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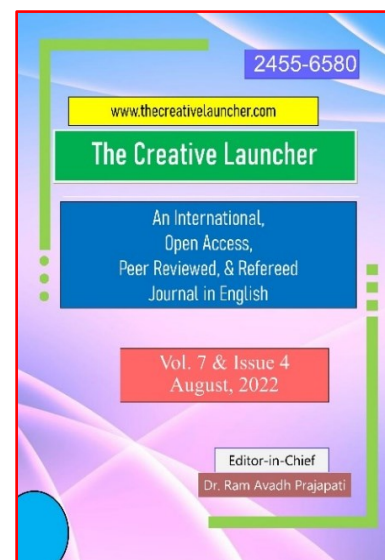
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Research Article




Nineteenth Century Domesticity and Social Contemporaneity: Exploring Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *The Poison Tree*

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Abstract

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in the novel *The Poison Tree* has entered into the boundaries of Bengali family life from his own world of historical novels and romances. The characters described in this novel are familiar, intimately related to our lives. Different streams and shades of their happiness and sorrow, experiences and consequences of their lives touch our minds. They live on the real background in which human life takes place. However, social life is not

absent there either. It is more reasonable to call the novel a domestic-social novel. This paper aims to look how Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in the novel *The Poison Tree*, has ventured into the territory of the Bengali domestic life with special focus on his depiction of the conflict between individual freedom and the social life and also how the story of the novel has been narrated in terms of social life.

Keywords: Domesticity, Family, Society, Culture, Individual freedom, Conflict, Contemporaneity, Nineteenth Century, Bengali

Originated in the nineteenth century, Bengali novel was the product of colonial encounter though it draws its subject matter from multiple and diversified literary traditions which are both native and foreign. Like its counterpart in Europe, it is associated with social, domestic and intellectual aspirations of the new bourgeoisie, the spread of print culture, the growth of urban centers, and the formation of a bourgeois readership eager for novelty and entertainment. But the conditions of formation and the development of colonial Bengal is clearly distinct from that of 18th-century Europe, making the novel both a witness and a participant in the creation of a distinctly modern Indian culture. In its expressive function, it documents not only the self-imposed limitations of this process but also its cracks and uncertainties, opening a space for ethical debate.

A child of Bengali renaissance and modernity, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is a literary forerunner of much celebrated Rabindranath Tagore, an essayist, poet, a reformer, a critic and bureaucrat during the British colonial period in India and a pioneer of Indian novels who has been widely discussed and acclaimed by the scholars. Considered as the 'father of modern novel in India, Bankim Chandra through his works established the novel as a major literary form in India. He acquired knowledge from east and west both. "He has synthesized eastern and western knowledge what he gathered throughout his life in his works, thoughts and activities" (Pramanick and Das 2). Commenting upon Bankim Chandra and his works Edwin Arnold writes that he was a "Writer of true genius, whose vivacious invention, dramatic force, and purity of aim promise well for the new age of Indian vernacular literature" (Arnold 7). Bankim Chandra is the architect of modern Indian fiction whose splendid depiction of women, especially wives and widows in his eternally stimulating novels such as *Krishnakanta's Will*, *Bishabriksha*, *Devi Chaudhrani* and *Indira* enthrall readers cutting across time and space.

Most of Bankim Chandra's early Bengali novels are historical romances. No matter when he sets his novels, he does not intend to disassociate his novels from himself or his contemporary times. Even when he is not writing historical romances, Bankim Chandra's characters are shaped by their socio cultural contexts. "Most of Bankim's fictional works are effulgent reflection of women's condition/status in the contemporary/colonial Bengali society vis a vis the raging conflict between their personal desires and social conventions" (Farooq 321). Position of women in patriarchal structure, gender roles, widow remarriage, premarital

romance etc.- the social and domestic issues of the colonial Bengal often find expression in Bankim Chandra's works. This paper is an attempt to analyse these social and domestic issues of nineteenth century Bengal in the works of Bankim Chandra's works with particular reference to his *The Poison Tree*.

