Chapter Seven: Representations of Family and Gender: Bankim Chandra’s
Rajmohan’s Wife, Toru Dutt’s Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden and Kshetrapal
Chakravarty’s Sarala and Hingana

The dynamic, shifting, socio-cultural environment in nineteenth century Bengal
did not leave out from its purview the domestic space and intimate relationships. The
impact of the collision of entirely alien cultures and religions was extensively felt in the
hitherto private and closed space of the family. This was the time when questions like
child-marriage, widow remarriage, sati, became matters of public debate and of
legislation. The erstwhile matters of everyday household life too became matters of
debate. It is little surprise then that women became the subject of a lot of discourse, both
verbal and written, in the vernaculars as well as in English. These discourses entered the
literary sphere and we find that the majority of novels written by Bankim Chandra
Chatterjee, the first modern Bengali novelist, are women-centric.

Tanika Sarkar’s book, Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation, contributes to the debate over
the relationship between imperialism, patriarchy, and nationalism in late-nineteenth-
century colonial India. Sarkar poses the question that "How is it that the Bengali
intelligentsia turned away so firmly from liberal reformism to Hindu revivalism later in
the century" (7)? During this period, the Hindu middle classes moved "quite decisively
towards a Hindu cultural indigenism and nationalism, from a more socially-questioning
and self-critical earlier era" (1-2). Sarkar comprehends that the insecure status of the
Bengali middle classes during this period had a crucial role in causing "a self-critical and
self-changing liberal intelligentsia into a closed, status-quoist, chauvinistic one" that
retreated into an authoritarian Hindu revivalism (11). The relocation to a “revivalist-nationalist” tradition had important repercussions in the status of women in Indian society, as women came to play an important role in the construction of Indian national identity. Sarkar posits that emasculated by colonialism, Indian men could implement autonomy only within their homes, the one place that was outside the purview of the colonial apparatus. Household conjugality, she claims, comes to represent the “last independent space left to the colonized Hindu” (198). Sarkar positions Bankim Chandra as a mediating voice between Hindu revivalists and Bengali liberal reformers. The importance of women in the nationalist imagination makes it possible for them to emerge as potent symbols of “the unviolated, chaste, inner space” of the nation that needed to be protected by Indian patriarchy from the corrupting influence of the colonizer (265).

Indeed, Bankim’s first novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864), too has a woman as its central character. In this chapter I take a look at three texts which are the earliest representations of family and gender in Indian Writing in English in the nineteenth century. The first is *Rajmohan’s Wife*, the second, Toru Dutt’s *Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden* (serialized in *The Bengal Magazine* 1877-78) the only extant English novel written by an Indian woman in the nineteenth century, and the third is Kshetrapal Chakravarty’s *Sarala and Hingana* (1896), all of which are named after the central woman protagonist in text.

*Rajmohan’s Wife*

*Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864), was written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94), one of the first graduates of the University of Calcutta, when he was a twenty six year
old Deputy Magistrate in the Khulna district of Bengal. Bankim had been born in a well
to do middle class Brahmin family. Educated in the prestigious Hindu (Presidency)
college, Bankim attained the highest level of western education that was attainable in his
day. He worked as a deputy collector and deputy magistrate for more than thirty years
and was known for his courageous administration in the face of British misrule and
oppression.

*Rajmohan’s Wife* was serialized in the weekly periodical, *Indian Field* (edited by
Kishori Chand Mitra). In 1935 Brojendra Nath Banerjee was able to locate all but the
opening three chapters of the text. These three chapters were re-translated from a
Bengali version of the novel which Bankim himself had started. The novel was then
published in the *Modern Review* (1935) and also as a book. The edition to which I refer
in this chapter is Meenakshi Mukherjee’s edition of the novel published in 1996.

In the “Afterword” to her edition of the novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee points out
that *Rajmohan’s Wife* has been “little more than a dead entry carried over from one
bibliography to another, without anyone trying to exhume the corpse, or attempting to
perform a post-mortem” (137). To regard this text as a corpse is not really acceptable,
and somewhat contradictory to Mukherjee’s own efforts to make the text both accessible
and visible. Critics and literary historians have been unanimous in their neglect of this
text. Thus K. R. S. Iyengar refuses to even designate *Rajmohan’s Wife* the status of a
novel: in his more than eight hundred page book *Rajmohan’s Wife* is allotted a single
small sentence, and there he calls it Bankim’s “first published effort” (315). Writing
twenty years later, M. K. Naik (*A History of Indian English Literature*) is more generous
and devotes half a paragraph to the novel. However, he too calls it “melodramatic… sketchy and lacking in adequate character-motivation” (106).

Sisir Kumar Das has suggested that Bankim did not complete his translation of Rajmohan’s Wife into Bengali “perhaps because he thought that it was too unsatisfactory to receive any public attention” (The Artist in Chains 19). Nirad C. Chaudhuri opined that Bankim turned to write in Bengali because to write in English was “to go into a blind valley which led them nowhere” (Opening Address, The Eye of the Beholder, Ed. Maggie Butcher, London, 1983). However, the story of the writing of Rajmohan’s Wife and Bankim’s departure to write in Bengali is certainly not a warning tale against writing in English as it is so often made out to be.

The whole question of “false start” (”Foreword”, Rajmohan’s Wife, (ed.) Meenakshi Mukherjee) seems less relevant today when we realize that the start itself was an important cultural, literary and socio-political moment. We need to be alert against such prevalent misconceptions that Bankim did not write any more novels in English because he realized the “impracticality” of the effort. Bankim’s problematics in negotiating with the English language as a literary mode, and the rationale behind his opting to write literature in Bengali is well documented in his advice to Romesh Dutt that educated people like them should try to develop the vernacular language.

Notwithstanding its position vis-à-vis Bankim’s Bengali novels, Rajmohan’s Wife is of interest because of its themes, conventions, characterization, use of language, and above all because of its cross-cultural negotiation. Meenakshi Mukherjee has identified several important areas in the text for critical attention: the implications and consequences of writing in English as opposed to Bengali; the “realistic” mode of

255
representation; and the cultural negotiations in the text. The text is, as Mukheijee says, “a potent site for discussing crucial questions about language, culture, colonization, and representation” (*Rajmohan’s Wife* 152). Since Mukheijee has already addressed these issues, I do not propose to go into the same, but want to focus on the representation of the Indian family and the woman in the text.

*Rajmohan’s Wife* interrogates the sanctity of the traditional family, the restrictions imposed by gender, and recognizes/imagines/discloses man-woman relationships other than that of husband-wife. The novel imagines/represents a number of family units—Rajmohan-Matangini; Kanak and her absentee husband; Mathur Ghose-Tara-Champak; Madhav-Hem; Madhav-Matangini; Tara-Madhav. While the first four are conjugal relationships, Madhav-Matangini are shown to harbour romantic feelings outside the fold of marriage, and the relationship of Tara and Madhav is a beautiful filial-friendly bonding not restricted by gender determinants.

In “The Allegory of Rajmohan's Wife: National Culture and Colonialism in Asia's First English Novel”, Makarand Paranjape reads *Rajmohan’s Wife* as a national allegory:

Matangini... is ... the “spirit” or personification of modern India itself. This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India ... [is] burdened by sorrow and anxiety... under the control of an unworthy husband... the very first chapter begins with a temptation and a transgression... Matangini... crosses the threshold ... The defining features of modern India are thus its energy, its adventurousness, its unwillingness to be confined by tradition, and its desire to break free...⁴
Prof. Paranjape’s reading draws on the Jamesonian model of third-world literatures being “necessarily” national allegories, a model which has been heavily critiqued by theorists like Aijaz Ahmed (In Theory). Ahmed rejects the category of “Third World Literature” as “epistemologically an impossible category” (105) and says that the channelling of all so called “third world texts” into the meta-text of national allegory is extremely reductionist (107).

I would like to look at Matangini not as the symbol of the new emerging India, but, on a more basic level, as the herald of the new Indian woman. Rajmohan’s Wife begins as a realistic representation of middle-class Bengali domestic life, and moves on to portray the picture of the “new woman”. It foregrounds the effort to break hitherto sacrosanct barriers. Bankim brings the private space into the open and challenges/critiques the traditional concept of the pativrata stree. Matangini is anything but a “typical, long-suffering Hindu wife” (Naik 106).

Tanika Sarkar (Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation) who has brilliantly analysed nineteenth century culture-texts in India in a bid to identify and examine the dominant Hindu ideas and traditions that have fashioned the key conceptions of “womanhood”, “domesticity”, “wifeliness”, does not recognize Rajmohan’s Wife at all. She commences her discussion of Bankim’s writings thus: “In 1865 Bankimchandra began his literary career by writing a novel.” She adds a foot note which says “This was Durgeshnandini, a historical novel” (144). The exclusion of Rajmohan’s Wife, which was written in 1864, from the purview of her discussion is intriguing because it is in this novel itself that Bankim initiates many of the themes that were to be the central concerns of his gender discourses in his subsequent writings as identified by Tanika Sarkar herself:
[Bankim's] concern was to counterpose different patterns of female sexuality and ways of loving to one another, to flesh them out within contrasting domestic and extra-domestic conventions, to question the limits of accepted codes and transgressive behaviour, and to test given models of male sexuality and love as well as suggest alternative possibilities... he examined the woman's anguish within these structures, as also the man's conflict between on the one hand his strong love and willed commitment, and on the other his polygamous license and inclination. He articulated wide-ranging configurations of female transgressions within extra-marital relationships and contrasted the woman's moral emotional dilemmas with socially sanctioned codes (144-45).

