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**Authority and Tradition: A Study of (pseudo)-Feminist Voice in
Bankim Chandr Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife***

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Abstract

Babu Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya is a renowned name in the history of Indian struggle for Independence. He is the writer of the national song 'Vande Mataram' of India. This song created an effervescence among Indians in that era to be united for the freedom of their country and to break together the shackles of slavery. Apart from this he is a strong signature in Bangla Literature. This is disappointing to know that Rajmohan's Wife is his only novel written in English though it records the true picture of its time at its best. Authority and tradition are two words which seem synonymous to each other. Tradition apparently denotes a continuation and acceptance of norms and myth in society. It also showcases a peculiar kind of imitation. When tradition becomes an integral part of normativity it also exhibits a strong authority towards those traditions. Patriarchy may be the similar kind of traditional authority that was spontaneously born due to the flow of imitation, approval and power. This paper tries to explore those issues closely related to authority a form of power and tradition as an internalized system in determining and demeaning the position and status of women in the early decades of the 19th century India. Indeed, India was facing the high tides of upheaval in its social, political and cultural milieu that became the fundamental factors in generating turmoil in the lives of the people. Our paper attempts to explore the feminist or pseudo-feminist voice in the novel along with its connection with authority and tradition.

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The era of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was a period where in the status of a women in general was of an inferior one to that of men. Throughout the world during the 19th century, the scenario of social predicament was considered to be seen as an age of extreme conservatism. The Victorian age (1837-1901) was seen in England as one part of time where the lives of women was conformed to position of greater credibility only through the process of entailment. Lady Catherine de Burgh of Jane Austen's *Pride and prejudice* who is pompous is said to be in greater accessibility of regard and prestige because of the wealth she possesses. While on the other hand Mrs. Bennet was in agitation against the society for the condition that was laid for her and her daughters by the society. She was in a stiff competition towards the other women in order to get for her daughters the finest men of good fortune. The whole subject was about holding status which only entailment can it be accessed. There was but an utter discrepancy of social harmony both between inter-class and intra-class. On the other hand, during the perusal of the narrative of the novel *Rajmohan's Wife* one can easily feel a strong voice of a feminist who demands and questions the equal rights of women in the society. But it is doubtful whether the voice is feminist or just pseudo-feminist as we have Matangani-a strong woman character who seems to be the protagonist of the novel. She is beautiful, she is outspoken, she is courageous, she is brave, she is tactful, she is a fighter and moreover poses the question where should I go? Where is the room of my own? But when it comes to scrutinize the other women characters in the novel as Hema, Matangini's friend, Kanak, Champak their condition is pathetic. A person that claims to be a feminist yet ignores the critical point of feminism, equality. Pseudo-Feminists will tend to blather on about how terrible male are, or assume how men do not face social issues in regards to their gender. Pseudo-feminism may be defined as a term which exposes the mere hollow effervescence and loquacious pretending of being a feminist or a person who is concerned seriously for feminist voice and their rights.

India during the age of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was at the peak of social outbreak of class struggle and human rights agitation. The status of human rights was not only confined to women but also men. Women suffered the stigma of submissive fallacy of faithfulness towards their husband "swami" who almost received a godly figure. The idea of faithfulness of a wife towards her husband was taken to a notion to which she may even submit her agency of rationality and reasoning sensibility which may serve her the consciousness of individual freedom. Her reason for existence was predestined by the conventional social set-up, that she was to remain as an obedient daughter, a faithful wife and an agreeable and submissive mother to her son in her old age. Women were to suppress their dignity and their struggles for pursuit of identity for the sake of their husbands. "In India women marry the

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husband's family instead of marrying the husband alone", is a statement made by many scholars on Indian feminism. In practical it is the mother-in-law who states this law and monitors the daughter-in-law. The conventional notion of identification of a girl towards the husband's family is considered only to a criterion wherein daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law are in the making, but never of an honoring daughter and audible mother by choice.

Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* represents the emergence of a new woman with Matangini as new spirit. She is not merely Rajmohan's wife, as Paranjape views, "but the 'spirit' or personification of modern India itself" (149). Claiming *Rajmohan's Wife* as an allegory of modern India, Paranjape continues that "what the novel actually offers is a way of mapping the Indian society of that period on a complex grid of ideological, political, social and cultural coordinates. The novel accomplishes this through richly textured negotiation of cultural choices for a newly emergent society which, for the sake of convenience, we may call modern India" (147). Ganeswara Mishra holds that Bankimchandra was "deeply involved in the social problem of his time, and one of his favourite themes is the emancipation of Hindu housewives from their age-old suffering and superstition"(6).

The husband's or man's fallacy towards the marital life is very ironical. The faithfulness of the wife is wrongly conceived in Indian patriarchy, that when a wife marries her husband she becomes the man's property. He would direct and monitor his wife according to his whims and fancies. The history of India lays a testimony in advocating the ugly past. Sati system, child marriage, dowry, etc. were some of the few which were brought along to caste system or the *vern* system. Similarly, in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, Matangini who is the protagonist, is initially projected typically as an Indian who is supposed to be unaffected by sensitiveness of rationality and reasoning. The first appearance however becomes contrasting with the unfolding of her bravery and chastity towards her feelings and emotions. The celebrating consciousness in her is one of the main theme (feminism) in the novel. There are however people like Rajmohan who takes into hand the fallacy of patriarchy into consciousness. He never did permit his wife to go out for any social work. This instance is similar to that of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' where in the domineering husband finds it too much to stoop down towards his wife in restricting her smile to every passerby. At the end he kills her claiming that he had done a work approving 'Bravo!' for him. His knowledge and acceptance of himself towards the society tangles him to cost such crime. However, his authority and power blindfold his affection and care towards his wife for consideration. Rajmohan similarly, acclaims his conduct as a socially responsible action by setting his wife's liberty to go and meet people around places. An ideal husband of the society is what he thinks of himself and makes his wife accountable for trespassing by scorning her and physically abusing her.