Thus, Bankim Chandra's writings should be understood in the background of social, religious and economical conflicts in the Nineteenth century foreign ruled society. On the one hand, the newborn middle class became aware of foreign education, culture, trade, economy etc. On the other hand, the conflict of the new age is in the midst of skeptical and restless life Bengali prose was gaining strength and ability. Published in 1873 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *The Poison Tree*, originally titled as *Bishabriksha* describes a mutually peaceful Bengali zaminder (a feudal landlord) household Debendra Nath Dutta and his wife Surja Mukhi. It is the story of a family bond and how that bond is disrupted. Everything seems pleasant in the beginning where both the husband and the wife understand each others' consent. However, Kunda Nandini, the widow's entry into their family led to disruption of a well-maintained household. Debendra Nath, cousin of Nagendra Nath, when finds Kunda Nandini has an eye on her, because he is enamoured with Kunda's beauty. Later Nagendra's passion for marrying Kunda Nandini not only distanced him from his beloved wife, Sujyamukhi, but also found how he on his own hand toppled the decorum of his house that eventually led to sufferings of all three characters.

Bankimchandra, in the novel *The Poison Tree* holds up a domestic milieu of a Bengali household to a larger context of the nineteenth century Bengal. The novel shows nineteenth century feudal Bengali life, where the educated Hindu '*bhadralok*' (sons of landlords, East India Company agents and traders who made fortunes in the eighteenth century, various professionals and government servants) worked in their offices, situated in the '*bahirmahal*' or the 'outer space' of the house and the women resided in the '*andarmahal*' or zenana (secluded quarters for women) or the 'inner quarters' of the house. The theme of domesticity is best represented by the character of Surja Mukhi, the devoted wife of Nagendra Nath who established herself as a worthy wife of a 'zamindar'. Being the mistress of the house, she resided in the inner quarters of the huge zaminder house and took charge of the household affairs, of the servants and maids, who did all the household chores of cleaning and washing the clothes, utensils and cooking. She not only was good in dealing with the household chores but also able to take care of everyone in the family. She looks after even the basic needs of everyone as she says to her husband Nagendra, "Be careful; if a storm arises be sure you fasten the boat to the shore. Do not remain in the boat. Nagendra had consented to this; otherwise Surja Mukhi would not have permitted him to leave home" (Chatterjee 2). She again writes to Nagendra: "I know not what fault your servant has committed. If it is necessary you should stay so long in Calcutta, why am I not with you to attend upon you? This is my earnest wish; the moment I receive your consent, I will set out" (Chatterjee 27). She is the woman of the house

who holds the family together. But the mistress only monitored whether or not the work of the house is done to its propriety.

Typical of the nineteenth century image of the '*bhadraloks*', when men of the public sphere were not allowed to enter the domestic sphere since the domestic sphere upheld the women's dignity and safety and only the women folk were allowed to enter and take care of the needs of the mistress, a sole room was reserved only for the husband and the wife, where Nagendra and Surya Mukhi used to spend their time. Bankimchandra has shown the very domestic world of a nineteenth century Bengali household through this novel where Surja Mukhi prays for her husband and looks after the well being of the family and the male members of the family deals with the outer world. On bringing home a young widow, Kunda Nandini, is looked upon as commodity to be owned by any man since she was already broken the ties of her previous marriage with Tara Charan. Tara Charan died early leaving Kunda Nandini as a widow in her adolescence. Kunda is now assumed for all men to pursue her. Bankim Chandra, by creating the microscopic view of Nagendra Nath's family, approaches all Hindu Bengali household to a microscopic level. He also criticises how Debendra although is a well educated man is corrupted in his morals. Not only he even Nagendra Nath, in the desire to marry Kunda Nandini, does not value the importance of his beloved wife Surja Mukhi. "In the nineteenth century Bengal the smooth functioning of the joint family depended on the degree of harmony among its womenfolk, who were responsible for maintaining the daily domestic routine" (Borthwick 11). In contrast to Surja Mukhi, Nagendra's second marriage to Kunda Nandini marks the beginning of the downfall of the well established family. Unlike, Surja Mukhi, Kunda Nandini could not act as someone who could maintain the big mansion of zamindars, even the maid Hira was not fond of her and did not support her ultimately leading to the after chaos. "Women, in the nineteenth century, were not allowed to cross the threshold of the antahpur into the outer apartments of the public male world" (Borthwick 10). They were under control and submissive to their husbands. For them husband were godlike figures and without the husband or the shelter in of in-laws women did not have their own identities. We find this common theme even in *The Poison Tree* where when Surja Mukhi although leaves Nagendra's but could not go to and live in her maternal house with her own identity. Although she leaves him for a few days, she still holds the emblems of their marriage. Later on, when Nagendra finds Kunda Nandini's beauty inapt for establishing or keeping a family together, Nagendra brings Surja Mukhi back into the house by convincing her but nothing is the same again which brings the reader to the title of the novel *The Poison Tree*. The tree can be seen as the family which when poisoned is disrupted with no peace and fruits of happiness anymore:

The position of women in Bengal has been subject to great changes from the traditional way of past to the modern way of present. Their status was not much respectful before nineteenth century Bengal renaissance. As a result of colonial occupancies society of Bengal had gone through transformation in nineteenth and twentieth century. (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 253)

Unfortunately, in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the 'Bengal Renaissance' is supposed to be taking place, there is little evidence of active roles for women. Reflective of this transformation, in the novel, *The Poison Tree*, when Kunda Nandini was married off to Tara Charan, the adopted brother of Surja Mukhi, being beautiful she was kept within the domestic sphere and not exposed to the male gaze of the public sphere. However, Tara Charan being a member of the Brahmo Samaj - one of India's major social reform legacies that stood against the practice of social orthodoxies, especially the sati and dowry system which also led the way for women's empowerment and contributed to the educational upliftment in Bengal, had the notion that women should be brought out to the outer quarter of the house. But seeing this as an opportunity, Debendra Nath, cousin of Nagendra Nath started coming to Tara Charan's house frequently, apparently because he was enamoured with Kunda's beauty. Hearing of Debendra's frequent visits, Surja Mukhi, instead of calling out Debendra's perversion, scolded Tara Charan for bringing Kunda out from the safety corner of domesticity.

Bankimchandra, in *The Poison Tree*, has entered into the boundaries of Bengali family life in the nineteenth century from his own world of historical novels and romances. In the novel, *The Poison Tree*, Bankim Chandra goes from story to narrative. Real Life experiences appeared here. The story of the novel *The Poison Tree* has been narrated in terms of social life. In this novel the story and the characters are on top of each other. The events emanate from the thoughts and actions of the character and again control the characters. There is no place for contingency! Kunda Nandini accepted Nagendra because she has listened to her heart. Her thought and decision were not influenced by the image she saw in her dream just after the death of her father. Here lies the difference between the romantic novel *Kopalkundola* and *The Poison Tree*. The characters described in this novel - Nagendra Nath, Surja Mukhi, Kunda Nandini etc. all are extremely familiar, intimately related to our lives. Different streams and shades of their happiness and sorrow, experiences and consequences of their lives touch our minds. They live on the real background in which human life takes place. Kunda Nandini's disapproval of Nagendra Nath's marriage proposal and her decision to leave the village at the suggestion of Kamalmani is indicative of her conflicted character.

The essence of Bankim's novel is to explain the importance of social life. In his *Dharma Tatwa* (Principles of Religion, 1888) he wrote "There is no different religious humanity in the society. Destruction of the society is the destruction of humanity" (Chattopadhyay 13). Thus, in the novel, *The Poison Tree*, he has depicted the conflict between individual freedom and the social life. He shows coherence through controlling and restraining the instincts and desire is necessary. Giving improper priority to the heart is the cause of sorrow. Balanced gratification is the way to happiness.

The novel *The Poison Tree* depicts the conjugal relationship; marital-love based family life. Bankimchandra has shown what kind of catastrophe and problems are created in the family due to indomitable desire in spite of having loving relationship between husband and wives and also believe in each other. The novelist has seen image of man and woman having

excessive and irresistible desire with the eyes of an artist and has portrayed it realistically. This, as expected, as if, the writer's generosity and sympathy did not seem to be properly expressed. The reason for this it seems that he was also aware of the social awareness. He has tried to maintain family unity by establishing an ideal husband at the center of family life. Bengali family life is consisting of relatives. If the picture of this family is not complete, the story is not objective and believable. *The Poison Tree*, by establishing in the family life, has preserved the reality of the story. Srikumar Bandopadhyay opines that "*The Poison Tree and Krishnakant's Will* – both the novels are profound and both have tragic consequences, in both the novels the reason for tragic consequences are man's inability to suppress his desire for the incessant beauty of the woman." Standing in front of the naked truth, the novelist has landed deep down the human heart in these novels.