It is not difficult to see that these are the very issues that Rajmohan's Wife deals with. Matangi's transgressive love for Madhav, Madhav's sense of duty overcoming his romantic feelings, Matangi's dilemma between emotional call and social sanctions are all issues that come up again and again in all of Bankim's later novels. But while in many of his later novels the woman has to go back to the domestic fold (if she is acceptable) or has to embrace death, Matangi is a woman who remains unsubdued.

It is true that at the end of the novel Matangi is relegated to the status of a lonely woman who has to "die an early death". Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that Matangi's death is an "expedient" solution which helps the author out of his "moral dilemma" since he has pushed her "into an uncharted and ambiguous territory from which neither romantic sympathy nor colonial justice can deliver her to a positive
future” (Rajmohan’s Wife 142). But we need to remember that this kind of a closure was common in Victorian novels, and it should not spur us to declare that the text is regressive, because more significant than the closure of the text is the text itself which establishes Matangini as the first woman character in Indian Writing in English who is not only the central character of the text, but also who has her own voice. She speaks against traditional strictures that are imposed on her, and although she begins as a shy woman in the text, she goes on to gain much strength as the novel progresses.

The very naming of the novel, stressing the “wife-ly” identity of Matangini is significant. The title “Rajmohan’s Wife” reminds that Matingini is not an individual with a self-willed identity, but that she is someone’s wife. In her socio-religious context this wife-identity superimposes a lot of restrictions that she has to follow whether she likes them or not. Thus in the first chapter itself the apparently simple act of going out of the house for “drawing water” becomes a matter of debate between Matangini and her friend Kanak.

“You know, Kanak Didi, I never fetch water.”

“That is why I am asking you to,” replied Kanak. “Why should you remain in a cage all day. Do not all other housewives draw water?”

..."

“I cannot argue about it Kanak. You know my husband has forbidden me to fetch water, and you know him well” (Mukherjee (ed.), Rajmohan’s Wife 4-5). 5

But though initially reluctant, Matangini ultimately does go out to draw water, an act that symbolises her transgression into the outer world. This event marks the most
significant move in the novel both in terms of plot development (as it sets the story in motion) and metaphorically (it is the crossing of the **laxmanrekha** drawn by Rajmohan for his wife). When she returns home and is questioned by her husband for her “disobedience”, she firmly answers: “I am your wife... I had gone because I thought there was nothing wrong in it” (12).

But Matangini’s trials really begin the following night when she overhears her husband plotting a robbery in the house of Madhav, her sister’s husband. Madhav is also Matangini’s lost love, and when she hears of the plan of robbery she is doubly intrigued: first that her husband should have association with a band of robbers; and second that the robbery was being planned in Hem and Madhav’s house. Matangini’s love for Madhav conquers her fear of her husband. After a lot of deliberations she decides to inform him herself about the plan of robbery:

Matangini now perceived with despair that her only resource lay in herself... Wrapping herself in a coarse piece of bed-cloth from head to foot she gently opened the door... summoning all her resolutions she made rapid but noiseless steps. Her heart beat fast as she walked through the jungly path. The dreary silence and the dark shadows appalled her. The knotted trunks of huge trees showed like so many unworthy forms watching her progress in malignant silence. In each leafy bough that shot over her darkened path, she fancied there lurked a demon. In each dark recess she could see the skulking form and glistening eyes of a spectre or of a robber...the light crack of the falling leaf, the flapping wings of some frightened night bird as it changed its unseen seat among the dark.
branches, the slight rustle of crawling reptiles among the fallen leaves, even her own footsteps made her heart fainter and fainter. Still the resolute girl hurried on, taking the name of her patron goddess a thousand times within her heart, and now and then muttering a prayer. (Italics mine) (38-40)

On the way she finds the dacoits and has to cleverly and boldly hide herself from their view. For sometime she immerses herself in a pool and remains floating in it. When the dacoits move away she resumes her journey. She reaches Madhav’s house at the middle of the night and informs him of the plan of robbery. He makes preparations and is able to scare off the robbers.

When its time for Matangini to leave the house she breaks down before Madhav and confesses to him how she has been in love with him:

...as if under the influence of a maddening agony of soul, she grasped his hands in her hands own and bending over them her lily face so that Madhav trembled under the thrilling touch of the delicate curls that fringed her spotless brow, she bathed them in a flood of warm and gushing tears.

“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, maybe 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 forever without a struggle. (53)
Madhav acknowledges her love and admits of his own passion too, but reminds her that they should not flinch from the path of duty:

"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 spooled our hearts, eradicate from them the evil which corrodes and blisters them? Oh! Matangini, let us forget each other. Let us separate. (55)"

Matangini returns home and her brash act is discovered by Rajmohan. She is excited and provoked enough to tell him that she loves Madhav:

At length Matangini spoke and desperate calmness was in her voice.

"You are right", she said. I love him—deeply do I love him; long loved I and I love him so. I will also tell you that words have I uttered which, but for the uncontrolled—uncontrollable madness of a love you cannot understand, would never have passed these lips. But beyond this I have not been guilty to you (61).

This kind of a bold declaration of love by a married woman to her husband certainly marks out Matangini as a strong and unconventional woman. Maddened by this confession of love Rajmohan is about to strike her dead, but Matangini is saved by Rajmohan's distraction by a sudden noise. There is a fall-out between Rajmohan and his associates and Matangini escapes in the confusion. She no longer dares to return to her
husband's home, and is given shelter by Tara, wife of Mathur Ghose, Madhav's cousin. But the shelter proves to be temporary as Mathur's younger wife Champak is intent on driving out Matangini, and Rajmohan too comes to seek his wife soon.

In the Chapter "Some Men are the Equals of Some Women", Bankim shows how Mathur is unable to subdue Matangini to his evil intent. Having tricked her into his godown, he "determined to gratify at once both revenge and lust" (119). She challenges him: "I am a full-grown woman, and at least your equal in brute force." When he threatens her with starvation, she "resolved to starve herself to be rid from his power." (120) Bankim establishes Matangini as an equal to Mathur in both physical and mental abilities. She is his equal in physical strength as well as in resolution.

Though the novel centers on Matangini, there are other engaging women characters too. One of them is Mathur's wife Tara, who gives shelter to Matangini in her distress, and later on is instrumental in liberating first Madhav and then Matangini from Mathur's captivity. Tara has a filial-friendly bonding with Madhav, and this rare exquisite relationship is beautifully represented by Bankim:

Madhav and Tara had known each other from their infancy... Tara had been his playmate... Tara's marriage with Mathur did not to any great extent interfere to banish the feeling in the mind of each towards the other, generated by the familiar and unrestrained intercourse of infancy...

By so many years the junior of Mathur, zenana etiquette did not stand in the way of his holding frequent conversations with Tara... each had a high esteem for the other. But their mutual fondness, and such the feeling might suitably be termed, was far removed from all impurity of the heart.
Their attachment to each other springing in childhood, and nurtured by a daily growing appreciation of the moral beauty of each other’s heart, had ripened into an affection that was akin to the love of brother and sister (113).

This very special relationship does not fall into any conventional categories, and evokes the possibilities of man-woman friendship based on equable temperament and sympathies. Tara is unfortunately married to a man unworthy of her. He has also married a second time, and spends most of his domestic time in the embraces of his younger wife, Champak. Thus the domestic space of Tara is problematised by the presence of the “other woman”. Champak “possessed decided superiority over her rival in the regularity of her features and in the blooming sharpness of her complexion” (79). But added to her beauty is “a witchery of coquettish grace”. Champak “ruled the household with the authority of its sole mistress” (79). As for Mathur, he was as much in the grip of Champak’s charms, as he was indifferent to Tara: “The master who bent with an iron will the interest of all who surrounded him to subserve his own—was but a slave to the will of this coquette” (80).

When Tara obtains her husband’s permission to give shelter to Matangini, the action does not remain uncontested. Bankim subtly captures the power-politics of the zenana: “Champak liked not that it should be under the auspices of her rival that the stranger should obtain a footing in the household.” (80) Thus not only is it significant that who gets shelter in the house, but equally, perhaps more, important is under whose “auspices” the shelter is given. The power play in the zenana goes on at a subtle level: over the issue of tying a child’s khompa for instance:
"Aha!" said Champak, "I fear our sister will make only one of her western country khompas. It is best as it is.

"If I succeed in tying a khompa as they do in our part of the country," returned Matangini, "this beautiful child will look twice more beautiful."

