

# Wives and Widows in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Novels

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The topic which I have taken for my term paper is about the depiction of wives and widows in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels *Krishnakanta's will*, *Bishabriksha*, *Devi Chaudhrani* and *Indira*. I am mainly focusing on the way how Bankim is writing about the condition of women in contemporary Bengali society and at the same time also describing the conflict between their personal desires and social expectations.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee also known as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, was one of the greatest novelists and poets of India. He is famous as author of Vande Mataram, the national song of India. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee began his literary career as a writer of verse. He then turned to fiction. *Durgeshnandini*, his first Bengali romance, was published in 1865. His famous novels include *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Mrinalini* (1869), *Vishabriksha* (1873), *Chandrasekhar* (1877), *Rajani* (1877), *Rajsinha* (1881), and *Devi Chaudhurani* (1884). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee most famous novel was *Anand Math* (1882). *Anand Math* contained the song "Bande Mataram", which was later adopted as National Song. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wanted to bring about a cultural revival of Bengal by stimulating the intellect of the Bengali speaking people through literary campaign. With this end in view he brought out monthly magazine called *Bangadarshan* in 1872.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was the first to introduce the pre-marital romance in his novels in Bengali literature and which was completely in opposition of the male-dominated orthodox society of that time. He brought into picture a very different kind of image of women which was baffling for the existed social structure of that time. He deals with the emotional and sexual tangles among women within the conservative society. He also depicts the frustration of Bengali women within these patriarchal structures. He questions the values and the beliefs of male-orthodox society and resents women's roles determined by conservative society merely as a respectable wife and mother with no individuality of their own. Although his views and ideas were assisted by the socio-political milieu of that time because there was British rule at that time and western education was taught in schools and colleges which supported such kinds of ideas and concepts but at the same time the conservative society of that time was completely in the opposition of this new and different image of women portrayed by Bankim in his novels. They believed that these new kinds of attitudes would spoil women and then they would become rebellious and assertive and would question the existed male patriarchal order and they would threaten its security. The women had no life of their own. Their function was to keep the family together, adoring their

husbands, taking care of their children within the domestic atmosphere. They did not have an identity and individuality of their own. Women's education was derived from two sources – knowledge of epics largely conveyed through the oral tradition and their own work within the household. They were born to serve others. Their personal feelings and desires were not taken into consideration. Bengal was going through the first phase of modernity in the nineteenth century which brought many new tensions within gender relationships, love, marriage, illicit affairs, jealousy, break up of marriage and similar other issues. And all of these issues we find in Bankim's novels. Bankim was endowed with a remarkable literary genius and is often regarded as a literary monarch of Bengal. He was first writer to portray women as individuals in his works within the framework of realistic society. His main concern was the issues like his love of humanity and his anxiety to work to raise the voice of the oppressed women. His women characters assert his deep understanding of the human mind and his remarkable power of delineation. His novels also portray many defiant heroines like Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini*, Prafulla in *Devi Chaudhrani* and Shanti in *Anandmath* and many other characters. Clarke has commented about Bankim's novels: "The social life of Bankim's novels is pitched at different levels, according to the status of his principle characters. He himself came of a middle class family, and it is only when dealing with characters of this class that he is at home and that his descriptions are realistic and convincing." (Clarke 69) These issues make us familiar with nineteenth century Bengal.

Bankim Chandra as a novelist was chiefly concerned with suffering of these women. He has depicted the crisis of individual will and the problem of agency that his characters have to face. I find that women have really powerful roles in almost all of his novels<sup>1</sup>. One of the important point that I have noticed is that Bankim has situated his women in the past and not in present social milieu because I think that he had a kind of fear in his mind that these women, so inflamed with passion and desires, could not be accepted by the conservative orthodox society. I really appreciate the way he has shown the courage to reveal the attraction between men and women even outside the conjugal life which was not acceptable in orthodox society and which that society did everything to suppress. It was said that Bankim derived this courage and strength by reading European literature. On the one hand he has made his women characters to question the social injustice done to them without any serious fault committed by them and on the other hand there was a conflict within his mind which forced him to cling to autocratic males who dominated social life. Here I would like to elaborate this point by giving an example of Rohini, who is a widow in *Krishnakanta's will*. Rohini is young and beautiful and not inferior to anybody in her intelligence and she questions her own state by saying "what sins had I committed that I became a child widow? ..... For what fault am I to spend my youth like a dried up log".<sup>2</sup> She is an orphan and there is no brother or sister or any friend to console her in her distress. She has nothing to lose in the wide empty world to save her good name. That is why she falls in love with Govindalal, knowing that he is already married to Bharmar. But her mistake is not as much serious as is being represented by Bankim.

