankim's historical novels are set in the medieval period – these would include a lot of his major works, namely – *Mrinalini*, *Durgeshnandini*, *Kapalkundala*, *Chandrasekhar*, *Debi Chaudharani* and *Ananda Math*. The past is deployed very consciously for a didactic purpose – to re-establish patriotism, self – sacrifice, chivalry – as well as to have more exotic settings with palaces and castles and intrigues and sacrifices.

His novels about contemporary life are mostly located in small villages. His chief characters belong to the propertied class – even though his canvas is wide – it includes domestic servants as well as landlords – lawyers as well as musicians. His descriptions of everyday life are detailed and fairly vivid which make him a precise chronicler of his times. Bankim wrote on social issues as well as religious and philosophical matters. He felt that the primary duty of literature was to create beauty that cleansed the mind. He felt that the chief function of literature was to purify the mind rather than present the readers with admirable role models. He said poets were not preachers – but in later works, he did not maintain this distance he talked about. After 1880, there is a distinct change of position that is evident from works like *Anandamath* where his political desire to raise consciousness overrides the earlier belief in maintaining an aesthetic distance. In *Anandamath*, Bankim is keen to infuse a sense of national pride and popularise a patriotism that was otherwise lacking. He tried to marry patriotism with religion – wherein arise the problems with Bankim. As has been mentioned earlier, Bankim equated nationalism with Hinduism that led to the Hindu right wing later appropriating his work for their own divisive purposes.

Tanika Sarkar in her incisive study on Bankim, sums up his position as being neither one of complete revivalism – nor one of complete westernisation. He rejected the latter option according to Sarkar because of a “specifically Bengali guilt about having accommodated and colluded with foreign rule”, (140). She defines “Hindu revivalist- nationalist as a political formation in the last three decades of the century, a formation which defended unreformed Hindu custom as perfect and inviolable and portrayed this defence as struggle against colonial encroachments into Hindu domestic practices. This group was particularly influential during the agitation against the Age of Consent Bill in 1891”, (140). It might be noted here that the Age of Consent Bill sought to implement the end of child marriages and Bankim's novels

which take up arranged marriages, child widows and male bigamy are engagements with the hotly debated issues of his times.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to locate Bankim in his period in order to be able to assess his role in the growth and development of Bengali Literature. We have seen how the novel itself was at a very early stage of development and his writings were wide and eclectic in ways that changed and influenced the history of the realist as well as the historical novel. But Bankim's role was not limited to that of a novelist. He wrote on politics and philosophy and religion. It is hard to sum up his political leanings – towards his later life for he grew closer to Hinduism and the traditional views that were a part of it.

1.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) What according to you is Bankim's unique contribution to the literary map?
- 2) Bankim is read by historians as largely a nationalist. What do you understand by nationalism?
- 3) What were Bankim's views on the reformist movements of his time?

1.9 GLOSSARY

August Comte:	French philosopher and sociologist, founder of positivism. In his study of the progress of human mind he discerned three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. According to him, the highest stage in the advance of mankind was capitalism with its positivist world outlook.
Enlightenment:	The set of ideas that emerged with capitalism, linked as they were with the struggle of the nascent bourgeoisie and the popular masses against feudal practices and institutions. An important feature of the Enlightenment was the urge of the thinkers concerned to restructure all social relations in correspondence with Reason, Eternal Justice and Equality.
Rationalism:	Accepting reason as the only basis in determining one's opinions.
Ram Mohan Roy:	(1774-1833). He criticised orthodox Hinduism for its polytheism, its idol worship, caste divisions, sati (self immolation of Hindu widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands). He also developed the idea of equality between men before a single god, whom he envisaged as an impersonal Universal Being. He was also the founder of the Brahmo Samaj.
Romanticism:	The movement was marked by a rejection of the ideals and rules of classicism and Neoclassicism and by an affirmation of the need for a freer, more subjective expression of passion, pathos and personal feelings.
Utilitarianism:	The doctrine that the worth and value of anything is solely determined by its utility and that the purpose of all action should be to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

UNIT 2 THEMES IN *RAJMOHAN'S WIFE* - PART 1

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Language and Audience
 - 2.2.1 Bankim's Use of Language
- 2.3 The Location of this Community
- 2.4 Matangini
- 2.5 Passion versus Duty
- 2.6 *Rajmohan's Wife*: As Conduct Literature
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will take up a detailed textual analysis of the novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. First we will look very briefly at some of the questions that arise from the fact that this is the first ever novel Bankim wrote and the only one he wrote in the master language or if you like, the language of the colonisers. Two very important questions need to be asked here: Why does he choose to write in English and not in Bengali? And secondly, why did he cease to write in English? One could say English was (and still is) the language of power – in the sense that it was the master's language and all serious business was conducted in English. Let us explore this further.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the first things that any middle class family aspired to do was to educate their sons in English. To write in it was to assert or at least aspire for the power that it represented.

However, if it was empowering, why did Bankim not carry on using it in his other novels? In his use of the master language, Bankim was anything but slavish. He adapted it boldly, wrote it with a confidence and defiantly chose not to translate some words that he very easily could have: these are the choices every writer makes and none of these choices are “innocent”. That is, each choice made by a writer should be understood as motivated by his/ her overt or covert politics. It is not as if the choice of language can be seen as a simple choice without political implications. If, for instance Bankim writes English as if he is translating ancient Sanskrit Kavya literature, it must be seen as his assertion of that indigenous model of writing over that of other western models which he was also familiar with. At any rate it shows his acknowledging the influence that Indian writing had over him. It also shows that he chooses not to copy the style of his western contemporaries whom he had also read. Thus his adapting of English in a manner that made it his own tongue is a significant choice.

After a cursory look at these kinds of issues, we will take up a close textual analysis focusing on the characters of Matangini and Rajmohan in the novel and the treatment of marriage in the text. This was a theme that Bankim persisted with through more than half a dozen of his novels. We will look at Matangini's near transgression and to what extent it is justified by the parameters of the text. Does the fact that she has a brutal husband extenuate her circumstances or is there a sub text, another underlying

logic in the narrative that undermines her moral position? In the section that follows we shall try and determine why Bankim chose to write this particular novel in English and also address the question of who Bankim was really writing for. Was it the Indian readership that he had in mind or was he writing for the English reading and speaking public?

2.2 LANGUAGE AND AUDIENCE

In this section, let us familiarise ourselves with the peculiar relation between an author's choice of a language and his audience. The issue is quite problematic. We should try and see how questions of this nature emerge from such a consideration.

Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half- scorched and half-radiant under the noonday sun. Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder; but some loose tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks". (3)

This is the description of our eponymous heroine, Matangini – and it is certainly not in the tradition of the purest English prose. Here we have Bankimchandra Chatterjee experimenting with the alien language of the coloniser. The aesthetics of the language quite apart, there is certainly an interesting politics in the choices involved. Most obviously, the writer's vocabulary reveals a deeply rooted, culture- specific content. Clearly the culture specific nature of the story does not permit a simple mimicry of more purist styles – it is a story that is so deeply rooted in rural Bengal that to write English is only possible if he makes it his own. When he writes about "loose tresses which had thrown away the bondage" or about the "land lotus", what he is doing is introducing images from his own culture into a language that belongs to his rulers – an act which requires a great deal of confidence. The author attempts a prose that tries to knit together different cultural images into the master's language – he is appropriating English into the service of his own culture. This particular passage reads more like Sanskrit prose in translation. Sanskrit Kavya literature is not the only influence at work in the novel – in fact the novel contains a whole range of cross cultural influences ranging from **Fielding**, **Richardson** and **Thackeray** to regional and native literature closer home. This is revealed not just in the ideas, but also in the vocabulary used which remains fairly multilingual.

Meenakshi Mukherjee talks about "the contradictory signs embedded in the text" which make it difficult to construct the identity of the reader". She points out the use of Bangla words like *Thakurpo*, *mal*, *Jama-dut* – words which to us seem to insist on a specific cultural nuance where the author refuses to use the equivalent terms in English. But what is more baffling is the use of certain Hindustani words like *zenana* and *Bur* trees which have Bangla equivalents but are preferred over them. This preference of multilingual over monolingual vocabulary seems to point towards a wider audience – or at any rate a more cosmopolitan audience. But the most puzzling use is of terms like 'Go to Jericho' that seems to pretend momentarily that the characters are really speaking in English whereas for the most part the characters sound as though they have been translated. The only conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the only reader familiar with all these vocabularies would have to be from a socio- linguistic background identical with that of the author. The reader would have to be English educated and therefore upper class. It is actually difficult to assess the number of readers – but it is not hard to see here a notion of a community that is specifically targeted. What we should try to do is to see the ramifications of the creation of such a community. It is hard to actually assess the number of readers Bankim imagined writing for. If he wanted to include all English speaking Indians, then was he disappointed – was his disappointment the cause of his having switched back to his native Bengali?