"No, no—you must not do it," rejoined Champak, "that is the way in which disreputable females dress their hair—it does not look seemingly in good people's children."

"O fie! Interposed Tara, "Is beauty ever disdained because sometimes a bad woman is beautiful? At that rate sister you should have disfigured your fine countenance long before this. No, no, because bad women may have a fine knot of hair, that is no reason why a good woman should have none. Tie the knot as you please, sister", concluded she, addressing Matangini (81-82).

Champak's shrewdness is well depicted by Bankim, whose interest in portraying women characters is evident from the fact in this very short novel he devotes an entire chapter to Champak who has little role in the plot. Champak's whims are described with fond detail as we see how she manouevres Mathur. She relies entirely on her charms to control her husband. When she wants Mathur to drive away Matangini she threatens to go to her father's house, and denies him her physical proximity:

That evening when he again returned to the chamber, an extraordinary spectacle presented itself to his eyes. In a corner of the room, far apart from his bedstead, another bed had been neatly prepared on an humble couch... throwing herself on it [Champak] went to sleep...
Our readers will guess what a night the uxorious Mathur Ghose passed (86).

Tara is no less intelligent than Champak, but she uses her instinct and intellect for better purposes. But for her alertness and courage, neither Madhav nor Matangini would be rescued from the clutches of Mathur. At first she tries to persuade Mathur to confide his troubles to her. She tries all the wife-ly charms and strategies and is at least able to make Mathur confess that he is deeply troubled by something, though what it is he does not reveal. She secretly watches her husband’s suspicious movements as he goes first into the jungle and then into the godown-mahal. She realises that the secret of her husband’s discomfort is likely to be discovered in the godown-mahal (101). She then “steals” the keys of the godown-mahal from beneath her husband’s pillow while he is asleep and when she opens the door of the godown she discovers Madhav: “How many fears, what tremor, what anxiety... assailed me as, possessed of the stolen keys I threaded my dark way beneath these sombre walls, you can better conceive than I describe. But I felt myself acting under a supernatural impulse and came on...” (115)

But when she learns from Madhav that he has been there only since evening, she tells him that since her suspicions were aroused two days back, there must be someone else too locked up in the godown. With this thought in mind they continue their search and discover Matangini, in an almost lifeless state. Tara’s alertness and courage saves Madhav’s and Matangini’s lives.

Another fascinating woman is Kanak, Matangini’s best friend and confidante. Her garrulity and cheerfulness belie the misery of her situation. Being a kulin, she is married to a much married man whose profession is to marry and thereby “rescue” kulin
girls like Kanak. Her’s is an absentee husband, who exists only in name. She has learnt to be reconciled to her fate and has even learnt to laugh at herself. When, at the beginning of the novel Matangini asks her is it wrong to go out to draw water,

Kanak laughed and replied,

“Wrong! I am not a fat-bellied Bhattacharya. I have nothing to do with the Shastras. But I would have gone even if I had fifty men.”

“Oh, what bravery!” replied the other laughing as she went out to get her pitcher. “Fifty! Do you really wish for as many?”

Kanak smiled sadly and said, “It’s a sin to even say so. But if all the fifty were of the same sort as the one given me by Fate, it would hardly matter. It I meet none, I am a chaste and devoted wife even if married to a crore of men” (5).

Other than these women, Bankim also sketches the scene prevailing in a typical andarmahal with perfect detail. I quote the entire section below in order to bring out Bankim’s interest and attention to details of feminine behaviour in the andarmahal:

There was a servant woman, black, rotund and eloquent, demanding the transmission to her hands of sundry articles of domestic use, without however making it at all intelligible to whom her demands were particularly addressed. There was another, who boasted similar blessed corporal dimensions, but who had thought it beneath her dignity to shelter them from view; and was busily employed, broomstick in hand, in demolishing the little mountains of the skins and stems of sundry culinary vegetables which decorated the floors, and against which the half-naked
dame never aimed a blow but coupled it with a curse on those whose duty it had been to prepare the said vegetables for dressing. A third had ensconced herself in that corner of the yard which formed the grand receptacle of household filth, and was employing all her energies in scouring some brass pots; and as her ancient arms whirled round in rapid evolutions the scarcely less active engine in her mouth hurled dire anathemas against the unfortunate cook, for the mighty reason, that the latter had put the said vessels to their legitimate use, and thus caused the labours which excited the worthy matron’s ire. The cook herself, far removed from the scene where both her spiritual and her temporal prospects were being so fiercely dealt with by the excited scourer of the brass pots, was engaged in an angry discussion with an elderly lady, apparently the housewife and governess, the subject of debate being no less interesting and important than the quantity of ghee to be allowed her for the culinary purpose of the night. The honest manufacturer of rice and curry was anxious to secure only just double the quantity that was necessary, wisely deeming it advisable that half should be set apart in secret for her own special benefit and consumption. In another corner might be heard those sounds so suggestive of an agreeable supper, the huge bunti serving the bodies of fishes doomed to augment the labours of the conscientious cook aforesaid. Several elegant forms might be seen flitting, not often noiselessly but always gracefully, across the dalans and veranda with dirty earthen lamps lighted in their little hands, and
occasionally sending forth the tinkling of the silver mal on their ankles or a summons to another in a voice which surpassed the silver in delicacy. A couple of urchins utterly naked and evidently excrescences in the household thought the opportunity a fitting one for the display of their belligerent propensities and were making desperate attempts at tearing each other's hair. Some young girls were very clamorously engaged in playing at Agdum Bagdum in the corner of a terrace (25-26).

We see above that women's space is represented as one characterized by clamour, confusion, bewilderment, misunderstanding and a babble of quarrelling voices. As interesting as Bankim's rendering of menial jobs, is his ability to represent the utter confusion prevailing in the scene. The narrative is infused with humour, even with a sly sarcasm in places. It is a male figure who enters this scene and the cognizance of whose presence bestows peace and order:

Madhav stood for some moments in utter hopelessness of ever making himself heard in the veriest of Babels.

'Will you, you wenches,' he cried at length in a key creditable to his lungs, 'will you cease? Can I speak?

The change this short exclamation produced was magical. The vociferations of the dame whose demands for nameless articles had been hitherto addressed to the air, ceased in the midst of a scream of more than ordinary power, and the black rotund form of the screamer was nowhere to be seen. She of the broomstick threw away the formidable weapon as if stung by an adder, and sought to precipitate flight to shelter her half-
naked mass of flesh in the friendly cover of some dark corner. The anathematizing scourer of the brass vessels was cut short in the midst of a very sonorous curse; and both her tongue and her arm was suspended in the middle of half-performed evolutions. The destroyer of the finny tribe, also, experienced a momentary interruption, but though she mustered courage to resume her task, it was certainly executed with a far smaller expenditure of noise. The presiding divinity of the kitchen abruptly terminated her vocal exertions in favour of ghee and betook to her heels, carrying off in the precipitancy of her flight the entire ghee pot, a bare moiety of which had just formed her demands. The flitting figures with the lit lamps disappeared in tumultuous flight, little caring that the tinkling of the ornaments in their feet betrayed the very presence the endeavoured to conceal. The combat of the sturdy little warriors who fought in nudity and darkness for victory suddenly terminated in flight on both sides, though the abler general of the two did not fail to fire a retiring short in the shape of a hearty kick at the sheens of his antagonist. The little girls too, who had been so merrily playing, rose and followed the said general accompanying him with an ill-suppressed tittle of hilarity. The scene which had just exhibited an unparalleled confusion was suddenly change into one of utter silence and solitude, and the grave housewife was the only being who stood unmoved and unchanged before the master of the house (Italics mine) (26-27).
What Bankim says in so many words is basically that the character of the scene changed entirely as soon as Madhav makes his presence felt. These kind of sketches only establish Bankim’s keen interest in delineating women characters. This is a public display of a very private space. What we see here is a rather stereotyped notion of women’s actions and behaviour: complete commotion and confusion in this exclusive women’s space gains a semblance of order and peace when a male figure, the master of the house, Madhav appears. When Madhav complains of all the commotion, he is told by one of the elderly women, “Women, son, women,... it is a woman’s nature to be screaming” (27).

Yet in this very novel we also see strong women like Tara and Matangini, who defy conventions and conventional notions of women. Rajmohan’s Wife has no picture of a happy peaceful domestic life. All the families represented in the novel are disturbed by some prospect or other. Matangini’s is of course disturbed by the fact that Rajmohan is an immoral man, having alliances with robbers, and misbehaving with his wife even to the point of physically abusing her. Kanak has an absentee husband and therefore no family to call her own. Tara’s family is far from perfect with her husband’s immoral ways. Tara’s conjugal life is also threatened from within by the presence of Mathur’s second wife Champak. Even Matangini’s sister Hem, though married to the guileless Madhav, cannot be regarded as having a perfectly happy/unadulterated family as we see her husband nursing amorous feelings for Matangini.