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“Have I not forbidden you a thousand times?...” then, wretched girl, where did you go? (*Rajmohan’s Wife*, p12) he shouts, jumps on his wife grips her by the wrist and raises his other hand to strike her. Matangini seems to be utterly helpless and submissive to her husband who threatens her: “I’ll keep you till death (*Rajmohan’s Wife*, p13)”

Her husband is a complete amalgamation of authority and tradition which proved him towards the failure of psychological response to Matangini’s condition. On confronting the subject of women’s right it is pervasive to the condition of Matangini, having her bounded by the norms and social regulation- the woman of chastity is what is to be considered conventional. However, she is competent in her expression to that of any modern woman of the present day. Her opinion is made audible and pristine when she openly expresses her love and admiration for Madhav. Hester Prynne *Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a similar character to that of Matangini. She despite having a husband or rather a man of her own, she had extra marital affair with Arthur Dimmesdale. Other than Chillingworth who was prior to him an impetuous young woman passionately vigour and confident in the decision for choosing the love, both women showed their foresightedness of life in loving and appreciating nature of love. It was in their hearts and jubilation in ecstasy over the feeling and emotion rather than their consciousness of status and prestige in society. Matangini chooses to overcome the margin of convention laid down for women that they are meant of keep quiet and rather endure the abuse and punishment from the husbands who are rather subservient and cruel in their treatment and temperament. While on the other hand Hester Prynne chooses not to speak or depend herself by supplementing the reason for her condition she was rather a contended by normalizing her condition. She did not believe that by revealing the father’s name she would regain her credibility in the society. She rather was a protector of Dimmesdale prestige and status.

For ages long, the nation has held that men have the upper hand and authority in decision making whether in family or in the society. However, Bankim’s brilliancy in moulding a character like Matangini who actually is adventurous and outspoken. She is a woman of responsibility and honour who tried to protect Madhav’s family and also got her husband Rajmohan a job on her request to Madhav. The very fact that she had accomplished the duties and workloads sanctioned to the man of the typical Indian patriarchy. She retaliates and raises her voice against patriarchy and having love for her brother-in-law is already a harbinger for the modern liberal Indian society. Despite the society’s denial of her basic rights she accommodates her rights by choosing her interests and listening to her own inner voice. It can be aptly described as her own pursuit for her happiness in contention.

Matangini, who is the heroine of the novel showed great vigour and vivaciousness in her love, not as love alone but also as a sympathy for her sister. She had to forsake her love for Madhav in order to make her sister happy. She not only wants to deceive Madhav form

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danger but also her sister form the frailty of Rajmohan's scheme to rob their house. She indeed is not a morally upright woman as par to the society's margin on ideal woman's citizenship, but however is an honest representation. A survival of love victim in order to maintain tranquility in society as well as adhere to family relation, the ability in her character gained her the right hand of the novelist to finally portray her image – a sensuously celebrating individual of modern India.

We measure the universe by our own miserable foot-rule. When we are slaves, we think that the whole universe is enslaved. Because we are in an abject condition, we think that the whole of India is in that condition. As a matter of fact, it is not so, yet it is as well to impute our slavery to the whole of India. But if we bear in mind the above fact, we can see that if we become free, India is free. And in this thought you have a definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. (Gandhi)

There is a concurrent implication to the statement made by Gandhi in regarding to freedom that is it concerning only the foreign rule without taking into account the hurdle and self-disciplining agency needed in self-governance which actually is an utmost priority for every individual. Rajmohan is in a confused state on how to go about life, he is both possessive and brutish in nature, seeking both sympathy and attention from his wife i.e. a juxtaposition of both of love and submission. However, just like how an Indian in *Hind Swaraj* cannot consider freedom only as a liberation from foreign rule (outsourced) but not from psychological regency of morality where in the treatment of inner-self is left unattended.

Rajmohan is not a mere novel to knowledge of the story or author's psyche but is rather an analysis of national adversity in downfall. The story is an exposition of the limitation of India's social and political functioning where the mindset of the masses interplay.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee made his move in widening the area of thoughts and concepts of Indian mentality of pious living and coexistence of social norms and notions, which in orthodoxy was adulterated by greed and selfish motives for advantages. The aims of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's writings is achieved by the projection of reckless character like Rajmohan who represents the ignorant India (Old India), the promising and non-conformist Matangini who rather is rebellious in nature and considered freedom at hand (New India), Madhav and Hemangini represent the flexible Indian who may become rebellious if enlightened... The novel however serves its utmost purpose in claiming the rationality and sensibility on the topic of independence that, is it only the external force or is it also the internal force that would drive out chaos of freedom (Azadi) regardless of class and caste.

To conclude the paper, we would like to say that authority and tradition are the two major concerns of the novelist which have also been given a dark shade to highlight his

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accountability in identifying the shadow of pseudo-feminism while raising our voice for feminism. His was the time when women were grappling hard to throw the heavy shackles of patriarchy and Matangani and his Nation have become true epitome of his feminist concerns. He knew it very well that until women are marginalized and subjugated, our nation can never progress. Babu Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was the writer with a vision who wanted to let the pendulum swing on the other side until it comes to the centre.

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