Domesticity during nineteenth century in Bengal was a site of protection of women from the male gaze. The voluptuousness of feminine beauty was a centre of poison; it made the men indulge in illicit relationships with the women. So, the women, especially the mistress of the house was kept behind purdah of protection. The women of the andarmahal (inner quarters) dedicated their lives in catering to their husband's needs and showing devotion to their husbands just as Surja Mukhi proved in this novel. The women indulged in gossiping, singing, chattering with their in-laws within the inner quarters- just like Surja Mukhi and Kamal Mani had their share of laughter, sorrows and joys. The women ruled the domestic sphere with their beauty, submissiveness, timidity and devotion! They were hardly allowed in the '*baithok khana*' or the outer public sphere which was dominated by the men. In Bankimchandra's view, society is more valuable than the individual. By placing the person in the social circle, he reveals the mystery of his life. In the novel, Nagendra Nath, Surja Mukhi, Kunda, Hira or Debendra - each of these characters is expressed with its own nature and mental identity. Only a mere attempt to place a person within any social circle makes a character creation useless. So the artist Bankim did not forget about the need for social power in their background while revealing the form and mystery of personal life of the characters. One of the main characteristics of *The Poison Tree* is, thus, the contemporary life. Contemporary novels often become domestic novels in Bankim's hands. But domestic novels do not develop the totality of life. *The Poison Tree* is a bright exception from that direction. The narrative in *The Poison Tree* encompasses the entirety of Gobindpur village, extending beyond familial boundaries through the intertwined tales of Debendra and Heera. The novelist's goal was not just to cross family boundaries – depicting the contemporary time and social milieu too have become the part of this artistic creation. The author has brought together different melodies and voices within this novel - contemporary Brahmo Somaj Movement, widow remarriage movement, different norms of the new age etc. Clark has commented about Bankim's novels:

The social life of Bankim's novels is pitched at different levels, according to the status of his principle characters. He himself came of a middle class family, and it is only when

dealing with characters of this class that he is at home and that his descriptions are realistic and convincing. (Clark 69)

He presents a true picture of the nineteenth century Bengal.

Bankim Chandra's *The Poison Tree* is social novel in the sense that it is contemporary. Of course he did not, at all, want to introduce everyone present in the social life. There is an opportunity to draw pictures of the behavior of different class, caste, their education, marriage, kachari, police, market, profession etc. He has not arranged the events in such a way. The feature of social novel has entered into this novel in connection to different characters. Such as there was a system of teaching and learning for the girls in the wealthy zamindar's house, widow marriage, pictures of family life, the economic class division among the male characters etc.

It has been argued that art and literature in general and novel in particular cannot be produced in isolation— we must understand them in context to people and society. There is no novel without society and social life. Since the birth of the novel it has been inextricably linked with society. The novel is all about the individual or individuals, individuality, personality and mutual conflicts, alliances and social backgrounds and individual and society. Social novels realistically depict, explain and analyse social and family life, as well as social problems and the resulting reactions, character's psyche and reaction to those events and issues. Prevailing social problems, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel. In Bengali literature, novels like Pyarichad Mitra's 'Alal er Ghorer Dulal' can be included in the category of social novels, but it is Bankimchandra who is the main initiator of this type of novel. No social description will be incorporated in the novel unless it is inseparable with the characters in the story - this was Bankim's style. Some critics think that *The Poison Tree* is a social novel because Bankimchandra incarnates in it a social problem like widow marriage. Surja Mukhi and Nagendra Nath have condemned and supported widow marriage. Surja Mukhi knows that if Kunda marries Nagendra, her rights will be lost and Nagendra Nath did not consider the marriage to be against the law. Bankimchandra has viewed this issue differently. The marriage of Nagendra Nath will not only ruin the peace of family life but also bring unwanted evil of causing separation. He has spoken of Nagendra Nath's instinctive desire of beauty; without judging his attitude towards widow marriage. The incessant thirst of beauty destroys the peace in family which in turn also endangers the social purity. In *The Poison Tree*, Bankimchandra, thinking that social interest is of greater importance than individualism and self-satisfaction, has moulded the family problems into the flow of social truth. Bankimchandra criticizes the nineteenth century Bengali patriarchal society which viewed women as unworthy and how it dominated over them. He emphasizes on the fact that to call it a family, a home cooperation of both the men and women are equally important.

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