No family in this little world of Radhaganj is blemishless. Some of the problems arise from greed, some from inherent defects of character, some from lust, and some
from matters of the heart. Some problems arise from the decline of traditional morality in a rapidly changing world sustained by the drive for money-making.

*Rajmohan's Wife* is the representation of the Bengali family space by an author who has a predominantly Hindu view of life, as is evident from his later Bengali writing. However Rajmohan's Wife is a big step forward in its articulation of "transgressive" love. While Lal Behari Day was reticent to even give space to the perfectly legitimate conjugal love in *Bengal Peasant Life* (See Chapter Six above), explaining in his *Preface* that love in the honourable sense was an alien concept in Bengal, Bankim makes his protagonist Matangini freely express her love, that too a love that has no social/religious sanction.

In the next section I take a look at *Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden*, Toru Dutt's unfinished novel, which once more is a fascinating text for its representation of gender and family.

*Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden*

Toru Dutt (1856-77), the third and youngest child of Govin Chunder Dutt, of the famous Dutt family of Rambagan, was baptised with the other members of her family at the age of six. Being born in a highly westernized environment, she started learning English at a very young age. In 1869 Toru's father went to England with his whole family. They spent a year in France where Toru learnt French. They returned to India in 1869, but Toru and her father kept longing to go back to England, but this wish was never fulfilled. Like her siblings, Toru died at a very young age. She was only twenty-one at the time of her death. Toru was a pious Christian, and found her solace in the
Tom's consciousness as reflected in her writings was shaped by many factors such as her marginalized status due to her Christian religion, her unconventional upbringing and personality, her sense of exile, her diasporic world-view. She is one of the earliest Indian women to display postcolonial and literary consciousness, shaped by divergent, disparate aspects such as gender, ethnicity, colonialism, nationalism, and religion. Her writings are charged with her cross-cultural perception and are an interesting site for examining the early postcolonial educated womanly consciousness.

We are here concerned with her English novel *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* (henceforth *Bianca*) (serialized in the *Bengal Magazine* from August 1877-July 1878).

Malashri Lai (*The Law of the Threshold*) has noted the “special significance” of the novel because it was written at a time when Indian women were “still struggling in secrecy to read and write” (53). Lai’s book draws on the metaphor of the *Laxmanrekha*, and is an interesting approach in itself, but I would like to allocate the “special significance” of *Bianca*, not just to its socio-temporal and location, but to its location outside India, its daring themes, its non-Indian protagonists, its psychological complexities, and its assimilation and negotiation of Western literature:

The novel is set in the British country-side and tells the story of Bianca, the youngest daughter of Alonzo Garcia, a Spanish immigrant “in exile”. Chandani Lokuge has remarked that Toru’s description of Bianca is exciting for its Indianess (Chandani Lokuge’s *Introduction*, Toru Dutt, *Collected Prose and Poetry* xxxi).8 She also suggests a lot of valid biographical parallels between Toru and Bianca. Toru’s choice of location
and characters was perhaps prompted by the unconventional themes of the novel such as the intense and almost obsessive father-daughter relationship, its evocation of pre-marital love, and the psychological intensity of Bianca’s character. Though apparently dealing with non-Indian characters, Bianca is ultimately an articulation of Toru’s imagined Indian family and familial relationships.

Toru’s letters provide us glimpses of her inner life, interests, thoughts and world-view. In one of these letters we come to know that she longed to go England for the “free life” she led there. In Calcutta Toru led a strangely out of place, isolated life in her “garden house at Baugmaree”, Calcutta. The reasons for this isolation were many: the fact that her family had converted to Christianity, that she was highly educated, and that she was still unmarried: “We all so much want to return to England. We miss the free life we led there; here we can hardly go out of the limits of our own Garden ... (227). Much of this isolation finds expression in Bianca, where Bianca and her father are seen to lead a solitary life, much like “exile”.

Bianca begins with the picture of a funeral, the funeral of Bianca’s sister, Inez. We learn that Inez had always been Garcia’s favourite child. She was engaged to be married to Walter. After her death Walter proposes marriage to Bianca which she promptly refuses. Mr. Garcia is rather happy that Bianca has refused him. Indeed, he wants to keep Bianca to himself because all his other children were dead and he did not want to lose Bianca. Bianca however is in love with Lord Moore, who is very passionately in love with her too, and one day, in a fit of passion, kisses her. Bianca is very agitated and tells her father about the kiss. Garcia is so angry that Bianca goes into a fit. Soon, a letter arrives from Lord Moore stating that he seeks the hand of Bianca in
marriage. Garcia is in no mood to contend. However when Bianca remains ill for a long time he changes his mind and when she recovers after a month he tells her that he is ready to accept the marriage for her sake. In between we get to meet Moore’s mother, Lady Moore, who is rather contemptuous of Bianca because of her mixed parentage. Lord Moore tells his mother that he will marry Bianca whether she likes it or not. All seems happily settled for Bianca with Lord Moore telling her that he has made arrangements so that Bianca’s father would be staying with Bianca and Lord Moore after their marriage. But the narrative trails off at the juncture when Lord Moore is suddenly called to the war. Toru’s father has left a note at this point stating that she had to leave off the novel at this point on account of her illness.

Toru Dutt is the only woman prose writer to write in English in nineteenth century Bengal (at least, she is the only one whose writings were published). Her incomplete novel Bianca is the only one in nineteenth century Indian Writing in English that has entirely non-Indian characters. It is also the only work of prose fiction that articulates the feelings of a young unmarried woman. This could only be expressed in a non-Indian setting since marriage in India was at that time entirely arranged by elders and at an early age of boys and girls. In this context we may recall Lal Behari Day’s Preface to Bengal Peasant Life where he speaks of the cultural difference between the East and the West in matters of love and marriage.9 Though set in a foreign location and dealing with foreign characters, Toru does impose very Indian sensibilities on her non-Indian characters. Alonso Garcia has the same feeling of possessiveness towards his daughter that a typical Indian father (perhaps Toru’s own father) would have. However, there is a hint of obsession in this father-daughter relationship:
...she was weeping silently to herself; when a hand was placed heavily and slowly on her shoulder. She knew it was her father's. A thrill of unknown pleasure she felt at this touch. He had never caressed her; Inez had been his favourite. ...sometimes Bianca felt a pang when she saw her father pass his hand on his eldest daughter’s shoulder; or... kiss her on the cheek... (94).

Later when Lord Moore has asked her hand in marriage Bianca is seen oscillating between her tender feelings for her lover and her guilt-feeling in being selfish and leaving her father alone. Like Toru, all of Bianca’s siblings are dead and so she feels she has no right to leave her father alone for another man. Again, Lady Moore has the typical resentment that a mother-in-law feels for her son’s wife; no matter how hard she tries to please her. Intriguingly enough, there is no other mother figure in the novel. Bianca is also beset with a sense of exile that is a constant feature of its author as is revealed in her letters. Not only is Alonso Garcia called an exile, Bianca too has a marginal existence: she is neither here nor there. She is called a “Spanish gypsy” (105) by Lady Moore, which highlights her transient status. The similarity in physical appearance and situation between Toru and Bianca suggested by Chandani Lokuge is not a coincidence. Toru transposes much of herself on her heroine, and perhaps thus articulates thoughts and ideas that she could project in no other way. The novel evokes the theme of pre-marital love and captures Bianca’s sway from pleasure to guilt when Lord Moore kisses her lips:

A strange feeling of unutterable bliss mingled with pain came upon her;

“Oh, if he would kiss me again!” She felt as if she had drunk of the
heavenly hydromel of the poets, she wanted to a deeper draught of the
drink of the gods. She had never been kissed by a man... How strange,
how soul-thrilling that touch of his lips was. It sent all the dark blood
rushing to her olive cheeks and forehead. She buried her face in her hands
and wept. Was it for joy or sorrow? She felt as if she had committed a
great sin. It seemed all so strange to her! (108)

Bianca’s swaying between joy and sorrow has much to do with her sense of guilt
about the matter being hidden from her father. But it is a matter of debate that how much
of this guilt arises from Toru’s Indian sensibilities since the West was never so inhibited
in matters of love and marriage. The representation of woman and sexuality was easier
for Toru because she chose an apparently alien setting and characters for her novel. It
would certainly be an interesting reading if Toru could have completed her novel. But as
it stands it yet provides interesting material for study.