2.2.1 Bankim's Use Of Language

The language used, with a lively mix of the colloquial and the proverbial styles, raises questions about the implied reader of Bankim's novel. We shall use the term "implied" to indicate that all writers address a specific community. For instance, sometimes we find French and Latin words in an English novel, this implies that the reader was assumed to be familiar with these languages. Similarly we might come across a vernacular word in a novel by an Indian in English, while at other times, a word of common usage is translated-for instance, a writer might say "vermillion in her hair" or she/he may use the term "sindoor", one implies a readership that is confined to an unfamiliar linguistic background, the other implies a readership with a similar linguistic background. Thus an Indian writing English may be writing for a limited Hindi-speaking readership, or for a wider international market. The most important point about Bankim's use of language is the one raised by Meenakshi Mukerjee, when she says that from the vocabulary he employs, which are borrowed from different languages, it is not possible to single out the exact nature of the readership. The only thing we can actually conclude is that Bankim aspired for a wider audience here, than in his later novels where he used only English.

2.3 THE LOCATION OF THIS COMMUNITY

Before we study the intricacies of the text, let us offer at least one of the readings of *Rajmohan's Wife*. The opening of this story is in an old fashioned rural landscape. Two women are carrying pitchers to fetch water. There are "numerous roses and mallika buds caressing the eyes of the passers-by", the men watching them were as "fascinated by the sight as a deer is by the sound of the flute", even the manner in which the villainous Mathur glimpses the heroine tells of a rural landscape. Matangini's beauty draws on old fashioned folklore where a strong gust of wind blows away the veil, thereby exonerating the woman completely of blame and making her as innocent as the damsels in the days of yore. Matangini here is not admired merely through simple description she is also contrasted rather favourably with her companion Kanakmayee. We are told that Kanakmayee is coarse and her accent is East Bengali, while Matangini is refined and bears no trace of the poorer, rustic East Bengali accent. That her features, gait and attitudes are also superior only follows. We are now lulled into expecting an easy correlation between the submissive Hindu wife and a refinement of manner. Our heroine disdains the defiance suggested by the rather rustic Kanakmayee with amusement. The contrasting manners of the two women are seen not merely as regional, but also in terms of class difference. In the chapter entitled "A Letter – Visit to the Zenana", we have a very perturbed Madhav searching for his aunt. He finds to his chagrin that his voice is drowned by the melee created by the team of women engaged in domestic chores. The women labouring are shown to be 'hurling dire anathemas, demanding, eloquent, active engine in mouth'. When Madhav complains about his house resembling a bazaar, the masi replies: 'It is a woman's nature to be screaming', (27) Clearly this is not a statement meant to be universally true – as much as it is meant to be class specific.

The readers for whom Bankim wrote would perhaps not have thought twice about such a statement. But it is the preceding chapter that looks at the origins of the zemindar family that is rather bold and unusual. The chapter sets out to trace the family history of Madhav and Mathur Ghose. The chapter begins with a scathing observation 'It is a notorious fact that many eminent zemindar families in Bengal owe their rise to some ignoble origin'. In this case, it is revealed that it was their grandfather who rose to acquire land and wealth. We are told he was a crafty menial in the house of a wealthy young widow. He used his youth and virility with tact and then discretely moved to his village. He however inherited her property, while leaving her to die, and 'soon she got a fever 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 had chilled her fires,' (16).

This digression, structurally, very close to Fielding, has far greater sting than the rest of the story put together. Its profound insight on female sexuality and its irreverence towards the aristocracy signal the changing times and the shifting class dynamic in Bengal as well as usher in the need felt for a new set of social values. The demythification of the aristocracy – by exposing the ignoble origins of the Ghose family is also interesting not just because it debunks the privileged position that the zemindar families have occupied for centuries but in another way as well. It refuses the didacticism of rewarding the good son and punishing the prodigal. The usual story with a moral tells us that we get what we deserve, but in this digression, the lazy son gets a good son and the hard working son has the bad son. This seems to suggest the reverse of the usual moral fable. The hard working, diligent son of the erstwhile servant has a son who he sends to a provincial school (Mathur) and the prodigal son sends his son (Madhav) to a western school. The complete contrast between the two cousins is offered to us largely as a product of their education. We are told that the eldest son i.e. Mathur Ghose's father was suspicious of western education and so the upbringing is provincial and very clearly, the implication is that the horizons are very narrow. While Madhav's father produces a worthy son despite his improvident ways – or because of them – the implication very clearly is that colonial education expands civilisation and brings in a new, vigorously needed set of values. The novel does not shy away from using western / colonial / metropolitan education synonymously with good education. In the chapter "A zemindar family", we are told:

One good result however had followed Ramkanai's residence in the metropolis. Influenced by the example of the metropolitans, he had bestowed on his son Madhav as good an education as he could receive in Calcutta, (17).

This point is made by **Nirad C Chaudhuri** as well when he talks about how the word *ejoo* was applied only to those well educated in English and never to those who were learned in any other native language. Let us now turn to an examination of the character of Matangini in the following section.

2.4 MATANGINI

Of particular importance in the novel, as we have seen, is the character of Matangini. How should we view her? To put it in another way: the men are the products of their education – but what about the women?

The dainty limbs of the woman of eighteen were not burdened with such abundance of ornaments, nor did her speech betray any trace of the East Bengal accent, which dearly showed that this perfect flower of beauty was no daughter of the banks of the Madhumati, but was born and brought up on the Bhagirathi in some place near the capital. ... Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder; but some tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks (3).

Which tradition does our heroine Matangini come from?

When we see her in the beginning, she is contrasted with her companion Kanakmayee – she is reluctant to even part with her veil.

Kanak laughed and said, 'come now, my proud girl, let's go and show beauty's splendour to the gaping idiots.' Hang you, monkey cried the other and hid her blushing face in her veil. (6)

When her face is revealed, it is only accidental – because of a gust of wind. her “immodesty” is punished by her cruel husband and we do not see her retaliate, all this can only place her in the tradition of good Hindu wives – compliant, modest and long suffering.

Only tears were streaming down her face. At the sight of her silent suffering the cruel man softened a little. He no longer tried to beat her, but continued his abuse. (13)

As was said earlier, the scenes that frame her at the beginning depict her as docile and sacrificing – entirely conforming to good Hindu notions of womanhood. But the story later develops in quite another way. In the chapter entitled “Love Can Conquer Fear”, she runs away from home at night in order to save the fortunes of her sister and brother-in-law. In doing so she puts everything she has at considerable risk.

Then summoning all her resolutions, she made rapid but noiseless steps. Her heart beat as she walked through the jungly path. The dreary silence and the dark shadows appalled her. (39)

When she is later alone with Madhav Ghose, she confesses her passion for him.

‘Ah, hate me not, despise me not,’ cried she with an intensity of feeling which shook her delicate frame. ‘Spurn me not for this last weakness; this, Madhav, this, may be our last meeting; it must be so, and too, too deeply have I loved you – too deeply do I love you still, to part with you for even without a struggle. (53)

In fact this outburst of passion and her recklessness here is in sharp contrast with the way she is portrayed in the beginning. What brings about this transformation? The transformation is a fairly obvious violation of psychological plausibility. One of the basic rules of traditional story telling is surely a consistency of character – but this is defied. But this appears to be a very deliberate choice. The narrator could have shown her as defiant to begin with – or he could have had her simmer with silent, sinful passion that remains unarticulated. But the writer forgoes both these options. This is a very revealing choice – it offers only one explanation. We shall consider this option in the next section.

2.5 PASSION VERSUS DUTY

What is the impact of this early portrayal of Matangini as long suffering oppressed and victimised? It seems that Bankim wants to create a character whose suffering is unjustified. The reader is thus perforce made to give unqualified support to Matangini. The villainy of Rajmohan – cruel, surly and a man of unmitigated evil (attempting to rob his benefactors) – furthers this agenda. Thus, when Matangini finally blurts out her doubly forbidden love (violating in one fell swoop both marital and familial boundaries), she is at once forgiven. In fact, there is an anticipation of the reader's judgement.

Yes reproach me, Madhav”, she continued, “censure me, teach me, for I have been sinful; sinful in the eyes of my God, and I must say it, Madhav, of my God on earth, of yourself. But you cannot hate me more than I hate myself ...” (55)

Bankim has risked the traditional reader's disapproval by having Matangini defy her husband. However, before the reader can judge her, she condemns herself. How does she do this? She does this by submitting herself to Madhav and admitting the wrong that she has done. Her expression of an extra-marital love here is an obvious rejection

of traditional values. But her simultaneous submission to Madhav and the vocabulary that she uses, that sees man as a godlike figure, undermines the rebellion of her earlier rejection. Once again, it makes her more traditional than rebellious and undermines her defiance as makes her acceptable to the traditional reader.

