

EXPLORING BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE'S CONCEPT OF 'NEW WOMAN' IN COLONIAL BENGAL AS REFLECTED IN *KRISHNAKANTA'S WILL*

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Abstract:

This research paper titled “ Exploring Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Concept of ‘New Woman’ in Colonial Bengal as Reflected in *Krishnakanta’s Will*” examines Bankim’s portrayal of women characters in his novels in general and the character of Rohini in particular in his novella *Krishnakanta’s Will*. *Krishnakanta’s Will* reverberates with burning and pressing issues of colonial Bengal which called for renaissance in India for the first time. Burning issues such as child marriage, widow remarriage, reigning feudalism and anarchic patriarchy, corruption among the clergy are foregrounded in the novel thus opening a new chapter in the history of literature in colonial India. Translated by Marian Maddern and S.N. Mukherjee, and incorporated in *The Poison Tree*, the novella *Krishnakanta’s Will* portrays a brutally true picture of issues plaguing colonial Bengal. This paper throws concentrated reflective light on Bankim Chandra’s exploration of the vexing socio-political issues via depiction of Rohini- Govindalal relationship. This research paper is an attempt to understand and analyse Bankim Chandra’s concept of ‘new woman’ and the characteristics he attributes to such characters in his novels, especially in *Krishnakanta’s Will*. At the same time the paper unearths Bankim Chandra’s depiction of the struggle between good and evil and the ultimate victory of the former over the latter.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Colonial mind set, Modernity, Feudalism, Conflict

Introduction

Krishnakanta’s Will reverberates with burning and pressing issues of colonial Bengal which called for renaissance in India for the first time. Burning issues such as child marriage, widow remarriage, reigning feudalism and anarchic patriarchy, corruption among the clergy are foregrounded in the novel thus opening a new chapter in the history of literature in colonial India. Translated by Marian Maddern and S.N. Mukherjee, and incorporated in *The Poison Tree*, the novella *Krishnakanta’s Will* portrays a brutally true picture of issues plaguing colonial Bengal. This paper throws concentrated reflective light on Bankim Chandra’s exploration of the vexing socio-political issues via depiction of Rohini- Govindalal relationship. This research paper is an attempt to understand and analyse Bankim Chandra’s concept of ‘new woman’ and the characteristics he attributes to such characters in his novels, especially in *Krishnakanta’s Will*. At the same time the paper unearths Bankim Chandra’s depiction of the struggle between good and evil and the ultimate victory of the former over the latter. However, attempt has also

been made to critically look at the novelist's inclination which is more towards Govindalal than Rohini in the novel.

Colonial Bengal ushered in an era of stimulating literary ambience under the tutelage of great literary doyen of the stature of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Edwin Arnold's remarks on Bankim and his works is noteworthy, "Writer of true genius, whose vivacious invention, dramatic force, and purity of aim promise well for the new age of Indian vernacular literature." (qtd.in Introduction: *Poison Tree*) It goes without saying that Bankim Chandra Chattterjee, commonly popular as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, is the architect of modern Indian fiction whose splendid depiction of women, especially wives and widows in his eternally stimulating novels such as *Krishnakanta's Will*, *Bishabriksha*, *Devi Chaudhrani* and *Indira* enthrall readers cutting

across time and space. Most of Bankim's fictional works are effulgent reflection of women's condition/status in the contemporary/colonial Bengali society vis a vis the raging conflict between their personal desires and social conventions. Published in 1865, *Durgeshnandini* happens to be the first Bengali romance written by Bankim Chandra. His monumental novels exuding themes of perennial relevance in *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Mrinalini* (1869), *Vishbriksha* (1873), *Chandrasekhar* (1877), *Rajani* (1877), *Rajsinha* (1881) and *Devi Chaudhurani* (1884) will continue to inspire writers and scholars. "Bande Mataram", which has been adopted as National Song of India forms a part of his most celebrated novel *Anand Math* (1882). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee contemplated on the line of bringing about a cultural and intellectual revival in Bengal through literary campaign and his monthly magazine *Bangadarshani* started in 1872 was a part of this ambition. Pre-marital romance, widow's desire for remarriage, considered taboo and unthinkable in the orthodox colonial Bengal are issues that surface and resurface in his novels. He also depicts the frustration of Bengali women within the 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. Bengal was in a transitional phase witnessing the first phase of modernity in the nineteenth century and therefore, most of his works treat themes of contemporary relevance such as feudalism, gender relationships, love, marriage, illicit affairs and jealousy. Portrayal of heroines such as Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini*, Prafulla in *Devi Chaudhrani* and Shanti in *Anandamath* are glaring reflections of Bankim's intense feeling of the need of change in the realm of women in India. Anuma, quotes Clarke's comment on Bankim's novels: "The social life of Bankim's novels is pitched at different levels, according to the status of his principal 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." (2013: 1) He was the first writer in Bengal to portray women as individuals in his works within the framework of realistic society.