*Sarala and Hingana*

*Sarala and Hingana* (originally serialized in *New India*, later published in book
form in 1896 and again in 1899) by Kshetrapal Chakravarty contains two independent
narratives, each named after the central woman figure in them. There is no information
available about the author, except that he also delivered two lectures, one on “Hindu
Philosophy”, and the other on “Life of Sri Chaitanya”, both of which texts are available
in the National Library, Kolkata.10
The two narratives are completely different from each other in setting, characterization and theme. The author dedicates his work to Sir John Woodburn, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in the following words:

As your Honour has been graciously pleased to grant me the permission, I cannot do better than associate Your Honour's name with the work, making it thus stand not only as a mark of my gratitude to, and esteem for your Honour for having shown me so much kindness, but also as a centre wherein meet the labours of the east and the goodwill of the west. (Italics mine) (Dedication, Sarala and Hingana)

The above words indicate how people like Kshetrapal thought it essential that "the labours of the east" need the sanction and the goodwill of the west. The "Dedication" is followed by the "Opinions of distinguished personages in regard to the Indian short stories Sarala and Hingana." All of these "opinions" are from Western readers and while some express appreciation that an Indian writer should write so good English, most others articulate that the "delightful" stories are specially interesting for the light they shed on Indian domestic life. For instance, Professor George H Clark from Philadelphia writes:

I consider that the people of the West would like to know Indian life from the pen of an Indian, better than from anyone of the West... Such writing is calculated to arouse an interest in your country among foreign nations than almost any other method. ("Opinions of distinguished personages in regard to the Indian short stories Sarala and Hingana", Sarala and Hingana) (Italics mine)
Sarala narrates the story of Sarala and her husband Hem Chandra, who works in Calcutta. This narrative is remarkable for its representation of Bengali domestic life in the village. We may recall that Rajmohan's Wife also has a similar setting; but while Bankim's novel focuses on the ill-matched and stormy conjugal life of Matangini, Sarala is the picture of a rather romantic marital relationship. On the other hand it also has inputs about Hem's life as a sircar, and has some amount of socio-political and religious discourse too. Sarala lives in the village with Hem's uncle and his wife. Hem longs to become rich so that he may live comfortably with his wife in Calcutta, and be free from dependence on his uncle. His wish is granted by a siddha purusha, who bequeaths his legacy on Hem, who is to become the next siddha purusha. The narrative starts as a realist piece of fiction but soon manoeuvres into the realms of mysticism. But before that, in the initial pages, there is interesting detailing of the rituals of the Durga Puja, and also heated debates on the question of British Rule as well as on Hinduism. It is a fascinating text for its thematic novelty and its portrayal of the Hindu wife and her domestic life. It envisions the new concept of the small/nuclear family as opposed to the traditional joint-family structure as we see Hem aspiring to break away from the "joint-family" set-up in his village and establish his own abode with his wife in Calcutta.

Sarala is subtitled "A Story Descriptive of Bengal Village Life". The emphasis is on 'village life', as in Bengal Peasant Life, though the latter text is much more voluminous and captures more details. Kshetrapal's narrative begins by capturing the urgency of shopping that is to be seen in the city in people returning to their home in the village before the Durga Puja: "Three days remained for the great Puja—only three short days: All the necessary purchases and arrangements had to be made and crammed
into this short space of time, before one living at a distance was expected to return to the bosom of his family” (Italics mine) (Chakravarty, Sarala and Hingana 1). The village and the family seem to function as some sort of a refuge/haven to one living in the city. In “The Journey to the Past as a Journey to the Self: The Remembered Village and the Poisoned City”, Ashis Nandy observes that

...the village of the imagination has become a serene, pastoral paradise. It has become the depository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, and of the harmony of nature, intact community life and environmental sagacity... The village symbolizes control over self; the city reeks of self-indulgence and the absence of self-restraint (Italics mine) (Nandy, Exile 13).

It is important to note the distinction that Nandy makes between the “real” and the “imagined” village. The real village is “uncivil... a symbol of India’s fearsome diversity and unknowability” (12), while the imagined village is “the utopia of an idyllic, integrated, defragmented self” (13). Hem’s village is certainly nearer Nandy’s conception of the “imagined village”.

The narrative introduces us to Hem Chandra, who, with fifty rupees in his pocket goes to the Puja-bazaar to buy articles for his dear wife Sarala. He buys “Dacca-Saris”, “Benares-churies”, “red and yellow ribbons”, “looking glasses”, “combs”, “oil”, “a bottle of Jasmine scent”, and “a Canadian gold ring with an artificial ruby”. But he also “wished very much to purchase a few cakes of soap, but he dared not, lest he be declared a Christian in his native place (Italics mine) (1). It is such inputs as these throughout the text which subtly convey the nuances of contemporary Hindu domestic
Early next day Hem starts for his native place, Taki, and reaches about four in the afternoon. As he nears his house he chances to see his wife bathing in the pond:

...to his delight he saw his dearest Sarala sitting on the steps of the pond immersed up to neck in water and washing her face. She looked to him as beautiful as any lotus in that pond. A momentary sweet smile played upon her lips as she saw him, and then she drew her veil, as there was another young lady at a short distance from her. Hem Chandra smiled and went towards his house... not venturing to speak to his wife as she was not alone (2-3) (Italics mine).

The culture specific act of not speaking to one’s own wife in the presence of others is outlined in detail as we see that even after reaching home Hem does not meet his wife (though yearning in his heart to meet her as he is returning after eight months) until it is night. Meanwhile, the author describes how Sarala enters the house in wet clothes by the back door and how she dresses herself. As Hem enters his house he is greeted by his uncle, and when he shows him the articles he has so assiduously purchased, his uncle is not too happy, opining that “in younger days we wanted only the necessaries of life and things that were useful and substantial. You purchased the ribbons. They are pretty and the ladies like them very much, but are they necessary?” (4). There seems to be a clear difference of priorities between Hem and his uncle, which fuels this kind of an inter-generational conflict.

In a remarkably Modernist technique of story telling, the second chapter moves back in time. Here, we are told of Hem’s early life. His father having passed away just
after he had passed the matriculation examination (securing a first division) he had to
give up his hopes of further study and of entering the medical profession. Instead, he had
to start looking for a job and after some time found himself the job of “a weighing sircar
in the office of a merchant” (6). When he entered the job he got some valuable advice
from his cousin and from “some old servants of the firm”: he should not be “pushing”,
should be meek and obedient, *should not talk to Sahebs of the firm in good English or
write good English* (7) (Italics mine). This last counsel raises questions on the much
maligned “Babu-English”, which I have discussed in some length in Chapter Four
above. Why should a sircar like Hem be prevented from speaking or writing “good
English”? Was it an unwritten law in order to boost the ego of the Saheb? Then, how far
was the comical “Babu-English” a natural actuality, and how far was it a
synthetic/simulated/fake pretension/construct?

Hem thus bade “adieu to all noble sentiments and high ideas which he had
formed at his school, and entered the fold with the meekness of a domesticated lamb”
(7). But he continued to study at night both Sanskrit and English, “not in the hope of
writing and speaking it like an Englishman but for acquirement of knowledge on various
subjects” (7). Thus, English is not an end in itself, but the means of attaining a higher
end, the acquisition of knowledge. The author tells how Hem’s marriage was arranged
by his uncle who was himself in the urgency of securing a third wife after the death of
his second one. Though totally unaware of his marriage beforehand, Hem was only too
happy to have secured “so sweet, so fair, so frank” a wife. After his marriage he took up
the job of a private tutor in the evenings in order to supplement his income.
The third chapter moves forward to the present. After taking his "jalkhabar", Hem goes out to meet his friends who are eager to hear the "affairs of the town". Without naming it, this part of the narrative captures the essence of adda (intelligent gossip/chat on diverse social, political, religious, or literary issues), a typically Bengali characteristic, as it occurs in small social gatherings among friends. In Lal Behari Day's *Recollections of My School Days*, the word *adda* comes up in the following context: "We put up in an *adda*, or inn, bathed, cooked our food, ate and drank... and laid ourselves on the ground".12

In his remarkable discourse "Adda: A Discourse of Sociality", Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that the word *adda* is translated by the Bengali linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay as signifying both "a place" for "careless talk with boon companions" and "the chats of intimate friends" (*Provincializing Europe* 180). Chakrabarty asserts that "The custom of men gathering together... to talk informally about all kinds of things affecting their lives is an old tradition in rural Bengal" (188). *Adda* becomes the space for critiquing colonialism. This informal gathering of friends does not carry the baggage of a formal meeting/sabha, but yet is a site where colonialism is being critiqued/interrogated. We must note here that Hem’s *addas* take place when he returns to his village from his work place the city of Calcutta. If we recall that the village provides some kind of a respite for Hem from the demanding, lonely life in the city, then we may also realize that this intimate chit-chat with his friends is an essential part of village-life that Hem longs to return to. Hem represents that first group of young educated men who went to the colonial city to earn a living but who could identify “coming home” only with returning to the village.
Soon the conversation veers to the subject of the Hindu religion. When one of Hem’s friends says that they should listen to what the Christian Missionaries say about the Hindu religion, another of them retorts,

The Missionaries may be learned, but I do not understand how, in the first place, they can help us to understand a religion which is not theirs. In the second place, believing as they do many extravagant things written in their Scriptures, the Ark of Noah as an instance, are they the persons to decide for us any questions that puzzles us? Have they studied our Scriptures? (12).