Madhav accepts his godlike status without flinching – thereby reinforcing the very patriarchy which the text seeks to question. He makes a predictable speech that places him firmly in the tradition of 19th century *Bhadralok* heroes who remain benevolent, progressive, liberal and deeply patriarchal. He is not unsentimental because he repeatedly bursts into tears, but the emotion is kept under check by an irrefutably reasonable mind. That is why at the cost of making him sound priggish, the author has him say:

Listen to me Matangini,' replied Madhav, scarcely cool himself, 'listen and spare both of us this sore affliction. At your father's house the flame was kindled which seems fated to consume us both and which then we were too young to quench by desperate efforts, but if even then we never flinched from the path of duty, shall we not, now that years of affliction have schooled our hearts, eradicate from them the evil which corrodes and blisters them? Oh! Matangini, let us forget each other. Let us separate ', (55)

We have quoted Madhav here at length because we want to pick on his vocabulary here which uses fate, desperate efforts, path of duty and evil – all of this places him squarely on the side of tradition and convention. His understanding is simple: theirs is an illicit love that is corrosive – it must therefore be forgotten and eradicated. To do otherwise would be evil. But is this voice authorial? It would not be wrong to suggest that even if it has some authorial approval, it does not have all of it. The next passage amply illustrates the point we are trying to make.

Matangini rose and stood erect in the splendour of new flushed beauty. 'Yes if the human mind can be taught to forget, I will forget you. We part now and for ever' (55-56).

Her answer to Madhav recognises the superior claims of duty over illicit passion. But this is only one part of the story. Every other sign in the text indicates that the author's imaginative sympathy lies with her. Her beauty at this point is celebrated. Just a little earlier we were told that the

distant and reserved demeanour, the air of dejection and broken-heartedness which had marked her from the first had disappeared ...for the wild current of passion had hurried her to that region where naught but the present was visible, and in which all knowledge of right and wrong is whirled and merged in the vortex of intense present felicity ..."(54).

The reader is first drawn into the vortex of the "intense present felicity" and then before one can censure this transgression, Matangini admonishes herself. But her last words to Madhav hauntingly contest the claims of duty. When Madhav says to her that they must forget each other, she bows to him, but her whisper "If the human mind can be taught to forgive" remains unanswered, ultimately leaving open-ended any attempt on Madhav's part to seek closure here. Because what Madhav has said implies an end – a termination of their feelings for each other. He says it must end because their feelings for each other are somehow not permissible. Matangini agrees that their relationship has no future, but her words here undercut Madhav – if reason must dictate their behaviour, then so be it. What she says is that feelings will not be governed by reason, that the human heart will follow its own course. And this is the nature of transgression that we will discuss at length in a later unit. But for the moment let it suffice to say that while the story through Madhav tries to bring their feelings to an end, Matangini's words which talk about the impossibility of reason governing emotion prevent the neat ending that Madhav wants.

Here, we shall acquaint ourselves with the viewpoint that governs the text. In one way or another, all literature has a morality- most writing consciously or unconsciously expressing a world-view. But when we use the term "conduct literature" we do not refer to all literature. We are specifically referring to a lot of early writing that was produced for popular consumption that took upon itself the role of educating its readers. It could be directly or indirectly didactic. For instance it could tell us how to eat or bring up our daughters, or it could tell us a story in which the path of virtue is rewarded. We use this term conduct literature to include all forms of didactic writing – but particularly the kind of writing that became popular with the rising number of middle class readers.

What is contained in *Rajmohan's Wife* are contradictory positions: it remains finally ambiguous about its attitude to women and marriage. We will talk later about why the story seems to be on the brink of a radical break with social norms, but then withdraws and concludes on a sober, rather conservative note. The contradictory signs embedded in the text on women's issues and on morality as a whole are a product of an attempt to grapple with a change visualised at the core of the situation. The complexity of the historical process underpinning such an attempt is best put forward by **Raymond Williams**. He talks of the residual, dominant, and emergent elements that coexist at any cultural moment, (*Marxism and Literature*, 121-7). Williams means that culture is not a unitary phenomenon – it is not a homogeneous unit that can be located in a single category. For instance, if we were to say that the culture that dominates our society is the urban upper class one, we would be right. But to say that society is shaped only by the middle class would not be true. There is also the rural poor, the urban poor, the zamindars, and the urban upper class. The zamindars and the bonded labour that can be found in rural areas could be seen as the residual class, the class that remains from an older feudal structure. The urban middle class could then be seen as the class that is on the make and the class that is about to be the dominant class.

Williams acknowledges that there is a dominant culture that is the most powerful, but it is not the only element that constitutes culture. At any given moment there are less powerful elements that either resist the dominant culture or run counter to it.

Dollimore elaborates Williams' categories, and he defines residual as that which

denotes ...experiences, meanings and values which have been formed in the past, which cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture and may even be in opposition to it, yet are still active. Emergent culture on the other hand involves the finding of new forms, in the process of which there occurs 'pre-emergence', that is an expression which is 'active and pressing but not yet fully articulated'". (*Radical Tragedy*: Jonathan Dollimore, 7)

What we are trying to suggest is a relationship between emergent culture and the grappling of the text with an incipient change in social mores. This happens subtly in the process of literary composition. To the reader, a fictional work poses numerous challenges. Read at one level, the story maybe seen as a cautionary tale that is one kind of conduct literature. For what else does Samuel Richardson attempt if not a rewarding of virtue? By cautioning his female readers of the pitfalls of lust, he is steering the emergent bourgeois morality away from the path of dalliance. In the case of Bankim, the readers are a newly colonised class, negotiating tradition and modernity. The author is then targeting an audience which might be receptive to a questioning of traditional boundaries – but this interrogation is done not blatantly but with circumspection. The structure of the tale is like several others in its genre, i.e. didactic. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, an unhappily married and much oppressed woman is consumed with an illicit passion for her brother-in-law. All this is silent till finally

Matangini confesses all. Madhav acknowledges a diluted version of the same. He reminds her of the path of righteousness, she sighs and agrees, (well almost). And then? As the story unfolds, we discover she suffers. While all other characters get the ends they deserve, Matangini's suffering is unmitigated. We are told that Mathur Ghose hanged himself, Rajmohan was apprehended, Matangini was dispatched to her father's house, "History does not say how her life was terminated, but it is known that she died an early death" (124). As if this were not bad enough, we are told that while she lived with her father 'Madhav increased the pension he allowed the old man, on her account.' If this is not the most patriarchal and convenient of all ways of extenuating himself, we may never know what is.

The point of course is that given its historical juncture, this was the most cautious end possible. An adulterous, incestuous passion can neither be forgotten (even though our hero urges Matangini to do so) nor consummated. It cannot be forgotten because there is too much emotion there that Matangini confesses cannot be wished away. Yet to have them give in to such a passion would be to take the risk of defying tradition. The end Matangini meets here vindicates the moral status in traditional terms. The conservative section of society would perhaps approve of this end. (We have talked about the outcome of transgression in Bankim as always tragic). Matangini's unhappy brief life and her early death echoes, the fate of the woman who bestowed all her fortune on the grandfather of the Ghose cousins. So far everything fits. The imagined reader Bankim wrote for would probably have understood Matangini's plight and appreciated the end as inevitable. The story addresses the fundamental anxiety that monogamy imposes: what happens when you are attracted to someone and neither of you is unattached. But there are different possible ends:

- Matangini and Madhav consummate their love and live happily ever after.
- They acknowledge their love and die of unhappiness.
- They concede that they both must go back and suffer their respective marriages and maybe suffer their thwarted passion equally.
- That the woman suffers the solitude silently and the man resumes at least a seeming normalcy.

We could perhaps go on, but the truth is that Bankim selects the last possibility – perhaps the most unfair as well as the most psychologically plausible one. To have a happy end would be to defy common sense and middle class morality. To have them both dissolve their marriages is always possible (and as was said earlier, Bankim plays a lot with different versions of that) – but here the woman is clearly the greater victim.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have delineated some of the important questions this book raises for us as students of literature written in English. We have to try to see why we have been asked to study some books over others. Why should we read an apparently unsuccessful book written by some 19th century Bengali? To take these questions in the order that they appear to us, we have first taken up its significance as the first novel Bankim wrote in English. His choice interesting – yet the fact that he takes liberties with the language of the British masters, by following the influence of Sanskrit writings is an anticipation of what was to later become a full-fledged nationalist streak in him. From questions of language and audience, we have gone on to discuss the portrayal of Matangini and her relationship with Madhav, her brother-in-law. The delineation of her character is extremely strategic. Bankim has tried to locate the core of the problem with marriage, but in order that the conservative section of his audience should not feel too alienated from her, he has shown her initially timid and virtuous. The passion she later articulates therefore makes her sympathetic, rather than immoral. We have argued that the role Bankim took upon

himself was one of a moral guide for his community. He is divided between his desire to talk about the nature of suffering, and a contradictory pull to try and school this weakness in the human heart. The novel then becomes a useful demonstration of the politics of Bankim, which is progressive in some ways, and traditional in some.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Bankim chose to write his first novel in English? Does the novel betray a sensibility that is informed by Western education? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Discuss the way in which Matagini has been characterised in *Rajmohan's Wife*.
3. What role does the choice of language play in the writing of a novel, particularly when one of the available languages enjoys social power?

