



PROBLEMATICS OF WRITING IN A FOREIGN TONGUE AND THE ISSUES OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION: EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE DYNAMICS IN BANKIM CHANDRA'S RAJMOHAN'S WIFE

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Abstract

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Rajmohan's Wife is a seminal work in Indian literature, celebrated for its portrayal of social dynamics and cultural nuances. Within this narrative, language serves as a pivotal element, reflecting the complexities of colonial encounters and societal hierarchies. This study delves into the treatment of language in Rajmohan's Wife, exploring how linguistic choices and conflicts shape characters' identities, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. Through close textual analysis, supplemented by historical and theoretical frameworks, this paper elucidates the multifaceted role of language in negotiating individual agency, cultural authenticity, and resistance against colonial hegemony. By examining the linguistic landscape of Rajmohan's Wife, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language operates as both a challenge and a tool for expression within colonial contexts, offering insights into broader questions of identity, power, and cultural autonomy.

Key-words: Language, Challenge, India, Colonialism.

Raja Rao in his *Foreword* to his iconic piece *Kanthapura* (1938) acknowledged the dilemma faced by Indian writers composing in a foreign language such as English demands attention and reflection: “The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.”

Raja Rao's candid acknowledgment of the challenges faced by Indian writers composing in English resonates deeply, particularly in the context of colonial India. Throughout history, native writers have grappled with the daunting task of conveying their innate sense of identity and cultural essence through the medium of the colonial power's language. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a notable figure of his time, confronted this very challenge with his pioneering English novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, published in 1864. As one of the first graduates of the University of Calcutta, where English literature had already gained a foothold, Bankim naturally absorbed influences from this foreign literary tradition. However, his transition to writing in English presented a formidable obstacle, devoid of any precedent to guide him. Despite drawing inspiration from luminaries like Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, Bankim encountered significant hurdles in expressing the Indian ethos authentically within the confines of English literature. This article endeavors to elucidate the inherent mismatches evident throughout *Rajmohan's Wife*, particularly in its semantic fields and the alignment between characters and their dialogues. The narrative reveals a palpable struggle in translating the Indian cultural landscape into English, resulting in a certain faltering quality in Bankim's prose. The characters' utterances often lack congruence with their cultural backgrounds, highlighting the difficulty in reconciling Indian sensibilities with the linguistic constraints of English.



The resurgence of interest in *Rajmohan's Wife*, exemplified by its recent reprintings such as the edition published by Ravi Dayal under Penguin Books in 1996, has sparked renewed scholarly engagement. Scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee and later Makarand Paranjape have contributed significant insights through their considerations and writings on the novel. Mukherjee, in her *Foreword* and *Afterword* to the 1996 edition, identifies specific thematic areas within the text that warrant scholarly discussion and further research. Mukherjee aptly characterizes the novel as a "potent site for discussing crucial questions about language, culture, colonization, and representation." In doing so, she underscores the novel's capacity to serve as a rich source of inquiry into broader socio-cultural and literary themes. By drawing attention to these thematic dimensions, Mukherjee invites scholars to delve deeper into the complexities of colonial discourse, linguistic dynamics, and the representation of indigenous cultures within the colonial framework.

As Mukherjee astutely observes, Bankim faced considerable obstacles in embarking upon a literary endeavor devoid of any precedent, particularly in the realm of a foreign language. Consequently, the novelist grappled with the formidable cognitive challenges intrinsic to the linguistic medium itself. This struggle permeates the entirety of the novel, manifesting in an elusive narrative voice that often eludes readers. Herein lies the clash between the social and imaginative realms depicted within the novel and the linguistic registers employed in its narrative fabric. The incongruity between language and narrative serves as a barrier, impeding the seamless flow of the work. Bankim's deliberate effort to navigate the semantic and connotative complexities inherent in transposing Indian, specifically Bengali, ethos into the English language underscores the magnitude of this challenge.

The discordance between culture and language within *Rajmohan's Wife* becomes evident from the outset of the novel. In the inaugural chapter, Bankim paints a vivid picture of the village landscape, depicting the activities of two women, Kanak and Matangini, as they journey to draw water from the river Madhumati. However, their interaction, when translated into a foreign tongue, appears stilted and lacking in spontaneity. In this instance, the language appears to be manipulated by the novelist in an effort to imbue Bengali experiences with an English sensibility. For instance, Bankim's usage of the term "Zenana" to denote the inner sanctum of the typical Bengali household seems incongruous and out of place.

In her analysis, Mukherjee suggests that the author may have presumed that English readers would be more acquainted with the broadly Orientalist term "Zenana" than the indigenous term "antahpur," which is more commonly used in Bengali contexts (Notes, *Rajmohan's Wife*, Page No.146). Subsequently, Bankim employs the Bengali term "andarmahal" on page 76, indicating a certain inconsistency in terminology selection. Similarly, the use of the word "salad" to denote leafy vegetables appears incongruous within the Bengali culinary context, where the term holds little familiarity. These instances provide clear glimpses into Bankim's arduous struggle to translate Bengali terms into English, exemplified when Matangini expresses surprise at Kanak's sudden visit to her home.

"Oh, it's Didi. What kindness! Whose face was it that I first saw on getting up this morning?"