The text questions the jurisdiction of the Missionaries in discoursing on a subject of which they know little. It interrogates the “logical” legitimacy of European/Euro-centric assumptions about other cultures/religions. When the speaker asks Hem’s opinion, Hem agrees that one should not seek explanations of Hinduism from Christian Missionaries as Hinduism is a complex religion, with many facets that are not comprehensible to a foreigner: “the Hindu religion has so many different phases or stages that it staggers even one born in the religion to clearly understand them... A foreign Missionary understands little or nothing of it and sees the religion as a homogeneous whole from its lowest side” (13-14). Kshetrapal here already contests the European tendency to homogenize non-West. More than a century later it is this kind of a confrontation that gained theoretical currency in Bhabha’s Nation and Narration (1990), where Bhabha challenges the tendency to treat postcolonial countries as a homogeneous block. He argues against the assumption that there is or was a shared identity amongst ex-colonial states. Identifying a relationship of antagonism and
ambivalence between colonisers and the colonised, Bhabha argues that all senses of
nationhood are narrativized.

The person who raises questions on the authenticity of Hinduism is thus
reprimanded: "Your Sahebs ought to respect the feelings of their Hindu friends and not
talk of things which they have not studied. But that is no reason why you should talk in
that style. By copying some Europeans you belie both your birth and your intellect" (15).

The next chapter takes the reader back to the domestic scene. We see Hem for
the first time with his wife. When he retires to his room for the night Hem sees Sarala
engrossed in reading a book of Agamani songs.13 The act of Sarala’s reading is
significant as it represents the contemporary social reality where educated husbands like
Hem would take initiative to try and educate their wives themselves. This was the time
when women’s education was one of the most popular subjects of social reform.

Hem “approached her stealthily and from behind took her head in both hands
and turning round kissed her over and over. Sarala put the book by, and greeted her
husband with a pan which she put into his mouth” (16). The next part of the narrative
delves on the conversation of Hem and Sarala on agamani songs and the puja. Sarala
asks Hem to pen some agamani songs himself to which Hem replies that he could only
write agamani songs when he would be a parent himself. The agamani songs essentially
domesticate goddess Durga as a daughter returning to her parental home from her
husband. Thus Durga the goddess becomes palpable as one’s own deer daughter. When
Hem says that for writing an agamani one has to be a parent, he articulates this
essentially Bengali sentiment associated with agamani.
Chapters Five to Nine are a detailed description of the Puja from Saptami to Dashami, Bijoya and Bisarjan. In Chapter Five the author outlines the concept of goddess Durga as Mohamaya (“inimitable love”) and as the “Reliever of the distress of humanity”, “born of the incomparable love and devotion of the Hindus” (20). There follows detailed description of the Saptami Puja being performed, the Homa and the Arati.

Chapter Six opens on Ashtami morning and fervently describes the rituals of Ashtami, “holiest of the holy days”, from morning till night. The next chapter opens on Mohanavami, “the last day of the great Puja”. In the afternoon Hem is asked to lend a hand in feeding the poor which he does with alacrity. The scene of the hundreds of poor people being fed to their satisfaction is described in much detail and takes up the greater portion of this chapter. We are then told of the jatras that last “till dawn of the following day”. Chapter Eight begins with Bijoya—“sweetest day in the Hindu calendar—the day for friendly greetings and exchange of tokens of love and good will ... (28)”. Hem takes the blessings of his mother, uncle and aunt and goes to meet his friends. After the exchange of Bijoya greetings they sit down for a chat/adda and the conversation turns to the affairs of the country.

They talk of the poverty of the country, the “indolence” of the people, and the “political agitations” and the huge amount of money spent in them. One of the speakers, who is not identified by the author, says that “The leaders of political agitations lead people to think that they are going to do something very great for the country, and the people subscribe under the spell spread by them. Is this not patriotism?” (29), he asks contemptuously. Another person says “Alas for poor misguided India... while thousands
and thousands are starving and thousands dying from bad living and want of clothing to protect themselves from inclemencies of weather, our leaders are spending money to fight for additional memberships in the councils of the State?” (30)

When Hem is asked for his opinion, he says that,

It is no doubt good sometimes for the people to take part in certain agitations of an important character with a view to remove certain grievances and there should be competent men to deal with such subjects: but it grieves me to see school boys, clerks, petty traders and school masters joining political movements, and as a consequence the boys are getting disobedient, clerks losing their devotedness to works, traders their energies, and school masters losing better employment in their leisure hours… a spirit of rude independence has entered almost all classes of people to disturb the social stratification of ages” (30-31).

Once more we see that *adda* becomes the site for voicing opinions and colonial interrogation. In the above extract Hem speaks of the needlessness of people of all walks of life getting involved in political movements, but at the same time he also recognizes the importance of “certain agitations”.

The next chapter opens on the day of Bisarjan (immersion of the goddess). The author captures very well the nuances of the sentiment associated with the *Bisarjan*:

...the faces of the images which looked divinely bright a day before, now wore a touchingly sweet, farewell look. Everyone prayed to the Goddess to come to the village a year after, and hands were raised to bow to her. The strings which bound the images to the poles by which they were
carried, were untied, and the images were slowly moved to the waters of the river. The drums beat. A large number of able bodied men stood on all sides of the images to raise them gently and then consign them to the waters. The ornaments shone brightly in the golden beams of the setting sun; the mouths of the images still sweet with the powdered pan and their hands still holding sweetmeats were visible for a while and then sank forever. The everlasting waters flowed on in solemn stillness (31).

The author here successfully captures the mood of solemn sadness that descends on the devotees at the time of the Bisarjan. After this we see how Hem and Sarala exchange Bijoya greetings:

A dish full of sweetmeats was before her. As Hem Chandra came she rose to take a sweet from the dish to put it in his mouth while he took another to put it in hers and then kissed her lovingly. This was a moment of supreme happiness with the couple—too delicious—too sacred to be described (32).

This moment of conjugal bliss is a rare one in contemporary writing. Indeed this is the only text where the amorous/romantic aspect of a marital relationship is given so much space. While most authors choose to remain reticent in this matter, Kshetrapal is quite unreserved in drawing the picture of conjugal bliss, not only here but in earlier chapters as well. He participates in the “the newly imagined (or perhaps newly re-imagined) idea of intimacy and friendship between husbands and wives, men and women, in their shared domestic world” (Walsh, Families 21) which was a powerful theme in the late nineteenth century discourse on Bengali women and their worlds.
After the exchange of Bijoya Hem and Sarala discuss the jatra at Mitter’s house and Hem tries to tutor his wife about the inner meaning of the piece performed: “you heard the opera... and saw the dances... but you did not try to understand the piece.” Sarala readily obliges that “When you say, I really did not understand.” This exchange is typical of the many conduct and “how to” books that were much popular at the time. These books were often written in the form of a dialogue between an all-knowing husband who took it as his duty to instruct his ignorant wife.

The titles of these texts were commonly “The Bengali Wife”, “A Husband’s Advice to his Wife”, “Lakshmi of the House” and “Conversations with the Wife” (Walsh, “As the Husband, So the Wife: Old Patriarchy, New Patriarchy and Misogyny in one late nineteenth century domestic science manual “ Families, 4). Walsh says that these conduct books were “shaped” by twin impulses: “...a desire for new patriarchal controls over women in a context marked out from the extended family’s domain; and the second, a wish for friendship and intimacy (and romantic love) within marriage relations (21).

Though not a conduct book in any way, Sarala has glimpses of the idea of what an ideal wife should be like. Thus Sarala is contrasted with Hem’s aunt Jagadamba, who is a foil to Sarala in every way. She is not pretty like Sarala, neither does she fit in with the conventional idea of an ideal Hindu wife. Early in the text we are told that Jagadamba was only four years older to Sarala and that she did not like Sarala much because at the time of her own marriage she had desired to be married to Hem rather than his uncle who was much older than her. We also see that when Hem and Sarala are in their room, Sarala asks Hem if he can hear the sound of foot-steps. When Hem
enquires whose foot-steps can it be, Sarala replies, “Perhaps aunt’s. Mother has gone to bed.” Hem asks why aunt should be there, to which Sarala replies, “To play the part of an eavesdropper.” Eavesdropping as well as the disparity in the age of the husband and the wife were two of the commonest topics on which a Bengali wife was discoursed in the conduct books. Walsh quotes from *Bangali Bou (The Bengali Wife)* by Purnachandra Gupta: “An old man cannot become the husband of a young wife’s dreams and for this reason it can be seen that the young wife of an old woman is usually an adulteress” (16).

Again, in *Strir Prati Svamir Upadesh (A Husband’s Advice to his Wife)* there is a chapter called “Eavesdropping” where “the eavesdropping at issue is the spying upon other family members in intimate conversation or in the act of making love” (Walsh: 16).

Incidentally, Jagadamba is also alleged to eavesdrop when Hem and Sarala are in “intimate conversation”.

That Jagadamba is a strong willed woman is also evident from her refusal to comply with everything her husband says. Thus she goes to the *Mohanavami* night *Jatra* in spite of her husband’s refusal to allow her to go. Not only does she go all by herself, without her husband’s “permission”, but she also returns when she wants to, on the day of *Bijoya*: “Jagadamba returned to her husband on this day to her wifely duties, and the old man was supremely happy. He promised his wife a new pair of excellent *Sari* on the day of *Lakshmi Puja.*” (28).