UNIT 3 THEMES IN *RAJMOHAN'S WIFE* PART 2

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Rajmohan in *Rajmohan's Wife*
- 3.3 Treatment of Marriage
- 3.4 Melodrama in the Novel
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at the implications of writing literature that has an educative role, and writers who see their role as teachers. When Bankim wrote *Rajmohan's Wife*, as well as some of his other novels on related themes, he was performing a sensitive function. In this context, we should think of a general problem that literary writing faces.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The liberal writer depicts in his/her works the contradictions and dilemmas in his/her society, while a conservative writer feels the need to abide by certain socially accepted norms and rules. These two functions are by their very nature contradictory. When a writer articulates discontentment, the underlying need is for change, but if the writer stresses upholding the institutions that generates the problems, then his/her work will contain within its core, a contradiction. In the previous unit we talked about how in his treatment of his heroine, Bankim seems to be on the verge of saying something very radical, but pulls back. In this unit, we will try to work out exactly where this contradiction, this 'rupture' or break takes place. We have talked about the depiction of Matangini and Madhav. We will switch focus to the treatment of Rajmohan at the hands of the author and conclude the unit with the treatment of the institution of marriage in *Rajmohan's Wife*.

3.2 RAJMOHAN IN *RAJMOHAN'S WIFE*

Let us consider Rajmohan's representation. To begin with he is depicted as a complete blackguard – an extraordinarily jealous and inordinately unreasonable wife-beater. He flies into a rage at the slightest provocation – we see this when Matangini goes to fetch water from the well. He is not vicious with her alone. He is surly and ungracious when Madhav Ghose tries to help him out. Not just that, he actually plans to rob his benefactor while still taking his financial help. Bankim does not take chances in the early part of the novel as he goes on to introduce his characters. He does not paint his main characters in shades of grey. He almost completely makes them black or white. Matangini and Madhav are good and Rajmohan is pure, unadulterated evil. Why does Bankim condemn him so unambiguously? To what end? The obvious reason is, to draw the reader's sympathy to Matangini. When she goes to Madhav and betrays her husband to him, it is after Rajmohan's connivance is

well established. This way one cannot fault Matangini. The argument seems to imply that because he is a villain, his moral authority as her husband has weakened to the extent of becoming invalid. So also her declaration of passion for Madhav follows after the reader is convinced of Rajmohan's complete callousness and cruelty towards Matangini. But is the author content to leave Rajmohan as a complete blackguard? Or do we see any attempt to humanise him? It is surprising that there is an attempt at humanising Rajmohan in the novel. When Matangini returns to Rajmohan after having gone to save Madhav – post her confession, she enters her home proudly. And this is one of the more interesting moments in the story. Rajmohan turns on her with a savage fury:

Woman,' he said fiercely, deceive me not. Canst thou? Thou little knowst how I have watched thee; how from the earliest day that thy beauty became thy curse, I have followed every footstep of thine – caught every look that shot from thine eyes. Brute thou I be,' continued he again becoming gentle, I was proud of my beautiful wife ...Did I not see before thou wert a woman, thou didst already become fond of that cursed wretch? Did I not see how time ripened thy fondness into sin? ...'(60)

Here Meenakshi Mukherjee sees echoes of Othello. Even if we do not agree, there is undeniably a lot of power - in this bizarre, archaic articulation of demonic jealousy – there is something vaguely reminiscent of **Chillingworth** in *The Scarlet Letter*. This entire passage and Matangini's response oddly attempts to render Rajmohan as more acceptable. While her defiance is admirable, Rajmohan's murderous rage is entirely believable. He is no longer the unfeeling good for nothing tyrant we saw earlier – rather he is a tortured soul who has always known himself incapable of winning his wife's love. Why was this scene necessary?

Why is Rajmohan given such a depth of insight and intuition that suddenly makes him reasonable? Perhaps it was the compulsive artist in Bankim that forced him to make Rajmohan less one-dimensional, more interesting. That is to say that by making Rajmohan a more human person, Bankim scores as an artist committed to the depiction of reality – Rajmohan's outburst suddenly makes him credible. Why does Bankim want to make him more real, less a cardboard villain? One cannot know Bankim's intentions. But what we can attempt is to analyse its impact. As mentioned earlier, the early villainising of Rajmohan works to extenuate Matangini's illicit love while this later humanising works to rehabilitate him. As was said earlier, this is because the characters in this story are broadly speaking either black or white. Yet after presenting Rajmohan as evil, this outburst seems to justify him. The rehabilitation of Rajmohan then becomes a troubling moment in the text. It conforms to dominant sexist stereotypes of cuckolded men and unfaithful wives (all popular humour is based on certain dominant stereotypes, such as: marriage-is unfortunate, men are victims and women manipulate them and cheat on them because the latter are more cunning). In this way, we find the sudden sympathy for Rajmohan runs counter to what the rest of the narrative attempts to do and it comes almost close to justifying his treatment of Matangini.

We could make sense of this rather curious moment in the text if we try to locate it within the different cultural practices of the time. To go back to Raymond Williams' terms – there is the dominant culture or the dominant cultural values that are at work here. But these values are soon to become residual (values that have been inherited from the past which are still supreme but are beginning to be interrogated). Even though marriage and women's subordinate status are still a part of the ruling ideology, yet, the passivity of female desire that it assumes is getting questioned here. However, the author is informed by his time and is conscious in that he embodies the contradictions that emerge through conflicting discursive practices. Thus even as he gives Matangini (and the unnamed woman who bequeaths her fortune onto the Ghose ancestor) subjectivity and makes her subject to desire, he likewise makes her partially

culpable where Rajmohan's ill treatment is concerned. Her infatuation and his awareness of it create a space where she is no longer an innocent victim.

This authorial choice may be seen as the moment of rupture (the moment where the story goes back on what it has been saying so far) where the overt logic of the narrative is betrayed. It is this moment in the novel when the dominant logic or the main narrative is suddenly turned on its head. So far the story has been saying that Rajmohan is entirely to blame and Matangini's hatred for Rajmohan is entirely understandable. But here Rajmohan's words threaten the integrity of Matangini – his words prove to be haunting and we are made to wriggle with discomfort as he says that she has caused him to become what he is. The uncivilised manner in which he has behaved earlier – especially with Madhav is suddenly seen in a different light. He tells her he ceaselessly hounded every footstep of hers. This threat to what is so germane (the innocence of Matangini) to the story illustrates the author's inability to extricate himself from the dominant views of his time that could only portray female desire as unnatural and threatening. Bankim has shied away from taking a clear stand on the issue of a woman's sense of freedom. This moment that embodies such a conflict in values then helps us to tie up a lot of the questions raised so far – such as questions about intended readership, attitudes to class and to sexuality. We began this essay by talking about how the text addresses itself to a new, fairly cosmopolitan readership that would be familiar with multiple linguistic registers. Such a class is by virtue of its education more modern and progressive with a desperate need for a new socio cultural niche where it can locate a set of values that are more acceptable than the ones it has inherited. This is where a need for conduct literature – or more appropriately, didactic literature steps in. And this is where the debate over values comes in. *Rajmohan's Wife*, makes a great deal of sense in this particular context which demands a questioning of traditional values – a laying bare of myths in society and simultaneously, it also articulates the fears that emerge from such a questioning. This probably accounts for both the role that Matangini plays as well as the hauntingly powerful threat that Rajmohan articulates.

3.3 TREATMENT OF MARRIAGE

The above section will have hopefully raise questions about the problematic nature of the story. There are however, related questions that arise. What is Bankim saying in this novel about marriage? Is he saying that some marriages are unfortunate – such as that of Rajmohan and his wife? Still more, does Bankim suggest that this failed marriage is an exception and not typical? The point is that the story is saying something more disturbing and potentially far more threatening about the institution of marriage. What we are trying to say is that where the story of Matangini reinforces the unhappy lot of women in arranged marriages, it also becomes far too threatening in its implications. There are two ways of softening the blow to a still dominantly masculine readership. One is to villanise Rajmohan to such an extent that he is purely hateful and Matangini's hatred of him is completely justified. But such a reading: which sees extra-marital desire as a result of an unhappy and incompatible marriage is not a reading that is reinforced by the experiences of the other characters in the story.

The first thing to be considered is Madhav's reciprocal love for Matangini. His feelings are not extenuated by a fate similar to hers – he cannot rationalise his feelings for Matangini as being a result of his bad marriage. He has a perfectly good wife – so how are we to look upon his situation? It would have been easy for Bankim to depict the wife (Hemangini) as undesirable. But she is shown to be kind, gentle and unsuspecting. But Bankim does not take the easier option. Madhav presumably respects his marriage enough. So his desire for Matangini is not necessarily a product of bad relationships – rather, Bankim seems to imply that it is a very potent force that may rear its head at any moment in even a good, monogamous relationship. The

nature of desire is not what the author judges, it is the choices that people make which define them as good and bad. In this context, Madhav's rather priggish lecture on the path of duty to Matangini is a reminder of the difference between him and his cousin Mathur Ghose. He acknowledges his long history of desire for Matangini but says they must not stray from the path of duty. In contrast, his cousin Mathur Ghose is shown to have little self-control over his sexual desire. He disregards his virtuous and beautiful first wife Tara and marries a younger woman who has little to offer but a youthful sexuality. Her manipulation of him portrays him as foolishly uxorious.