The guest laughed back and retorted, "Who else but the person you see every morning? "At this, the face of the younger woman clouded over for a moment, while the smile half-lingered on the lips of the other. Let us describe them both at this place.



Matangini's expression appears disjointed from its intended meaning, as Bankim endeavors to translate a common Bengali idiomatic expression denoting mock-gratitude into English. This attempt results in an alien and awkward rendition, as no native English author would employ such an expression, given its absence from the English linguistic repertoire. Similarly, at the conclusion of the novel's opening chapter, Matangini mildly rebukes Kanak with the phrase "Hang you, monkey!" Here, the author's expression falls short in accurately conveying the intended sentiment. As Mukherjee observes, Bankim may be conflating the Anglo-Indian usage of "hang you" with a playful Bengali insult, "Die, burnt face" (*Mor, porar mukhi*), resulting in a discordant translation. Subsequently, Matangini's later reaction towards Kanak further exemplifies this peculiar linguistic juxtaposition- "*The young woman said angrily, "Go to Jericho! How she goes on! I would never had come with you if I had known---*" Here the term conveys no particular sense in an Indian context, particularly in the Bengali atmosphere as far as the nineteenth century India is concerned. The mention of Jericho, an ancient city alongside the Jordan River in the Old Testament's Book of Joshua, signifies a form of curse in scriptural contexts. However, within the Bengali setting of the novel, this reference may appear entirely alien to readers, lacking cultural relevance or resonance. Similarly, the phrase "by reproducing all his Billingsgate" presents an incongruous and peculiar reference within the novel's setting unless the reader possesses an intimate understanding of London life. Billingsgate, renowned as a fish market in London's East End, is notable for the colorful language employed by its fishmongers. Bankim's deliberate use of this reference within the text serves to highlight the coarse or vituperative language utilized by Rajmohan. Moreover, the novel also features the usage of archaic terms such as "thou," "thy," "thee," and "canst" by Rajmohan when addressing Matangini. These archaic terms, while consistent with historical linguistic usage, may seem unfamiliar or outdated to contemporary readers, further contributing to a sense of linguistic dissonance within the narrative.

Bankim's laboriously tedious attempt to translate the metaphor-laden Bengali and Sanskrit terms into English often puts the readers into trouble throughout the novel. The way the novelist describes the beauty of Matangini in heavy English diction is at once unnatural to the context: He praises Matangini's physical presence referring to "her dainty limbs", later her "well-rounded limbs" and "voluptuous eyes". Here Bankim seems a little more rough as the description loses its naturalness in the mechanical jargons of the language registers. His language falters when he again draws Matangini's beauty like this, "...her bloom was full of charm as that of the land-lotus half scorched and half radiant under the noonday sun." Here the image seems to be directly translated with greater effort from descriptions of the beauty of Radha in the Sanskrit texts. Moreover, in Mathur's bed-chamber the figure of Durga in the painting is described by the novelist as a "crab-like form" that goes unnatural in the context. In all these examples Bankim speaks not like a spontaneous literary personality in English but as if like an official administrator depicting his papers.

A significant concern regarding the congruence between language and culture in *Rajmohan's Wife* emerges when Matangini, a Bengali village woman, is depicted articulating her illicit love for her brother-in-law using the passionate language of English Romantic poetry, as noted by Mukherjee. Bankim's narration in this instance appears lacking in authenticity and spontaneity, with phrases such as "lily face," "delicate curls," and "spotless brow" coming across as artificial within the context of the narrative. Matangini's declaration, "Yes reproach me, Madhav...of my God on earth, on yourself," further highlights the forced integration of emotive values from English Romantic poetry into the dialogue of a Bengali villager. Consequently, the narrative loses its natural flow, and its lack of appeal ultimately leads to roughness. In contrast, Bankim's subsequent novel, *Durgeshnandini*, features a



strong-willed female protagonist seamlessly integrated into a natural Bengali setting. Here, the stark divide between medium and sensibility, evident in *Rajmohan's Wife*, is no longer a concern. This shift allows for a more harmonious fusion of language and culture, resulting in a narrative that is both authentic and compelling.

It appears that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee grappled with the challenges of language particularly acutely during the composition of the final chapters of *Rajmohan's Wife*. Towards the conclusion of the novel, the narrative language undergoes a disjointed development, leaving the reader unsettled by the abruptness of the ending. Bankim's use of English is notably imbued with an elitist bias, reflecting his primary audience of English-educated youths from Bengal's elite circles during the mid-nineteenth century. This audience demographic excluded the uneducated lower or lower-middle class of India. Sisir Kumar Das underscores this aspect in his work, *The Artist in Chains*, asserting that Bankim was confined by the socio-linguistic constraints of his time and lacked the agency to forge a new linguistic territory within a foreign tongue. By the 1870s, Bankim seemingly embraced the belief that English served as a language suited for polemics in India, rather than creative literature. His advice to Ramesh Chandra Dutt, encouraging him to write in Bengali instead of English, further underscores this conviction. In a letter, Bankim cautioned Dutt against relying on English writing for sustenance, asserting that Bengali poetry, exemplified by the works of Madhusudan, possessed greater longevity. Bankim himself recognized his limitations, as highlighted by Makarand Paranjape, and his transition to Bengali writing was not merely incidental but a deliberate and auspicious choice, both aesthetically and politically.

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