To return to the narrative, after Hem and Sarala have exchanged *Bijoya* greetings and discussed the *jatra*, Sarala falls down in a swoon and sees a vision that a sage is giving “so much gold” to Hem. When she gains consciousness, Sarala can only vaguely recall the vision, but that night Hem too sees a similar dream where a “venerable man”
tells him to go to Pareshnath Hill: "there you would fall into a strange company and then your wishes will be fulfilled" (36). It is from this point that the narrative takes a turn from realism to mysticism. Hem takes the journey to Pareshnath and there he meets a band of Kapaliks, whose rituals and modes of worship take up considerable space in the text. Kshetrapal explains the rationale behind the Tantric mode of worship with wine, meat and women: "the object of the worship was to show that those which were vulgarly supposed to be temptations were not so to this band of worshippers" (42-3). Among the Bhoyrabis, is a beautiful young woman, the wife of the chief of the Kapalik band. Her name is Indumati. Her beauty attracts Hem as soon as he sees her and she too falls in love with him. When her husband and the rest of the bhoyrabs go to the Siddhasram, Indumati tells Hem that she had been sold to the chief and how she has fallen in love with Hem. She urges Hem to take her with him to the Siddhasram, which he refuses saying that they are both married. Next morning Hem quietly leaves the place and goes in search of the Siddhasram. When he reaches the asram, he is warmly welcomed by the siddhapurusha, who tells Hem that he is glad that he did not yield to the temptation of Indumati. He also tells Hem later on Hem will come to know of his previous birth, and of his relation to Indumati in that life. As for the present the siddhapurusha tells Hem that he will give him enough wealth to fulfil all his wishes. He tells Hem that after twelve years when his wife and mother will be dead, Hem will come back to the asrami, and "remain with me till you are sufficiently educated. I shall then cast off this body, but I shall continue to watch over you till you are advanced, as I have been watching you since your birth" (48). After this Hem is given much gold and many precious stones with which he returns to Calcutta.
The narrator then says that Hem brings his wife and mother to Calcutta: “he built a Temple and an asylum for orphans, widows and aged. He encouraged agriculture and instituted a fund for the relief of good men in trouble, and promulgated *Chaitanya Dharma*” (49). Hem continued to serve in his temple when one day, after a year, Indumati comes and stands before him. She asks his permission to pass the rest of her life in the temple. Hem says that he cannot deny her the permission as he is deeply touched by her affection. The narrative comes to a close with Hem telling Indumati, “I know not how related we were in our previous life—the *Siddhapurusha* did not tell me all; there seems to have existed some bond of affinity between us, and that bond let us spiritually develop here” (50).

It is very strange that we hear nothing of Sarala after Hem’s return from the *asram*, except that she was brought to Calcutta. Since the narrative is named after her, it is justifiable to expect that something more explicit should have been told about her. It is strange how Sarala is almost erased towards the end of the narrative. In fact, she seems to become extinct the moment her pre-mature death is foretold by the *siddhapurusha*. Though Hem was seen to be much in love with his wife at the beginning of the text, towards the end we see no lamentation or grief in him when he is told that she will die in twelve years time. Indeed, the narrative ends with Hem speaking of developing a bond, albeit spiritual, with Indumati.

*Sarala* provides the reader a glimpse of the domestic life in a moffusil, it captures the essence of the *Durga Puja*, the greatest festival on the Bengali calendar, it contains significant dialogue on questions of religion and political agitations, and it also throws light on the perception of women in nineteenth century Bengal. It is the only text
in nineteenth century Indian Writing in English in Bengal that shows the picture of a romantic, intimate, conjugal relationship—a relationship that was being shaped by the changing socio-economic scenario in the world outside.

**Hingana: The Young Witch of Mandala**

*Hingana: The Young Witch of Mandala* (henceforth *Hingana*) tells the story of the beautiful, spirited, young Gond woman (girl), Hingana, who falls in love with a prince in disguise, Kumar Birkeshwar. Apparently a love story, the narrative is of significance to us because of its engagement with tribal characters (the Gonds), and the remarkable portrayal of the life and customs of the Gonds. The engagement with tribal characters and society is a recurrent feature in Shoshee Dutt’s work (*The Republic of Orissa, The Wild Tribes of India*). Other than Shoshee, Chakravarty is the only author of the time who writes about tribal characters. The text preludes the works of Mahasweta Devi who has persistently written about the oppression of tribal communities in India (*Aranyer Adhikar (Rights of the Forest), Nairite Megh (Clouds in the Southwestern Sky)*). However, Chakravarty’s text does not talk of any kind of oppression, neither is it a political text like Shoshee’s *Republic*. *Hingana* belongs to the genre of romance, and charts the love story of Hingana and Kumar Birkeshwar. It is the only fully developed love story (there is a hint of a love story in *Republic*) written in its time. But what is most significant is that the narrative visualizes the coming together of the marginalized tribal community (as represented by Hingana and her family) with the mainstream Rajputs (as represented by Kumar Birkeshwar) for the foundation of a society based on
love. Chakravarty's text thus becomes significant not just for its ethnographical detailing, but also for its very act of incorporating tribal characters in his vision of India.

The narrative begins by setting the Gond tribe in their social, historical and geographical context. In the manner of a social historian/anthropologist the narrator tells origin and development of the Gonds:

The district of Mandala contains some of the most picturesque hill tracts in Central India. It is divided into six administrative units... The whole district undulates with the valleys of numerous rivers and is inhabited chiefly by the Gond tribes which at one time ruled Central India... the honest and simple life of the Gond tribes are subjects of interesting study such as few places in India afford (K. Chakravarty, Sarala and Hingana 51).15

The story opens with the picture of Hingana playing on the flute:

On one of the hills characteristic of the country, there stood one fine evening one early autumn of 1841, a blooming girl of sixteen summers with a flute in her hand... A number of cows grazed round her. The beams of the setting sun and the fresh mountain air imparted a colour to her cheek and a soft light to her eyes, which increased as she looked upon the beautiful prospect of hills and valleys before her. The pollen of the full blown flowers fell upon the tresses of her dark hair and her garments as she stood, but she was unmindful of it, so interested she was in the evening scene (51-2).
A handsome youth comes up to her and requests her to play another tune. The youth is a Rajput as is evident from his princely physical appearance, his sacred thread and his manners, but what he does not reveal to Hingana is that he is really a prince, the son of the neighbouring king.

Hingana does not play the tune for him but promises to do so another day. The youth turns up a second time when Hingana is with her friend Aruna. He now tells her that he would like to go with her to her father's place and be her servant. Hingana understands that the implication of this is that he has fallen in love with her and as per the Gond custom wants to serve her family:

Marriage, with the Gonds is not so much a religious as a social institution... The bridegroom is required to take the consent of the bride and to propose to her by making a present of choores or bracelets. He is also required to pay a certain amount of money to the father of the bride and give a feast to the headmen of the place where he is to be married. If he be a poor man, he is required to serve in the family of the bride for a period extending from seven months to two years (62-63).

The above passage is characteristic of the text's ethnographic detailing of the customs and manners of the Gonds. Throughout the text there are many more such anthropological passages:
into various doctrines and modes of worship, giving rise to various religious sects, their intermarriage with the descendants of the Aryan conquerors gradually raised them higher and higher in the social scale (61).

Coming back to the narrative, Hingana seeks and receives her father’s permission in employing the youth. However, we learn that she is already engaged to be married to her cousin Udoy, who has made her a gift of choories, and is now gone abroad to make money. Hingana’s father’s assent is thus only half-hearted and though he takes the youth into employment, he harbours plans to dismiss him on the slightest pretence of disobedience. The youth sincerely performs all his work, but Hingana’s friend Aruna begins to be jealous of her that she should have two lovers. Her jealousy is further fuelled when a messenger from Udoy brings rich gifts for Hingana:

When Hingana will see all these, would she give up Udoy? ... I used to love her before but now I hate her. She will either take Udoy ultimately after this flirtation or his ornaments and run away with this good-looking penniless chap. What a game! If she fly with the ornaments, I may get Udoy and he would give me better things when he returns home. But supposing she consents to marry him, then he will not have me. Burnt faced girl—my rival—my enemy. Each day is adding fresh grace to her countenance, while I, who am striving so much to appear beautiful, am getting worse and worse... I will try my best to ruin her (75).

Thus, one day when a messenger from Udoy comes with gifts for Hingana, she tells the messenger that Hingana is being false to Udoy. Udoy is enraged to hear
everything and comes back to Mandala. Meanwhile, the youth suddenly leaves Hingana's house when some messengers come to inform him of his sister’s illness. When he does not return even after a few days have passed Hingana feels worried and goes to the hills to pray to Ghaneshyam Dev. Aruna follows her and takes this as an opportunity to implicate her as a witch responsible for the not coming of rains in Mandala:

... Aruna thought for some days as to how she could injure Hingana... all at once one day an idea came to her mind ... It so happened at the time of which we are speaking, that there was the bitter prospect of an entire failure of crops all over the district of Mandala for the want of sufficient rains... Aruna thought that this was the most fitting opportunity to declare that Hingana was a witch and that the drought was brought about by her witchcraft... she would declare that Hingana learnt witchcraft from Kumar, and that she goes every evening alone on a hill to mutter incantations to the setting sun to absorb all waters in the sky and earth...