But till now Mathur Ghosh has been only ridiculous, it is his lust for Matangini that makes him become really reprehensible. His desire for her is different not merely because he tries to force himself upon her, but because fundamentally he has no hold over his desire. In the case of Mathur Ghose, the underlying message is that to live by desire alone cannot lead to happiness, because there is no end to it. That despite having married a second wife, and being sexually manipulated by her, he is seized by a desire to possess Matangini. His desire is of course of a lower order, as he does not care about her feelings in the matter: the fact remains that he is unhappy despite having two desirable wives who both want him in their own ways. Ultimately the text, through repeated examples, proves the destructive nature of desire. Matangini suffers, Mathur Ghose hangs himself, Rajmohan (with his violent passion for Matangini) ends up in jail and the unnamed benefactor of the Ghose family dies a premature death like our heroine.

Though the nature of desire is celebrated briefly is pervasively shown as destructive. There is a certain inexorable movement to which even the best fall victim. No longer is virtue a matter of intrinsic worth alone – it is defined by the choices people make. Thus, the institution of marriage is shown to be vulnerable. But the cautionary nature of the narrative demonstrates the need to hold onto this rather fragile institution.

3.4 MELODRAMA IN THE NOVEL

And finally before we draw close to concluding this unit, let us talk about the melodramatic style of writing. The word "melodrama" comes from Greek and means 'song drama'. Sensationalism and extravagant emotional appeal are two prominent features of melodrama. There could be a reason to support this. The

flourishing of melodrama in the 19th century produced a kind of naively sensational entertainment in which the main characters were excessively virtuous or exceptionally evil (hence the luminously good hero or heroine and the villain of deepest and darkest dye), an abundance of blood, thunder, thrills and violent action ...and also...realism in the shape of extravagant tales of the wickedness of drinking, gambling and murdering, (J A Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms 387-388).

Why does any writer choose an exaggerated mode of writing? While watching a Hindi film have we ever asked yourself why situations, language, body movements, and even characteristics are so vastly "unbelievable"? If we haven't, then it shows us the success of the mode. If we have ever cried in any of these unbelievable situations, and later been amused by our own reaction, it shows how we willingly suspend belief. When catering to a large audience, most writers do not like to risk losing the reader's approval. They want to ensure the reader does not miss the point they are making. So points are simplified, repeated, exaggerated as means of emphasis. Thus, works that are obviously trying to preach something or are didactic often use melodrama to ensure that the reader/ viewer does not get the "wrong" message. Melodrama in *Rajmohan's Wife* and in Bankim's other novels is used in the form of exaggeration of, character, situation, and language. For instance, the villainy of Rajmohan and the lechery of Mathur Ghose are of an unmistakable magnitude. Then

there are at least two situations that are extremely melodramatic. The one in which Matangini overhears the conversation between the robbers and Rajmohan and then escapes to warn Madhav. Her journey at night, the suspense, the fear of discovery, the natural elements all seem familiar to an audience brought up on Hindi cinema. And the other situation is where we are kept in the dark about Matangini's whereabouts and the plot resembles a detective novel, till we actually discover her imprisoned by Mathur Ghose in a dungeon like place. Apart from character and situation, the language is often melodramatic. Let us quote the following this time to make a different point:

Woman,' he said fiercely, deceive me not. Canst thou? Thou little knowst how I have watched thee; how from the earliest day that thy beauty became thy curse, I have followed every footstep of thine – caught every look that shot from thine eyes. Brute thou I be,' continued he again becoming gentle, I was proud of my beautiful wife ... Did I not see before thou wert a woman, thou didst already become fond of that cursed wretch? Did I not see how time ripened thy fondness into sin? ...'(60)

It is hard to decide the matter of influence. Here we see a style reminiscent of **Nathaniel Hawthorne** as well as dramatic voices closer home in India. But the one thing that Bankim's readers did not complain of was melodrama. And to some extent we have to understand that understatement was not always considered a virtue in aesthetics.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In Units Two and Three, we have located a common central problem through Bankim's treatment of character. Writing in a realist genre has certain conventions, one of which is characterisation. Early novelists did not follow the same conventions as the novelists who arrived later on the scene. **Henry Fielding** wrote about characters that were mainly one dimensional, defined by one exaggerated feature. But with the development of the novel, the emphasis on complexity of character grew. It followed from this then, that the character remains consistent, because, people in "life" are not expected to be inconsistent. Yet, we see in *Rajmohan's Wife* that both Matangini and Rajmohan have moments where we are taken unawares. We are not suggesting that those moments are implausible. For those moments are significant because they represent contradictory pulls felt by Bankim to appease different sections of his reading public. In attempting to shape his community, he cannot allow a dent in the existing morality.

In this Unit we have tried through a close textual analysis to locate some contradictions, inconsistencies, gaps and silences. These questions are important because they show the discrepancies between the stated intent of the narrative and the actual narrative. By now we also hope that we have suitably indicated the problems in this text. The central problem lying in the treatment of Rajmohan. Till Rajmohan's outburst of passion and jealousy, the text is weak but consistent. After his outburst, it suddenly erupts into life and produces a problem. In a nutshell, the question is, why does the story/ author betray the woman Matangini? Till that point she is an ill-treated woman who falls in love with a sensitive, beautiful man. Now she suddenly becomes someone who through her passion for another man has reduced her own husband into a state of unreasonable and monstrous jealousy. This is not central to the story it is only briefly shown and then quickly forgotten. In the final analysis, the textual sympathy remains with Matangini and Rajmohan meets the end he deserves. We have emphasised this seemingly marginal point, because it allows us to illustrate the nature of contradiction in the story. The loneliness of the woman is what comes across as the strong and central point in the novel. And yet, this moment seems to articulate and justify the man's suffering, making the story suddenly more complex.

The point is never developed, perhaps, it was never meant to outweigh the suffering of Matangini. Yet, where does it come from if not from a traditional point of view, where as we said earlier, women are depicted as naturally treacherous, and men as natural victims of their treachery?

This seemingly unimportant moment allows us then to see that a text does not tell just one simple story that often even the simplest of stories is a complex weave. It is possible sometimes just to read it along its grain, i.e to see it as telling the story that it seems to be unfolding. This is normally the skill of a good storyteller because of which the reader is seduced by the obvious story. But literary theory has now provided us with a lot of insight where reading against the grain becomes as valuable if not more valuable than reading it along the grain. By detecting moments of rupture, gaps and silences, we are able to see the "unconscious" of the novel. In this way, we are allowed to see the anxieties and conflicts that the writer felt. These conflicts could be personal or social – but it is the repressed or unstated nature of these conflicts that is of interest to us, more than the stated and obvious nature. Finally we have tried to define the appeal that Bankim had for his readers that allowed him to shape his reading community. In doing so, we have discussed the use of melodrama in his novels. It is this element that makes his characters so violently good or bad.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. How far is Matangini seen as transgressive and threatening? Does the text justify her violation of her marriage? Or do you see contradictory signals in the text?
2. What do you think of Bankim's treatment of marriage? What do you think of Mathur Ghose and his two marriages? If all marriages are satirised and exposed as hollow, then why does Bankim uphold Madhav Ghose's attitude? Discuss.
3. What do you understand by melodrama? Do you agree that *Rajmohan's Wife* has melodramatic features? Give reasons for your answer.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Authorial Voice:	The voice of the author, here used to see if its possible to see Madhav's position as identical with that of the narrator. Literary theory and criticism has made us sensitive to differences between narratorial voice, authorial voice, and the voice of the leading character/s
Coloniser:	conqueror
Didactic:	moralising so that the reader gets converted to the author's point of view.
Eponymous:	An eponymous hero or heroine gives his or her name to the title of the work. For instance: <i>King Lear</i> , <i>Dr. Zhivago</i> , <i>Emma</i> .
Mimicry:	imitation
Radical:	fundamental or deep-seated, also challenging and rebellious.
Sub text:	In any text underlying the stated or overt views, there is another set of views that often run counter to the overt views.
Unconscious:	In Freudian theory it refers to the sum of all thoughts, memories, desires, etc. of which the individual is not conscious but which influence his emotions and behaviour. I have used it to say in more general terms that a text could also have its own "unconscious"
Unmitigated:	complete, absolute

UNIT 4 MARRIAGE AND TRANSGRESSION IN BANKIM'S OTHER NOVELS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Musing on Morality
- 4.3 "Evil" in Bankim: The Widow and the Heart of Darkness
- 4.4 Nature of Tragedy in Bankim's Fiction: Historical or Eternal
- 4.5 Ideological Stereotypes Built Around Desire
- 4.6 Bankim's Universalist Paradigm
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Glossary