New Woman in *Krishnakanta's Will*

Conflicts between personal aspirations and cultural practices characterize Bankim's novels. There are flagrant references to the desire to satisfy emotional and sexual needs of his characters which ultimately invite fatal consequences. His female characters are shown as deviating from the accepted normal social practices, defying the established norms and thus they find

themselves in chaos. His female protagonists are ‘new women’ amidst oppressive old traditions. Rohini in *Krishnakanta’s Will* emerges as a ‘new woman’ as she is defiant to all practices that impede her desire to remarry. She is characterized by boldness, ability to speak out what she thinks is unjust, oppressive and biased. She plans a happy life destroying Bhramar’s. She is determined, focused and uncompromising. Such tendencies in a woman in orthodox society of colonial Bengal were discouraged and abhorred. However, Bankim portrays her as an incarnation of change in the status of women determined by patriarchs. Her role as a ‘new woman’ has been justly and appropriately portrayed in the novel. However, the tragic end she met with, reinforces Bankimchandra’s attempt to justify that women venturing into socially unacceptable practices invite destruction and death. Rohini’s attraction for Govindalal and her ultimate elopement with him, as in evidenced by *Krishnakanta’s Will* led to her own suffering as well as Govindalal’s. The very opening of the novel, “There was a rich Zamindar family in Haridragram. The Head of the family was Krishnakanta Roy. He was a very rich man; the annual income of his estate was nearly two lakhs of rupees. The estate was acquired jointly by him and his brother Ramakanta,” (1996:1) sets the tone suggesting some of the momentous themes the novelist would focus upon. “Zamindar family”, ‘head of the family’; ‘acquired jointly’ are phrases which speak volumes about feudal and patriarchal set up of the society the novelist endeavours to portray.

Rohini is an immortal character in *Krishnakanta’s Will*. The first encounter of the readers with Rohini has been executed in the novel with great artistic brilliance and elegance. The novelist describes Rohini, “...Rohini was then in the full bloom of youth and overflowed with beauty like the harvest moon in autumn.” (1996: 182) Besides being beautiful, lively, agile, energetic and vibrant she is bold and articulate. The novelist seems to exhibit flood of sympathy for her although she comes to a sad end. A strongly determined widow, Rohini’s headstrong decisions and desire to enjoy life, thwart the long established socio-cultural practices characterize her as a ‘new woman’. Her determined step towards remarriage, her burning pulsating desire to snatch Govindalal from Bhramar, her passion and zest for life stamp Rohini out as a symbolic representation of a society Bankim wants to see in Bengal. Bankim was a reformist through and through and he advocated for a change in the status of women which he definitively portrayed in his literary works. Rohini’s rebellious, determined nature is required for bringing about change in the long internalized patriarchal and feudal society. She defies protocols of a widow and wears clothes of her choice and dons bangles which a widow was not expected to use in the Bengali society.

The portrayal of ‘New Woman’ in Indian literary scenario finds its fullest manifestation in Rohini who remains resolute and unyielding to Haralal’s pressure once she is able to read his heinous trick of having the Will stolen and then denying to marry her. Haralal’s true intent came to Rohini’s notice when he vituperated her for not surrendering the stolen Will to him. Rohini’s outrage and determined nature comes to light as she takes on Haralal:

Rohini suddenly stood up and, threw back her dhoti from over her head and looked at Haralal full in the face. ‘I am a thief? And you are a saint! Who told me to steal? Who tempted me? Who deceived a simple woman? You are a son of Krishnakanta Roy, but you cheated me. You said which the vilest of men would not say, you are a cheat and a liar. And you say that I am not worthy of you! There are no such wretched women as will

have a scoundrel like you. If you were a woman, I would give the broom. Since you are a man, leave now, before I tell you what I really think of you.’ (189)

Bankim Chandra exposes the hidden personality of Rohini whom Haralal betrayed for his selfish interests. Hence, the otherwise unseen side of her personality surfaced ferociously and Haralal was forced to kowtow before her. Such blunt demeanour of a widow with a feudal lord’s son was unthinkable in the nineteenth century orthodox Bengali society. Bhabatosh Chatterjee in this context observes, “However, Rohini’s wrath can be attributed partly to her unrequited desire for a complete life with a husband and partly for being jolted by Haralal.” (1994: 76)

Bankim portrays Rohini’s loyalty and fidelity to Brahmananda and Krishnakanta. As a poor widow, she enjoys every one’s affection in Haridragram. Even Govindalal was soft towards her for her innocence. The novelist unwinds her innocent heart full of desire and justifies that all her adventures and misadventures to realize her dream of enjoying ‘a full blooded life’ was a natural drive because she was vibrant with youth. She is extremely conscious of her physical needs. She responds to Haralal “ you must give me what you said you would give” (1996: 189-90) which has an implicit bearing on her desperate desire to bring an end to her widowhood, realize her individuality and satisfy her biological needs.

