

Rajmohan's Wife

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The Village

Social Realism

Depiction of Society

The plot of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* is set in Radhagunj – a village in Bengal. This village presents a thumbnail version of the rural heartland of the state with its ponds, forest paths, temples, a river at some distance and of course a cluster of helpful and problematic neighbours.

Tall trees, big houses, gardens neatly manicured or simply lying attended, cruel insensitive husbands, a gang of robbers characterise Radhagunj. The huts having mud walls and thatched roof, the gates made of wicker, the reed fence giving protection to the cluster of huts have been a common sight in every village and the writer could have drawn Radhagunj from any village he knew. There is nothing unique in this place.

Its importance, however, lies in the fact that the village lying on the eastern side of the state by which the river Madhumati flows has been the seat of many zamindars. Two of them are in fact mentioned here – Madhav and Mathur Ghose. They are cousins and their fathers inherited the property from their grandfather. While Mathur's father led a prudent and resourceful life and increased his wealth, Madhav's father was an extravagant man who lived in Calcutta, squandered his money but at least gave his son a decent education in an English school.

In this village women live a life of purdah to screen themselves from the unethical stare of other men. Their lives are mainly lived inside their houses where they cook, rear children, do other household works and spend their leisure by doing some needlework. Despite living a sheltered life they took a good many hours to make themselves presentable like their city counterparts even though the items with which they deck themselves are few and rudimentary – comb, vermilion, betel leaves.

Like all villages Radhagunj too has its share of good and bad people. Madhab Ghosh must surely rank among those who are good. In fact Bankim has physical parameters to separate the good from the bad. Madhab as described as fair and handsome. Bad people like Mathur Ghosh and Rajmohan are stout, muscular, and dark complexioned. Mathur wears profuse gold ornaments – chains and rings.

Among women too the same phenomenon is noticed. Of course, nearly all women of Bankim are fair and beautiful. But there are some who attract men. Kanak, though good at heart, is initially given this feature. Champak is fair but silly and selfish. Hemangini is too innocent to be true. Only Suki's mother is shown as fat, bulky, and mischievous. She can on the one hand help a woman in distress but given the right amount monetary inducement she does not hesitate to betray the same woman whom she has promised to protect.

Matangini however, stands out amongst them. She is beautiful and spirited. She can become proactive against her husband and foil a bid of dacoity at the dead of night at the cost of life-threatening dangers. On the other hand she takes good care to protect the good name of her husband who is involved in such

nefarious activity. Even in the house of Mathur Ghosh where she would be at his mercy, she holds her fort and resists all attempts to seduce her even at the cost of her life. She is not prepared to sacrifice her wifely purity despite the fact that she would not be accepted by her husband and who would kill her should she ever return to him.

Life in Radhagunj is also fraught with dangers. Here we find the existence of a gang of robbers who can be commissioned to loot and steal important documents. It proves that Radhagunj may be a village but it is not as idyllic as it appears to be with its rural roads and open air worship places of the god Chandi.

In Radhaunj the elders are not always responsible persons. Madhav's widowed aunt who is under the care of Madhav betrays him and moves the court to recover the estate of her husband. She lives with Madhav but works in the interest of Mathur. Incidentally, she is the only elder in the novel. All other characters are young. Thirty is the maximum age given to any person in this novel. Even Tara, the unloved wife of Mathur Ghosh is young though she has become the mother of a daughter.

Women, though they practise marital fidelity with zeal have weakness for other men. Both Matangini and Tara love Madhav. Bankim, of course, takes care to mention that Tara's love for Madhav is a sisterly love. Both were playmates as kids and both have sealed their emotions in the mansion of their innocence.

Even a place as remote as Radhagunj is not free from the interference of the British Raj. While Mathur thought that he could bribe the corrupt police into silence, his pogrom is foiled by an Irish police officer who turns out to be incorruptible. In *Anandamath* we found Bankim expressing the opinion that the advent of the British has freed India from the medievalism imposed on the country by the Yavanas or the Muslims. Here too the same sentiment prevails. Indian police personnel are corrupt. The British officers on the other hand are above such petty things as bribes and corruption.

It can be safely adjudicated that Bankim has picked up most of the elements from real life. The descriptions are real; the people found in these villages are also real. He deals with real incidents and plausible motives. Hence, he follows perfectly the pattern of the British novel of the period which also depicted social realism with the faithfulness of a documentator and situated a story in this realistic locale populated by believable characters. *Rajmohan's Wife*, like the novels of George Eliot and Charles Dickens is therefore a credible document depicting the rural scene during Bankim's time.