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will take up a comparative study of three other novels of Bankim. We have chosen to discuss these novels along with *Rajmohan's Wife* because the thematic preoccupations are very similar. The comparison will hopefully enhance our understanding of Bankim's vision. Think of this statement first: "Marriage relations may be made in heaven; but they are with frightening regularity broken on earth". (Sudipto Kaviraj, 20) In this Unit we are going to examine *Rajmohan's Wife* in relation to three other novels, which are thematically close to it: *Bishabhriksha* (The Poison Tree), *Krsnakanter Uil* (Krishnakanta's Will) and *Indira*. All three stories are about marriage and love, or very broadly- speaking, they all deal with the nature of human desire. Desire is an omnipotent force and few can resist it. What do you say? Bankim's own moral position remains elusive as each text dramatises a variation on this tireless theme. In many ways *Rajmohan's Wife* is the least troubling, most conformist of the texts we discuss here.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with, let us go over the ordinary details of representation in the novel *Bishabhriksha*. It is the story of a young girl Kundanandini who is left orphaned and destitute. Nagendranath, the hero (a wealthy zamindar) sees her in her trance like grief and is moved by the vulnerability of her beauty. He decides to adopt her. Inexorably, Kunda is carried to her tragic fate. It might be noted here that the presence of a beautiful, single woman – often a widow is a recurrent feature in all these texts. We will return later to the significance of such a figure. Kunda's presence – her beauty and her dependence – is so immediately apparent, that Nagendranath's otherwise generous and good looking wife Suryamukhi decides to "fix" a marriage for her. Accordingly, Suryamukhi marries her to her own rather unattractive foster brother Taracharan. But Kundanandini is soon widowed, and once again and this time irrevocably lodged in Nagendranath's large feudal establishment. Nagendranath is hopelessly infatuated and his wife realises that very soon.

However, Bankim adds a different perspective to this apparently simple story. This is made to happen in a peculiar way. Consider this. The hapless Kunda who reciprocates her benefactor's feelings is herself being pursued by a debauched young babu called Devendra. Devendra disguises himself as a singing woman saint or a

sanyasin – a ruse that is discovered after a while. Soon a scandal breaks out and Suryamukhi who has been miserable with jealousy finds a convenient excuse to expel Kunda. Meanwhile a nasty maid -servant of Suryamukhi decides to fish in troubled waters. Hira – another child widow – goes and quietly observes the unreasonable conduct of the wife of the master of the house. Things come to a head between husband and wife – culminating in the marriage of Kunda with Nagendranath, arranged by Suryamukhi herself. There is a further twist to the story when Suryamukhi's sudden departure takes place followed by Nagendranath's obsessive infatuation for Kunda that vanishes and converts to anger. There is a lot of melodrama from here on – (not unlike in *Rajmohan's Wife*) – ending in the restoration of the first wife and the convenient suicide of Kunda.

As would have become obvious to us by now, Matangini's story and that of Kundandini are not very dissimilar – and certainly even though Matangini does not commit suicide, her early death and unhappy life convey a tragedy that is no less undeserved. And like Madhav Ghose, Nagendranath too, is caught in the dilemma of having a wife who is virtuous and beautiful – but who feels compulsively drawn to a more powerfully beautiful woman. While Madhav remained faithful – at least physically, Nagendranath remarries and succumbs to temptation. That is the only deviation and a minor one considering that he felt very close to her.

4.2 MUSING ON MORALITY

At this point we are going to quote at length from **Sudipto Kaviraj's** extremely thoughtful study on Bankim. He talks about how the

Stories of his novels often turn around a conflict between two inevitabilities, two things that are equally necessary truths of human life. A social world requires definitions, a kind of basic social map which defines permissions and prohibitions. At the same time, there are the elemental drives of human nature which these social constructs are meant to discipline into reasonably safe forms, but hardly can. The social and moral worlds in which men actually live are made up of these two dissimilar and contradictory elements – the desires that control men and the controls that make society. Much of Bankim's fictional movement arises from this central conflict – between the inevitability of moral orders and the inevitability of their transgression", (Kaviraj, 2).

Kaviraj further elaborates what he sees as unique about the nature of conflict in Bankim. He distinguishes the morality of Bankim's universe from that of the Victorian universe from where he borrowed / inherited the structure of his narratives. The morality of Victorian narratives, according to Kaviraj is far less ambiguous. Don't you think what he says of Victorian writers is more true of **Dickens** than of **George Eliot**? In Bankim's novels the inevitability of desire undercuts any narrow understanding of morality. His characters are never simply right or wrong – they are in the throes of a conflict that goes beyond a conventional understanding of good and bad. This is something we appreciated in Bankim in the previous unit. For instance, we commented on the depth of Matangini's passion – the passion of Kunda is no less intense. In fact the depth, the intensity of the tragedy has come from each character's knowledge of that inevitability.

In the first chapter of *Bishbhriksha*, we see an orphaned Kundanandini lying almost unconscious, while Nagendranath sees her and is struck by her beauty. What impact can it leave on the reader? The sense of fatality and doom sets in the very first chapter itself when the reader is made privy to Kunda's dream – a dream which warns her to beware of a very beautiful man (who resembles Nagendranath) and a dark, attractive woman (Hira, the maid servant). Kunda is seen in a trance-like fashion following

Nagendranath to her doom. The whole thing is done to make an important point. Beauty for instance, in Bankim is no mere ornament – it is an instrument of fatality. Beauty seems to be in the service of passion that is, constantly opposed to the call of duty. (This you would remember from our discussion on the theme of passion versus duty in the previous unit). Beauty in Bankim's novels serves a more fundamental purpose. It is what in a sense makes the beholder helpless. It emphasises that the beholder of beauty has to become a victim of this great force of nature. We must understand this notion of beauty as an agent that blinds and infatuates the beholder and makes him/her transgress. Bankim's characters: whether it is Rohini or Govindlal in *Krsnakanter Uil* or Kunda and Nagendranath in *Bishabriksha* or Matangini and Madhav in *Rajmohan's Wife* – are all struck by the power of each other's beauty. It is rather interesting that men in Bankim are described as being as powerfully attractive as the women. When Kunda dreams of Nagendranath, we are told that "...the figure of a god-like man. He had a fine, noble, tranquil brow; a candid, compassionate look; his swan-like long neck was slightly curved; ...". (*Bishabriksha*, 12)

One can see similarities between this and *Rajmohan's Wife* where the good looks of Madhav and Matangini are a sign of inner moral worth. In *Krsnakanter Uil*, the scenario is in a sense completely obverse to the one in *Bishabriksha*. In this novel we come across a happily married couple Govindlal and his child bride Bhramar. Their marriage is portrayed as playful and companionate – almost as if child marriages were being advocated. But just then Govindlal encounters the beautiful but morally ambiguous Rohini (yet another child widow). Rohini is consumed with passion for Govindlal and slowly her beauty draws him away from his path of virtue. Yet, as with Nagendranath, straying away from the path of virtue must lead to tragedy – here, all the characters are punished equally. When Govindlal abandons his child wife Bhramar, her childhood abruptly ends and she slowly pines away to death. Meanwhile, the luckless Rohini provokes Govindlal into a jealous fit and he shoots her dead. Govindlal spends most of his life after this trying to escape the police and finally finds solace in religion. What we are suggesting is that Bankim consistently grapples with the idea of morality in the dace of temptations and desires.

4.3 “EVIL” IN BANKIM: THE WIDOW AND THE HEART OF DARKNESS

The stories in these novels are the obverse of one another because in one the childlike woman tempts away some married man from marriage and in the other she is not successful in her mission and is thus rebuffed. So if one can be read as an indictment of child marriage the other novel resists such a reading – demonstrating the sexual attractiveness of young girls to older men. But in both narratives it is interesting to see that it is the widow who destabilises the marriage. Kunda is more like Bhramar – both suffer blamelessly, while Rohini is an active agent in her tragedy – in some ways Rohini is more like Hira – the maid-servant in *Bishabriksha*. Let us now quote two passages, one from each of the two texts and the similarity will be seen as self-evident. The first one is taken from Hira's introspection and the second one is Rohini's.

Well, why am I so angry with Suryamukhi? She has never done me any harm; rather she has favoured me and treated me well. So why am I angry? Does Hira not know that? ...Suryamukhi is happy and I am miserable; this is why I am angry. She is important and I am insignificant. She is the employer, I am the servant. ...If you say God has made her important, what fault is it of hers? Why do I harm her? - to that I say, God has harmed me, for what fault of mine? (*Bishabriksha*, 78).