The socio-cultural milieu of colonial Bengal comes to light as the novelist embarks upon throwing light on Rohini’s behavior and her status in the society. The novelist in exquisite and lucid terms says:

She had become a widow in her early youth, but had acquired some improper habits for a widow: she wore a black bordered dhoti, bangles on her wrists and took up chewing betel leaves. On the other hand, she excelled in cooking—she was like Draupadi: all Bengali vegetarian dishes, jhol, ambal, charchari, ganta, dalna et cetera received a special flavor in her hands. She had no rival in needle works, in decorating with rice paste and in flower decoration. She was the only one who was in demand in the neighbourhood for dressing women’s hair and arraying brides. (182-183)

A widow was not expected to use ‘black bordered dhoti’ or ‘bangles’ or ‘chew betel leaves’ as part of convention of the society. However, Bankim’s Rohini undermined such conventions and thus became the representative of ‘new woman’ in colonial Bengal. Her expertise in cooking various dishes has been extolled. Haralal informs Rohini that widow remarriage is “allowed by our sacred books” (186) and his allurements to Rohini, “You can also marry again,” kindled desire in Rohini for a new life. She sees rays of hope and becomes all the more attentive to Haralal as he meaningfully arouse her desire for remarriage, “ You only call me uncle because we are your neighbours; there is no blood relationship, nothing to prevent us from getting married.” (184)

Bankim Chandra exposes Rohini’s heightened frustration, unquenched burning desire and venomous jealousy as she harangues herself and indulges in self-contempt.

‘ 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 Govindalal's wife for instance— what virtues do they have that I have not? What spiritual merit have they acquired that they should have happiness while I have none. I donot really grudge them their happiness, but why are all paths closed to me? What shall I do with my unhappy life? (194-95)

Rohini is acutely conscious of her beauty and youthfulness. She speaks blatantly against the norms of the society which impede her desire to quench physical thirsts and enter into remarriage. She is jealous of Bhramar's happiness and she rightly feels that as a human being she has her right to enjoy a full blooded life and at the same time she is oblivious of the fact that her act would destroy Bhramar completely.

Rohini's succinct but meaningful repartee to Govindalal in response to his insistence on telling him the reason of her melancholy, "Someday I will tell you. Not today. Some day you must hear what I have to say." (195) speaks volumes about the psychological vacuum she has been experiencing in the absence of a life partner. Amiya Sen remarks "Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's women characters are markedly different from stereotypical female characters of his time and Rohini one such strong character." (2008: 45)

The tug of war going on inside Rohini represented by Sumati and Kumati symbolize her dilemma as to whether she should return the Will to Krishnakanta. However, Sumati prevails over Kumati in the end and she decides to return the will because," the forged will must not be passed" (1996: 200), and she doesnot want to "ruin such a nice man (Govindalal)" (197). More importantly, "The image of Govindalal was printed in deep colours in Rohini's heart." (199) Rohini is Bankim's 'strong will incarnate' whose zest for life and desire to enjoy its beauty to the fullest emboldened her to set all socio-cultural restrictions at naught and work single mindedly towards realizing her goal. Rohini confides in Govindalal the reason why she had burnt the counterfeit will and kept the original will in place. She saw an extremely good and humane human being in Govindalal who must not be subjected to injustice. Rohini says to Govindalal, "You gave me something which I never had in this life and shall never get again in this life." (211) Rohini's short but emotive sentence is fraught with meaning. She not only drew Govindala's attention but also hinted at her sad plight of being a widow who never seemed to be blessed with the opportunity of enjoying life as a married woman. The novelist says, " Rohini saw that he (Govindalal) understood. She was embarrassed but very happy. She forgot her pain and wanted to live again, did not want to go away." (211) She refers to her own feelings for Govindalal poetically, "There is no treatment for this disease. I shall never be able to be free of it." (211) Rohini cleverly puts in Govindala's mind what she wanted to and feels happy because she was, so far, not able to divulge directly to Govindalal that she has fallen for him. Bankimchandra portrays Rohin's daring nature as a 'new woman' in a feudal set up. Rohini's knowledge of Krishnakanta as a potent feudal lord and an acknowledged patriarch could not deter her from pursuing her life with Govindalal. The novelist allows a glance at Krishnakanta's assertive, patriarchal nature as he responds to a query as to whether Krishnakanta had decided to send Rohini to the police, "What have I to do with the police? I am the police, magistrate and judge in this estate. Will it help my manliness if I were to send this unimportant woman to prison?" (208)