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<sup>1</sup> *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Devi Chaudhrani* (1884), *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Indira* (1873) and *Rajani* (1877) except *Rajsinha* (1881) and *Sitaram* (1886) in which male characters dominate the scene.

<sup>2</sup> *Krishnakant's Will*, ch-7, p-194.

She does not deserve the punishment or the treatment meted out to her. He brought into play the conservatism of the society even when acknowledging the power of socially transgressive romantic love. He reveals the secret passions and desires of Hindu wives and widows and men drawn into clandestine relationship with others outside their marital life<sup>3</sup>. The very striking point I have found about him is that although he represents the conflicts between personal aspirations and cultural practices and emotional and sexual needs of his characters but he has made all these clandestine and transgressive thoughts and feelings invariably ending in death and disaster<sup>4</sup>. The women characters once deviating from social code and following their own desires meet disaster and death and are left with no other alternative. I think it is his conservatism that compels him to choose these kinds of conclusions for his novels. This is also evident by the way how he gives a clean chit<sup>5</sup> to Govindalal who is the cause of the suffering of both Bharmar and Rohini. Govindalal is himself a weak and unsteady character. He wants to seek beauty that he finds in Rohini and then he quickly forgets all his responsibilities and duties for her innocent and childish wife Bharmar who was completely devoted to him. He justifies his decision of leaving Bharmar by putting all blame on her and elopes with Rohini. He doesn't even care for the pleadings of his wife and remains unresponsive when she throws herself at his feets begging forgiveness. He is unsteady by nature which is clearly seen by the way he keeps on thinking about Bharmar while living with Rohini in Prasadpur<sup>6</sup>. He keeps her like a prostitute, and treats her like a plaything. His mean and cruel character is also evident by the way how he murders Rohini suspecting her of adultery and later keeps running away from police and writing a letter to Bharmar asking for her help. Even when released from the accusation of Rohini's murder he doesn't return to his wife asking forgiveness. Bharmar dies waiting for a long time of his return but he remains insensitive of her suffering and only returns on her death bed. What I want to say by revealing all details of Govindalal's character is that although he is more responsible than Rohini and Bharmar for their tragic doom, then why is he given solitude and spiritual life at the end? Why is he not punished by the author? This is really a very crucial point which I have tried to raise.

Although "a taste for transgression" could be detected in all his novels<sup>7</sup> and it is central theme in *Bishabriksha*, *Krishnakanta's Will*, *Indira*. In his novel *Bishabriksha* he has tried to morally caution men and women of illicit passion. Here he has adopted a very conservative approach. This illicit passion is not justified in his eyes even when it leads to the marriage of Nagendra and Kundanandini, two characters in this novel. I feel that here he is giving a message that once drawn to the life of immoral acts, men and women are unable to redeem themselves. He is making a point that lack of judgment is responsible for the growth of this illicit love and passion. Here, the widow Kundanandini is forced to end her life once Nagendra and his wife are reunited after having both realized their folly. Nagendra feels that he has fallen a prey to carnal temptation by loving and marrying Kundanandini and his wife Suryamukhi realizes her fault for not

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<sup>3</sup> As in Krishnakant's Will and Bishabriksha.

<sup>4</sup> Like Widow Rohini in Krishnakant's Will and Kundanandini in Bishabriksha.

<sup>5</sup> Providing him solitude and spiritual life in the end.

<sup>6</sup> A place where he goes into hiding with Rohini.

<sup>7</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, 'A taste for transgression- liminality in the novels of Bankim Chattopadhyay' (Mimeographed). This view is also supported by Tapan K. Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 111.

having thwarted her husband's marriage with her. Here, again the same question arises that why Bankim has not chosen any other conclusion presenting a good life for the widow. Why his widow characters end in disaster or death? It appears to me that Bankim resents widow remarriages if I look at the way how widow Kundanandini and Rohini are not given any good life to live after they are transgressed. Multiple marriages of men are common in his novels as in *KrishnaKanta's Will*, *Bishabraksha*, *Kapalkundala*, but if a woman marries more than once, then she meets gruesome fate. Does it approve Bankim's opposition of widow remarriages in upper class Hindu society? At the same time he is upholding family values and also quick to condemn any injustice done to a wife as in the case of Bharmar in *Krishnakanta's Will*. He is on the side of wronged wife Bharmar who has the courage to say to her husband that she will respect him as long as he is worthy of respect this point also illustrates the idea that to what extent he justifies the conduct of his characters.