For what fault was I destined to become a widow while still a child? Have I committed more sins than others that I should be deprived of all worldly pleasures? What is my fault that although I am young and beautiful, I am condemned to live the rest of my life like a dried up piece of wood? People who have all the happiness that life can give – take Govinlal's wife for instance – what virtues do they have that I have not? ...(*Krsnakanter Uil*, 194)

Let us take a critical look at these passages. At one level these two passages are significant because like Rajmohan's outburst of jealousy that we have discussed in the previous section, the point of view of the otherwise 'villainous' characters in a sense, makes them more human, more understandable. Thus, these passages demonstrate the artistry in Bankim that enables him to see the undesirability of villainising a character beyond redemption. That is his skill at characterisation. But there is something else that cries for comparison. There is in both portrayals, a hint of irreverence. As widows, they ought not to feel the way they do, but Bankim even though he condemns them for their flaws, sees the humane aspect and their perception of injustice. Both Hira and Rohini are child widows who resent their fate as widows. Rohini, though condemned to wear white sarees – chooses white sarees with black borders - a very small but significant violation. She also chews pan that ensures her lips remain red. Bankim is indulgent about her violations. He is more harsh with Hira – but even there Hira's passion for Devendra is so intense that 'sinful' though her heart is, Bankim somewhat redeems her. In fact, Devendra is dealt with more severely. We are not arguing that Bankim does away with conservative didacticism – his didacticism is apparent from the outcome of the transgressions. It is not a banal belief in the right and wrong that is socially defined – rather, it is a realisation of the impossible co-existence of desire with duty.

Kaviraj argues that a "moral judgement often judges an act or a life against rules set down by a particular moral system, and evaluates them ethically as right or wrong. But the kind of judgement this type of story-telling invites is very different. What we come to reflect upon and judge is less the moral quality of an act than the nature of morality itself, and the rightness and wrongness of having this kind of a system of right and wrong." (Kaviraj, 5). Obviously, Kaviraj's emphasis is not on the morality of a person's conduct but on what morality means in a situation. This takes us on a higher plane of understanding of Bankim's fiction.

4.4 NATURE OF TRAGEDY IN BANKIM'S FICTION: HISTORICAL OR ETERNAL?

This then leads us to the question of the nature of tragedy. How can we define the nature of tragedy in Bankim? Is desire defined in terms that are primordial – is desire something that is fundamentally at odds with human happiness? Or is it always socially constructed? Is it embedded in the fabric of society, so much so, that it is no longer possible to distinguish what is historical from what is eternal? Let us elaborate on the nature of this questioning. What is seen as historical is seen in terms of change and is seen as specific to a particular historical moment which is specific to a society, a class, a region, a race, culture or/and gender. It is these categories that construct histories that determine difference between one historical moment and another. An artist's vision may subscribe consciously to this understanding of the world, or it may subscribe to an ahistorical understanding. In the latter case, the worldview informing the argument erases the real constituents of history and cloaks them in a discourse that sees life in terms that are fundamentally unchanging. For instance, if we were to say that there is an evil impulse that is at the core of the human heart, this would be an "essentialist" or if you like, an ahistorical view, because it assumes that the human heart is essentially the same and differences are only superficial. On the other

hand, if we were to say that Matangini's suffering is because of the nature of patriarchal society that insists on a repression of desire, we would be making a historical statement i.e we would be looking at society as contingent upon historical factors where differences happen because of changes in the social or material world. A historical view privileges change and difference over stasis and similarity. The historical mind will see change as the basis of life and the development of society as a natural historical process. On the other hand, the a historical mind will erase change and emphasise that which has remained constant over time. If we apply this to Bankim we will see that Bankim clearly is a product of his circumstances where he participates in the changing nature of contemporary norms.

The tragic vision of Bankim is articulated in a vocabulary that is fundamentally historical. By and large, the tragic conflict arises because of circumstances and conventions: both of which are historically determined. For instance, the recurrent presence of the widow – a troubling presence that destabilises marriages and bends the course of history is perhaps the most significant of these historical determinants. If Govindlal forsakes his marriage and his fortune for the widow Rohini then, Nagendranath does likewise (well forsakes at least his wife) for the widow Kundanandini. So also, is the role of Hira the widow crucial in bringing about the tragedy in *Bishabriksha*. In *Rajmohan's Wife* it is the untamed erotic desire of a widow that changes the fate and fortunes of the entire Ghose family. If you recall, in unit two, we discussed how in a digressive chapter on zamindars, the narrator tells us how Madhav and Mathur Ghose's grandfather came into money. The widow for whom he works is youthful and he proves to be a discreet man. Later, she bequeaths him her wealth inherited from her old dead husband and he quietly leaves for his village. The widow languishes and dies after his departure. This telling little story can be seen as a significant precursor to a whole genre of widow representation in literature. Here we see in miniature, the way that historical conditions shape the lives and destinies of men. Were it not for the fact that widows were not meant to have a life, this little episode would have had a very different end.

It might be noted here that the widow remained a troubling presence in a lot of popular representation – in literature and film. This would be particularly true (as in Bankim) of the child widow or the young widow. The reason is self-evident because, the widow's own desires are unfulfilled. Also, there are very few options left to them as they have no claims anywhere – neither on their husband's family, nor on that of their in-laws. Their rejection was partly because of their dependent status and partly because their sexuality was a threat. Often, the widows were either children or very young, they were seen as both sexually desirable and easily available. They were dependent on the men in their families and did not have the power to refuse their sexual overtures, thus they provided easy sexual opportunities within the home. But since a male dominated society sees the woman as the temptress and not the man as the victimiser, the widow began to be associated with someone who threatened the stability of regular family life. It is precisely because of their threatening sexuality that they are de-sexed or made to follow very rigid codes of dressing and behaviour. This was to ensure that they were no longer "sexually desirable". Very strict codes were formed to see to it that they did not destabilise conventions of bourgeois society. Bengali widows had to have their heads tonsured, wear white sarees. They were also supposed to avoid food that was linked to stimulating sexual desire- i.e. eggs, fish, meat and so on. It is because of this deeply inhuman condition of widows prevailing at that time that reformist movements raised the demand for allowing widow re-marriages to take place. But even years after widow re-marriage was permissible, it remained emotionally unacceptable to the conservative sections of society. As mentioned earlier, Bankim was not amongst the reformers – in fact in his writings he distances himself from the reformists. Perhaps it is this ambiguity of his real life position that gets reflected in his novels as well.

But it is not as if transgressions only take place in the presence of widows. In *Durgeshnandini*, the hero Jagatsinha who is in love with Tillotama is confronted by

Ayesha's growing passion for him. The barrier between Jagatsinha and Ayesha arise out of the "deep prohibitions between the two religious communities." As Kaviraj says, "Bankim's concern is chiefly for liminality – by which he means relationships that are posed at the threshold. He elaborates his point by discussing a lot of his novels where the conflict is arising because of some "uncrossable social distance" which places a conflict between the demands of desire and those of duty". (Kaviraj, 4) What Kaviraj is pointing to is the sameness of the problem at the heart of some of Bankim's novels and this is the fundamental conflict between what the person really wants to do and what society has taught as "right". Tragedy stems not from mere circumstances, but from the human inability to reconcile conflicting voices within. Desires are usually independent of norms, but social norms are not just enforced from outside, they also lodge themselves within the social man as the voices of conscience. Hence, the irreconcilable nature of conflict from which tragedy ensues.

One of the shorter novels that playfully deal with this kind of issue is *Indira*. A conventional but spontaneous young girl, the eponymous heroine, tells the story in a lively first person narrative. Married off by her parents, she has just come of age and though she has not met her husband, she is looking forward to being united with him. This gives rise to a series of rather implausible events that take place. Her palanquin is rested in a very notorious area and she is robbed. Seeing her beauty, one of the younger bandits suggests taking her along, but is reprimanded by a senior bandit. Subsequently, she finds herself starving, almost naked and lost in an unfamiliar village. She encounters a vast number of kindly souls and next she is placed as a cook in a very respectable home where she gets quite intimate with the mistress of the house. As she finally reveals her story to her benefactors, the mistress and the master plot to reunite her with her husband. Let us see the interesting implications of this situation. We are face to face here with a number of issues. Indira is left high and dry in the middle of nowhere in a world that predates forms of instant communication that we are all too familiar with. She cannot return to her parents nor can she understandably arrive robbed and disheveled at her husband's home. The problems are both mundane and not so mundane. We can relate to these even today. Can't we? Think of Indira's helplessness. She does not know how to communicate her plight to anyone. Nor can she tell the truth of what happened- because nobody will believe that the robbers did not rob her off her virginity as well. She cannot come clean to her husband. Even though he is invited to their home, she cannot be introduced to him as his wife – after all, she explains reasonably that, she has been robbed by a notorious gang, lost and in the hands of strange men. Why should anybody then believe that her precious virtue is still intact? Aided by the mistress and abetted by the master, she decides to seduce her husband into falling in love with her. This was the staple of early Indian films, based as they were on popular folklore. Thus, she overcomes the 'modesty natural to a virtuous woman' in order to seduce the husband – thereby demonstrating the constructed nature of female virtue. The fact that her lively mistress enacts the ways of a temptress with such ease and experience only shows that Indira is not an exception.

4.5 IDEOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES BUILT AROUND DESIRE

At this point it would be worth quoting a little from this novel that could well be entitled the Tricks of the Harem.

For eight days I inflamed my husband with all the means which Providence has given women to inflame men with. I am a woman – how can I divulge these things? If I had not known how to ignite flames, he would not have been so enkindled ... It can be said that it is women who are earth's thorns. More harm is caused by us than by men...(Indira, 363)

For those eight days I stayed constantly with my husband; I spoke caressingly to him; ...

