

ART OF CHARACTERISATION IN RAJMOHAN'S WIFE

Rajmohan's Wife is, on the surface, a tale of conjugality and property rights and the struggle for dominance and inheritance. A criticism that is often levelled at Bankim is that of hastily finishing off the novel. The characters are inadequately individuated and operate on a plane that is more symbolic than psychological. They dramatize the twin dichotomies of country versus city and Western versus indigenous cultural tradition, both of which would have a bearing on the emergent, anticolonial national consciousness.

At the centre of such a reading is the heroine of the novel, Matangini, Rajmohan's wife. She is described as a 'perfect flower of beauty'. Not surprisingly, Bankim uses tropes from folklore to describe her and her companion's not-so-attractive looks serve to heighten the heroine's beauty. But irrespective of this conventional presentation, she is made to carry the plot forward with her energy and strength which is not at all typical of contemporary heroines. Her strength of character and resolve has a European ring and it is surprising to relate her endeavours to that of a country girl wilting under patriarchy. She becomes in effect the face of modern India—strong-willed and spirited, willing to bend rules and sometimes even break them. In the first chapter we see her disobeying the paradigms set for her as she goes to fetch water, and thus she can well be associated with the newly emerging free spirit of India, adventurous and full of courage and vitality. She does not hesitate to go against her husband, as it is Rajmohan's cruelty towards her and his desire to rob his own benefactor which makes her do so. She withstands verbal assaults from him and then undertakes the journey in the middle of the night to warn Madhav. In doing so she has to fight the demons within her but she ultimately succeeds. Not only is she waging a battle against her domestic colonization by her surly husband but also against a rural culture steeped in superstition. By doing so, she emerges as a representative of a new India, on its way to the modernization which would ultimately give the country its freedom.

The novel, no matter how much kinetic energy it gains from the apparent heroics of Matangini, is called 'Rajmohan's wife' as if the central character's identity is constructed keeping in mind her marital relationship with Rajmohan; in a way she is denied autonomy and shown to be her husband's property. No matter how sympathetic towards her the author might be the abruptness of the ending might hint at the difficulty which the representation of such a woman of unusual vitality may pose for him. It becomes difficult for Bankim to draft her into the cultural milieu as she transgresses her marital domain and articulates an apparently illicit love to her brother-in-law. At the end is the sweeping comment: 'history does not say how her life terminated, but it is known that she died an early death'.

It is through the characterizations of Madhav and his cousin Mathur that the country/city dichotomy is brought to the forefront. Madhav's father was attracted to the city by its money-making possibilities but it resulted in his son getting a taste of Western education, which is the reason for his refinement and sophistication in the novel. This is in stark contrast to the crudity in Mathur's character who becomes the picture of a corrupt and unscrupulous man. The men represent two different kinds of social prestige, the traditional native one and the progressive and humanistic one derived of Western education. Their lives seem to be lived in self-indulgence and fraud, as in the case of Madhav and Mathur respectively, whereas in Bankim's view, men of their class and education should be the forerunners of the new national consciousness.

Finally, as it is evident from the narrative, Mukherjee notes rightly: Characterization is not Bankim's forte in this apprentice novel and the seemingly abrupt end may be the result of a serialized project which no longer held the author's interest. The problematics in the presentation of such free-spirited characters would only create more problems for the author enmeshed in the discourse of that era. [694 words]