Now I would like to give another example from his novel *Devi Chaudhrani* in which Bankim has once again proven his idealization of domestic life by the way how Prafulla, the protagonist who is so defiant and courageous that she participates in the freedom struggle against British Government is finally made to return to her in-law's home and accepting her role as a respectable wife leaving her previously powerful role as a great freedom fighter. Now here as well he has portrayed a very different image of a woman because at that time it was very unnatural for women to participate in independence movement and they always remained behind purdah and seclusion, Bankim here shows the freedom struggle led by a woman, Prafulla. This proved to be a powerful message for the women who gradually began to come outside of their homes to participate in the freedom struggle. Now here also arises a very crucial question: Why is a woman so defiant and rebellious freedom fighter reduced to a position of mere a housewife in the end? I think, it might be possible for two reasons, first – He might have the conservative society of his time in his mind which was not ready to accept such rebelliousness from the women of their times and second reason might be that, he had certain beliefs in the values of domesticity to some extent as he himself came from orthodox middle class. He has not spoken freely and openly on the issues of widow remarriage and child marriage. But despite of certain controversies he is overall the first writer dealing with emotional needs and conflicts of Bengali women of upper middle class.

In his short story *Indira*, He has also described the issue of transgression but in a very different way by making a husband falling in the illicit love with his wife not knowing her true identity. Here he has represented a very triumphant figure of woman. Here the speaker narrator is a woman who tells her own story, this technique of narration was very new in the Bengali novel. It clearly shows the importance of women in society. We can not imagine a woman who is so individualistic engineers in the medieval literature of Bengal. Here Indira shuns the hesitation, fear and the Sastric shackles of medieval woman and establishes her superiority in worldly affairs. Here, Bankim has represented a new kind of woman apart from the role of woman as mother, wife or sister assigned by the orthodox Hindu society. Bankim is here asserting a woman's identity which was missing in Bengali society of that time. Here individuality is the essence

of Indira's personality. Here Bankim is depicting the inner conflict in the Bengali woman 'modern' and yet conformist under social compulsions slowly discovering her individuality & identity. She is the champion of women's place in society. Here Indira who belongs to an affluent family gets married to Upendra. But her father refuses to send her to her in-law's house until Upendra earns enough money to keep her happy. When he fulfills the condition then he sends for his wife but on the way palanquin was robbed by forest brigands and then she seeks shelter in a house working as a maid. Then her husband comes there as a guest and she recognizes him but he doesn't recognize her and gets attracted to her. Now the whole emotional conflict begins, she finds herself in a dilemma whether she should reveal her true identity to him or not. Here again question of transgression arises by the way Upendra gets attracted to another woman although he doesn't know her but still it is not right for a married man getting attracted to another girl.

Now I would discuss about the main issues that we find in Bankim's novels. In his novels we mainly find a struggle between individual and social being shackled by conventions. In this process the individuality of women suffers most. They have been denied of their primary rights and at the same time the opportunities of self- fulfillment. At that time women were deprived of the rights of education, inheritance, free choices in male dominated society. On the one hand they are seen clinging to the social roots and on the other hand fighting against the blind conformism and social tyranny. In discussing all these issues we can compare Bankim with other important Bengali poet and novelist Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Although it is right to say that they both discuss almost the same issues about the condition of Bengali women but I have noticed that Rabindranath Tagore appears to be a step ahead from Bankim as he has represented his women characters protesting against the male orthodoxy more openly and strongly and where the transgression of women unlike in Bankim's novels leads to the discovery of their identity and self fulfillment as in *Wife's Letter*, in which Mrinal, the protagonist has left her husband's household in order to live a life of freedom and self-fulfillment. He treats both men and women equal and he is more than anyone else to break the stereotype conception that Bengali men had for women as submissive and subdued creatures. Both Bankim and Tagore are the representatives of Renaissance Bengali Literature. Both discuss about the self-centered nature of husbands who fail to provide any emotional security to their wives. Both deal with the suffering of women who have to act out their tortured lives within the dictates of traditional society.

In my conclusion I would like to say is that in a sense Bankim exposes the false moral conventions of Bengali society without developing empathy for the victims he has portrayed in his novels. He did not show the compassion towards the victims and at the same time, he could not treat the sinner with love, and kindness. I have really debated the theme of transgression in his novels and to what extent it is justified for men and women and his ability to express the inner frustration and turmoil within his female characters.

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