As a mahout controls his elephant with an ankush ... and the Englishman controls a party of his babus with his reddened eyes, so we can control you with smiles and glances. Our devotion to our husbands is our virtue that we are reviled for it by our smiles and glances. (Indira, 363-4)

A woman conveniently speaks the sexist stereotypes that are articulated at this point and as she is the likeable narrator herself, we do not doubt the veracity of her observations. In fact it is worth noting that such outright sexism is made permissible because of this narrative strategy. Or do you feel that, that is the way women behave? However, this is not our purpose in discussing *Indira*. We shall use this text to see what has been the subject of this entire section i.e., the manner in which the narratives of Bankim problematise desire. For here after all, desire exists within a socially sanctioned sphere. The two characters so consumed with desire for each other are in fact married to each other. But marriage – a social bond must of its very nature must be recognised by society – which includes the husband. Not only must he believe that the woman he has married is his wife, but that she must also be untainted. After all spoilt goods cannot be given the same status as that of pure goods. From this point of view the text is deeply dissatisfying – it does not even attempt to challenge the unfairness of the notions that it rests on. The fragility of this social bond is something it assumes and attempts to placate. Bankim was writing a story with a happy ending in mind and so he kept Indira untainted. But let us not reduce our understanding of the text by insisting that it follow our own radical and historically constituted demands.

Instead, let us see what the text actually manages. Told light-heartedly, it is nevertheless a text which reveals female anxieties about masculinity. At one level, as we have mentioned before, it accepts the fundamental inequality of the sexes as something of a truism – i.e. it does not question that men and women are unequal and men have certain privileges and rights and women have to abide by their subordinate status. But in its acceptance- or as we should clarify in Indira's acceptance of her subordinate status, there is not so much resignation as there is a desire to fight her way out. She does not challenge the basis of the inequality that exists instead she manipulates the system to suit her ends. It is not a very noble way! She lies in order to inflame her husband with desire for her – and even though she reassures the reader that she could not have feigned love if she had not felt it, somehow we are never that sure about the existence and strength of her desire. In connivance with her mistress and their exchanges about how to sustain a man's desire, there is recognition of several things. For instance, that men are socially privileged and their feelings are fickle- thus women must not allow their feelings to come in the way, as women are socially subordinate, they must keep a strong head which must govern their feelings and steer the man's otherwise fickle feelings in their own interest etc. If there is any moral to be drawn from this rather implausibly happy book, it is that, women are more capable and should manipulate men.

What we are saying is very evident from Indira's reaction to her husband's quick acceptance of her proposition. The part in which Indira's husband comes to meet the master of the house is the crux of the novel. Indira knows it's her husband, but he has no way of knowing the same. She manages to draw his attention to herself even though she is only a cook in the house. He is drawn to her and when she sends him a note saying she would like to meet him, he agrees readily. It is now that she plays the classic hard- to -get tease. The first person narrative is effective because it allows us to see her anxiety at this point. While she is relieved to find her husband attracted to her, she is also worried about his temperament. Are his morals so easily dispensed with? Is it so simple for him to be seduced? Her testing and teasing of him which is described as a female device that comes "naturally" to women is actually something

which she is forced to do, because of her status, because of the fragility of a woman's reputation and not because there is something that innately motivates her to lie and connive. These are the hidden implications of which the author does not really seem to be conscious of.

The text also playfully engages with the notion of transgression that is the subject of this entire unit. Once again, the text narrativises desire and the conflicting demands made by desire and duty. In this sense, the happy ending is possible only because the two are legally husband and wife. Still, they must go through the trial by fire. The husband suffers because he thinks he is transgressing by loving someone out of wedlock, the woman suffers because he thinks she is also transgressing and because she knows that women have to pay the price for such defiance. It is only when he realises that she never actually transgressed any social boundaries and that he will not have to incur shame that a resolution can be brought about. This betrays an extreme sense of insecurity in the nineteenth century Indian woman. Bankim, however, overlooks this aspect and presents things divested of immediate relevance. We will consider his governing outlook in the next section of our discussion.

4.6 BANKIM'S UNIVERSALIST PARADIGM

There is something in Bankim that suggests the universality of suffering. Sometimes he uses a fatalist discourse which suggests the inexorable nature of tragedy- as in *Bishabriksha* – where we are shown the way that suffering lies and then we see the heroine systematically follow the course that she knows is doomed. Bankim also writes about tragedy as inescapable because it is an outcome of desire and desire itself is inevitable because it lies outside what is socially sanctioned. When Govindlal sees Rohini's unconscious body lying still undecided between life and death, he has no option but to save her life. He breathes into her lips and falls prey to desire. We are told that he was still a young man and therefore he had a natural need for beauty and his wife Bhramar could not satisfy this 'natural' need. There are a lot of such instances in Bankim's novels (the attraction between Madhav and Matangini is again written about as of a fatal nature) which seem to point to the inevitability of suffering and tragedy.

The question we should finally raise is whether such a vision of tragedy is reconcilable with the historically rooted nature of his narratives. Is Bankim saying that some people are just fated to suffer? Are most marriages doomed to end in tragedy? Will desire rear its head always? Will the lust for beauty remain forever? In which case how do we see widows and child marriages?

What Bankim is doing is reconciling these two world-views. He sees tragedy and desire as cutting across history insofar as he recognises that desire is intrinsic to social codes. Every society defines itself by certain laws and taboos. But Bankim's heroes and heroines are not content within what is socially sanctioned – thus the violation or the transgression which brings about the tragedy. He is not saying that tragedies would not occur if society changed or became more tolerant. Perhaps the nature of tragedy would. The underlying sense we get is that desire would by its nature always want to transgress and in that sense, tragedy is intrinsic to society. Today, this should be largely unacceptable. However, Bankim's fiction tells us that it is inherent in the very nature of society- so as long as man is social and therefore lives in a society, he has to adhere to certain norms, and deny himself what he often desires. Till then there are bound to be conflicts which may be tragic. But this is not to say that tragedy is eternal and autonomous of society. We have consistently drawn your attention to this modern rational principle.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have looked at three short novels that share the same preoccupations as *Rajmohan's Wife*. The latter only comes near a transgression but draws away as it approaches temptation. Later in his career, Bankim was to actually show the consequences of transgressions. It may be argued that Matangini suffers even though she is not physically unfaithful to her husband. But she suffers because she has felt and articulated desire. To go back into a prelapsarian world (the age of innocence; before the fall of Adam and Eve) is shown as impossible – i.e. to say that they can all return to live the way they used to before their loss of innocence would not be credible. Nagendranath can never recover his love for Kunda, nor can Govindlal recover his love for Bhramar. No amount of repression of desire can actually lead them back into the earlier age of innocence. The fact of immediacy and life however, cannot be overlooked.

We have tried to see the similarities of themes and motifs in order to be able to reconstruct Bankim's understanding of desire. Does he indict society and its laws or is he troubled by the destructiveness of the human heart? Are these two statements contradictory? Bankim seems to be consistently trying to resolve these two positions. He sees the culture specific conditions that facilitate tragedy- but he also sees the human heart as inevitably violating its possibilities of happiness. To that extent one could say he is universalising the nature of tragedy. And as was said earlier to universalise is to deny history, it is to deny the necessity of change. What it could imply is that there is no point in reforming laws and improving the position of those who are marginalised such as women and particularly widows. If man is doomed to suffer, then why imagine that things will improve if we reform laws? However, this would be an extremely ahistorical view and in our view, retrogressive in its implications. This would be the opposite of a historical view. The point is that Bankim negotiates the two extremes without completely supporting one or the other. Therein lies the problematic of his fiction.

4.8 QUESTIONS

1. In the context of *Rajmohan's Wife*, how would you respond to child marriage or child marriage? What problems, if any, can they cause? Support your answer with illustrations from the text.
2. Matangini declares her passion for Madhav but even as he reciprocates it, he reminds her about their obligation to duty. Where does the authorial sympathy lie in that scene? Where does your own sympathy lie? Give reasons in support of your answer.
- 3) How do you understand the concept of transgression in Bankim? From your reading of his text/s and the above essay do you think of his morality as strengthened by and based upon orthodox? Give a reasoned answer.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Paradigm:	model, pattern. A theoretical term much in use today.
Primordial:	primeval or elemental. Very early in human history, much before men and women became socially organised.
Prelapsarian:	before the fall of Adam and Eve
Stasis:	the condition of remaining static or fixed. This is not merely opposed to change, but also has its own logic of permanence.

Sexism: discrimination on the basis of sexual difference. Feminism squarely criticises and attacks it.

Stereotypes: fixed or conventional notion or conception of a person or group, idea, etc. held by a number of people, and allowing for no individuality, critical judgement, etc.

Transgression: wrongdoing, lapse or violation. Of course, social institutions feel challenged by it.

**Marriage and
Transgression in
Bankim's other
Novels**

SUGGESTED READINGS

UNIT I

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UNIT IV

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