Govindalal's love for Rohini became an open secret. While allowing the readers a peep into Krishnakanta's psyche who already had inkling about Govindalal's feelings for Rohini, the novelist goes on to claim that Govindalal was keen to save her but he did not give the least air about it to Govindalal. Similarly, Bhramar learns that Rohini has already expressed her love for Govindalal. She gets outrageous and calls one of her maids named Khiri and asks her to go to Rohini and "tell her to go and kill herself." (217) Bankimchandra draws a life-like picture of the Bengali society in the colonial period where privacies and secrets were a far cry.

The novelist's craftsmanship and his powerful imagination come to light in his depiction of Rohini's suicide attempt. Rohini decides to kill herself by drowning and goes to the Varuni ghat. The floating pitcher in the Varuni gave rise to curiosity in Govindalal's mind and he went to the ghat only to discover "Rohini lying under water like a golden image set in crystal, her body lighting up the bed of dark water." (220) The sensual description of Rohini's body and different parts of her body, Govindalal's act of blowing air into Rohini's mouth all point to the novelist's craftsmanship and sound understanding of natural therapy. On being asked as to why she attempted suicide, Rohini says, "My heart is burning with desire, there is cool water in front of me. I cannot touch it not in this life. I cannot hope to touch it." (223) Rohini's statement exposes her desperation and her desire to live full blooded life. She loves Govindalal but social restrictions do not allow her to enjoy life with him. Colonial Bengal was alien to Rohini's blunt, articulate nature because, such brazen defiance of established norms of the society was unthinkable.

Bankim Chandra's characters are not supermen or superwomen, rather, they are characterized by their own human vices and virtues. They are realistic. Govindalal realizes the gravity of the situation engendered by Rohini's love for him and feels being infinitely galvanized towards her. Therefore he prays, "Oh Lord, save me from this danger. I shall not be able to save myself unless you give me strength. I shall die, Bhramar too will die. Abide in my heart—with you I can conquer my weakness." (224) However, he falls prey to his 'human weakness' and decides to begin life with 'beauty' and not with 'virtue'. Govindalal goes to Bandarkhali estate to be away from Rohini and her memory; but he had to come back in a few days only to find Bhramar already left for her father's house. Bankim's subtle observation of human character reflects when he shows that though Govindalal wanted to avoid Rohini and her memory, Rohini was all pervasive and pervading in his heart and therefore, he blew the issue of Bhramar leaving the house before his arrival out of proportion and decided not to call Bhramar home or send somebody to bring her home. The novelist aptly says, "At first Rohini was a memory, then she became a sadness and finally a desire." (239) Govindalal actualized his desire for 'beauty' by running away with Rohini and began a new lease of life at Prasadpur under the pseudonym Chunilal.

The novelist dwells upon 'betrayal' inherent in Rohini's character and subscribes to Hamlet's view in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* "Frailty they name is woman." Rohini's blissful life with Govindalal facilitated by Govindalal's elopement seemed to augment her desire for more enjoyment and more pleasure. Such transgression spells her doom in the long run. Change of her status and life seemed to make her more ambitious instilling in her more hunger. Bankim describes Rohini's attraction to Nisakar:

I suspect she had quite different reasons for wanting to meet Nisakar. The two had exchanged glances and divined each other's thoughts. She had noticed that he was handsome, had a beautiful pair of eyes, and was a prince among men for his manliness. She resolved not to be unfaithful to Govindalal--- but this was quite different from being unfaithful. ((275-76)

The patriarch within Govindalal comes to life and commits Rohini's murder for her infidelity. Bankimchandra shows that Rohini's tragic end is self-invited and her death justifies the importance of the age old traditions of the Bengali society. Thus, the novelist seems to foster an inclination towards the social norms as shown through the death of Rohini. Bankim's female protagonists are reckoned as strong women with the potential to stand against oppressive social norms, customs and traditions.

Conclusion

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee made his 'new woman' stand against all odds, social conventions and oppressions. His women characters question the social injustice meted out to them and seek redressal. Bhramar is a foil to Rohini in *Krishnakanta's Will*. Bhramar represents typical Bengali women in the Colonial Bengal. She is quiet, submissive, docile and likes being under the control of her husband. Rohini, on the other hand, is assertive, articulate and bold. The novelist empathizes with Rohini and her triumph in the novel was a necessity but her tragic death in the end was equally important.

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