(102).

Aruna goes to the local priest and asks him to proclaim Hingana to be a witch. The priest realises that this is a matter of personal grudge and he bargains with Aruna: “A kiss everyday about this time as long as Hingana is not accused, or else I shall tell her [Hingana] all about this incident tomorrow” (106).

Aruna complies with the priest’s evil policy, and after a few days the priest publicly proclaims that Hingana is a witch and that she has been taught witchcraft by the
youth who has now suddenly disappeared. The people readily believe the priest and it is decided that Hingana will be publicly tried:

The ignorant men at once believed the priest when they were assured by him that the youth, Kumar, had taught her sorcery. A general hue and cry was raised in a very short time in the village against the innocent girl (111).

However, Kumar comes to know of the entire conspiracy and on the day of Hingana's trial he appears in his princely garb and rescues Hingana. He places a crown of diamonds on her head and she becomes his queen:

At length there came, at an easy pace, a handsome and manly youth riding on a superb mare, with a crown of diamonds on his head and a string of pearls round his neck, while a naked sword hung by his side. He was followed by five chosen horsemen. ... Hingana recognised in the youth, her lover, and the servant of her family who for the sake of her hand had often toiled from morning to evening, doing menial work. She recognised him, wept, and hung down her head. The youth approached her with tenderness, raised the net carefully from over her head, took the crown of diamonds from his own brow, and placed it at her feet. He then took it up and put it on her head and tenderly assisted her to mount his mare. This done, he commanded his five attendants to bring the priest before him, proclaiming to the astonished multitude who he was, and what he had been in the house of Hingana and said that at the instigation
of a young woman the priest had fabricated the false charge against the
innocent Hingana who was no more a witch than he a wizard (120).

This text is a romance that traces the love story of Hingana and her prince in
disguise, but woven into the tale is a story of feminine jealousy and conspiracy. No
woman character in the whole body of nineteenth century Indian Writing in English in
Bengal is as astute as Aruna. She comes across as a real woman, not inherently evil, but
one who is driven by human temptations and who can implicate her friend when she
feels threatened by her. Aruna uses her body to make the priest do as she says. Aruna is
a foil to Hingana, who is some kind of a perfect woman, in every way. Aruna is not
beautiful like Hingana, nor is she so naïve. She has a mind of her own and from the very
beginning conjectures that Kumar is concealing something about himself. At first she is
quite friendly with Hingana; her jealousy is aroused only when she finds that Aruna has
two lovers whereas she has none. She clearly does not have the sympathies of the author,
but even then no conventional “punishment” is meted out to her. Even at the end of the
narrative when her conspiracy is exposed she remains unrepentant:

She hung down her face. Kumar, in a sterner voice, asked her to explain
why she had tempted the priest to accuse Hingana as a witch. She spoke
not a word, she neither knelt nor sued for mercy, but remained doggedly
silent (124).

In order to implicate Hingana, Aruna uses an age-old strategy: she conspires
with the priest to proclaim that Hingana is a witch. Allegations of witch-craft against
women have seen numerous women being tortured to death, and it is this cruel fate that
Aruna plans for Hingana. Aruna exploits the strong socio-cultural superstitions of her
tribe: the *World Culture Encyclopaedia* states that “Gonds also believe in the evil eye and in witchcraft. A witch is usually a woman who by her evil power brings sickness and death to people in the neighborhood. When discovered, she is publicly disgraced and expelled from the village or even killed.”16 In “Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial Western India”, Ajay Skaria cites an incident in a tribal village in western India in 1846 where a woman is pronounced a witch and slowly tortured to death. Skaria observes that this was “not an exceptional case”. He points out that even a “casual perusal of standard compilations of caste practices, such as R. E. Enthoven's *Tribes and Castes of the Bombay Presidency* or P. V Russell and Hira Lal's *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces*, indicates that belief in witchcraft was quite widespread in colonial India.”

Skaria develops the notion of “gratuitous violence”, in order to “take better cognizance of randomness and unpredictability” associated with witchcraft. He assigns the term to violence that is “antisocial -- worse, asocial: for an act to be truly gratuitous, it has to be quite independent of social causality”, contending that it is because of this independence that “the author of mystical versions of gratuitous violence is relatively invisible, motivated principally by the desire for violence itself.” For Skaria what makes “gratuitous violence so profoundly dangerous and arbitrary” is the “asocial and potentially unprovoked aggression”. He concludes that “Thus, perceived as a unilateral act, gratuitous violence is necessarily illegitimate” (*Past and Present*, Vol 155 no. 1 109-141).

Skaria contrasts “gratuitous violence” with “reciprocal violence”, where “the performer of the violent act usually sees himself or herself as reacting to violent or
potentially violent situations or acts.” If we attempt to explain our text with the help of
Skaria’s model we see that Aruna’s act of violence against Hingana is a curious blend of
“gratuitous” and “reciprocal” violence: apparently she seems to harm Hingana out of no
provocation. Yet if we analyse her situation we may see that she does feel threatened by
Hingana: by her beauty, by the fact of her having two lovers, by the fact that Udoy has
brought rich gifts for her.

The text ethnographically showcases the socio-cultural position of the Gonds,
the largest tribe in India. Witchcraft is an essential element of Gond culture. But while
those alleged to be witches always had a cruel fate, the element of romance in the story
saves Hingana from her fate by the timely appearance of her lover—Kimar Birkeshwar.
The marriage of Hingana, a Gond and Birkeshwar, a Rajput prince also symbolises the
coming together of the tribals and the mainstream high caste Hindus in the vision of a
comprehensive society. Chakravarty visualises the weaving together of these two strands
of Indian society.
Notes and References

1 In India, both feminism and nationalism emerged from the social reform movements of the nineteenth century. These social reform movements that first appeared in Bengal before spreading to other parts of India, originated within the Indian intelligentsia and spread to sections of the middle classes. It was partly inspired by Hindu revivalism and partly by liberal ideas: “As an Indian bourgeois society developed under western domination, this class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a pre-modern or primitive identity” (Kumar: 1993). Sati was abolished by the 1829 Sati Abolition Act. In 1856 Hindu Widows Remarriage Act was passed. The 1872 Marriage Act passed as a result of campaigning by reform movement, raised the minimum age of marriage to fourteen for women and to eighteen for men. The 1874 Right to Property Act gave widows a life interest in her husband's property, but as yet she could not dispose of it. Sons, not daughters, inherited from their fathers. In 1891 the age of consent for girls was raised from ten to twelve years. The legislation was opposed by B. G. Tilak as example of British interference in Indian customs. Child marriage raised the most controversy – Indian feminists and reformers, European missionaries and British press all campaigned for reform. Indian campaigners included Behramji Merwanji Malabari & M. G. Ranade. Behram Malabari argued that it resulted in enfeebled children being born. Opponents of the campaigns included B. G. Tilak who was an extreme Hindu nationalist and orthodox on social questions. Early marriage justified by those who supported it as controlling wantonness in young people and binding young girl to her husband’s family, which was seen as supportive of both joint family system and of caste system. Jayawardena (1995) says that “Indian nationalists argued that to be politically credible, social reform of unacceptable practices was necessary, while the British often found an excuse for the continuation of imperial rule in the “social evils” prevalent in India” (91).


3 See my “Introduction” above.

5 In 1996 Ravi Dayal Publishers brought out an edition of *Rajmohan's Wife* with an "Afterword" and notes by Meenakshi Mukherjee. All subsequent references to the text in this chapter are from this edition.

6 This kind of a tussle between duty and passion is common in many of Bankim's Bengali novels.

7 For details on *Kulin* Brahmins, see page 97 above.

8 All subsequent references to Toru Dutt’s texts (letters, *Bianca*) are from this edition.

9 See Chapter Six above.

10 I have a suspicion that this could be the same Kshetrapal Chakravarti who is one of the founders of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata. However I have not been able to ascertain the same.

11 All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.


13 Kshetrapal describes the *agamani* as ‘a small poem describing the advent of the goddess’ (16).

14 *Chaitanya Dharma* was promulgated by Lord Chaitanya, believed to be an incarnation of *Vishnu*. He was born in Nadia district of Bengal. Kshetrapal Chakravartiy delivered a lecture on ‘Life of Sri Chaitanya’, at the sixth annual meeting of the Sri Chaitanya Yoga Samaj on the 17th March, 1897. The text was later on published, a copy of which is to be found in the National Library. The lecture testifies Kshetrapal’s interest in Sri Chaitanya.

15 All subsequent references are to this edition.