

“Now What Should I Do?” : Celebrating and Restricting the Role of Women in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath*

LAKIMOLLA

Abstract. The dominant historiography, besides neglecting the role of women in the freedom struggle, always stresses the idea that nationalism is a male activity. The country is imagined as a mother who strengthens the bond among the children irrespective of their differences and thus fostering unity, fraternity, and a common identity among them. But through this, the discourse also emphasizes the subjugation of the helpless mother (country) who is dependent upon her brave male sons for protection. The paper makes an inquiry into the sources in Bengali literature where the country is represented as the mother, giving special reference to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath*. Bankim conceives the idea of the mother in the form of a goddess and subsequently gives it a patriotic spirit. The country is no longer a mere geographical entity or emotional symbol but a complete statehood comprising territory and people. The paper aims at exploring how Bankim Chandra invented the “national culture” through the deification of the country by bestowing in it the images of the goddesses. The santans with their “self designating shared belief” form “the collective self-consciousness”, a necessary component for a nation. In this process, they were helped by their female counterparts. Shanti, through her action in the novel, becomes an embodiment of gender equality. The paper discusses how Bankim differs from his contemporaries in his representation of women characters. The symbolic association of the nation as a mother also traffics the patriarchal inequalities between men and women and reinforces the disempowering representation of women in nationalist causes. The most helpless character in the novel seems to be the country (the mother) itself. The paper mainly focuses on how, besides creating a Hindu identity during the initial phase of British rule, the novel constructs a discourse that simultaneously celebrates and limits women’s power.

Keywords: Historiography; nationalism; identity; culture; patriarchal inequalities.

Introduction

The nationalist literature always depicts the nation as a mother who strengthens the bond among the children irrespective of their differences

Received : 22nd June, 2023; Accepted : 30th June, 2023

and thus fostering unity, fraternity, and a common identity among them. But, the discourse also emphasizes the subjugation of the helpless mother (country) who is dependent upon her brave male sons for protection. Partha Chatterjee in his 1993 book *Nation and its Fragments* emphatically argues that when the nation is gendered, nationalism becomes essentially patriarchal. He notes that Indian nationalism during the 19th century equated women with the home- a spiritual and private space unfettered by colonialism. One of the goals of the anti-colonial struggle was to protect this sacred space. The representation of women in nationalist literature of the time endorsed this view and thereby the anti-colonial nationalism was gendered and patriarchy was reinforced (Chatterjee, 148). In the present paper, I made an enquiry into the nationalist literature of the 19th century where the nation is represented as the mother with a special emphasis on Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath*. Bankim conceives the idea of the mother as the goddess and subsequently gives it a patriotic spirit. The paper mainly focuses on how Bankim creates a narrative that simultaneously celebrates and restricts women's power, in addition to forming a Hindu identity during the last quarter of nineteenth century of the British administration.

The Depiction of Nation as Mother

Anandamath, first serialised in the monthly *Bangadarshan* between March 1881 and May 1882 (published as a book form on 15 December 1882), is considered the first political novel of India because of "the tremendous impact it had on the subsequent Nationalist Movement in Bengal and in some other parts of India" (Mukherjee, 903). The novel rose the country and brought about an upheaval.³ The novel is also important for establishing the ideology that the nation is the mother and thus extending the metanarrative of the Motherland. The identification of the country as a Mother strengthens the bond among the Children irrespective of their differences. Fostering unity and fraternity among them, it provided a common identity to the people as a nation. Besides bringing out their resentment of the British rulers, it made Indians more self-conscious as a nation.

However, the way in which the land, a non-living entity, is personified as Mother by the Santans as "the very essence of Vishnu's earthly form" and their "way to salvation", we come across an idea which is used in Bengali literature for decades before Bankim. Michael Madhusudhan Dutta in his "Bongo Bhumir Proti" (An Ode to the Land of Bengal), published in 1862 addressed the land as a mother. The

reference to the land as Mother is also present in “Birbahu Kavya” (The Saga of Birbahu), published in 1864. What Bhabananda’s says in the novel – “One’s mother and birth land are greater than heaven itself” (quoted in the Sanskrit *janani janmabhoomischa swargadapi gariyasi*)- is usually attributed to the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* where Rama, after conquering Lanka when requested by Lakshmana to rule the golden Lanka, responded that he would not want to rule Lanka, even if it were made of gold because one’s mother and birth land are greater than heaven itself. But Julius Lipner and Pradip Bhattacharya argued that the lines do not appear in the Sanskrit *Ramayana* known to them.⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya refers to Bengal as the origin of the idea when he says that the line occurred in “the version of Valmiki’s *Ramayana* current in Bengal” (*Vande Mataram* 78). Lipner also argues that the concept of the motherland may be a recent one, but the concept of birthland (*janmobhumi*) is an ancient one and can be traced in the *Harivamsa* of the great epic the *Mahabharata* (241-42). Historian Tanika Sarkar argued that *Anandamath* was not the first embodiment of the motherland. She mentions a play by Kiranchandra Ray, called *Bharatmata*, published in 1873, in which the “wan, pale figure of absolute abjection” of the weeping Motherland is portrayed. Towards the end of the play, a good sahib promises that another mother (the British Queen) would bring her woes to an end. What is essentially different in *Anandamath* is that, as Sarkar argues, it dramatises and transfigures “the image of abjection into a lustrous, powerful deity” (3965).

The productive land is compared to the Mother in many texts before Bankim, but in *Anandamath* Bankim moved a step forward by conceiving the idea of the Mother in the form of goddess Durga and subsequently giving it a patriotic spirit. S. K. Bose points to a similar idea in Satyendra Nath Tagore’s song – “Children of India, sing together and in complete unison, the glory that India is”, which is sung in several sessions of Hindu Mela started from 1867 onwards with the aim of rousing patriotic feelings (78). Bose also mentions the opera *Bharatmata*. But all these vague ideas get concretised in Bankim who refashioned the “Mother-Goddess mythology in terms of the modern virtue of patriotism” (80).

While leading Mahendra to the inside of *Anandamath*, Satyananda pointed to him three images of the mother- Jagadhatri, Kali and Durga- representing her past, present and future. In the first image, the productive aspects are emphasized by Satyananda. She trampled on wild animals like elephants and lions and erected her lotus throne in their

habitat. In the second image, the mother is garlanded with skulls as the whole land has turned into a burning ground and she is crushing her own gracious Lord underfoot. The third image shown to Mahendra is a “golden ten-armed image of the Goddess in a large marble shrine glistening and smiling in the early morning rays” (Chatterji, 150). “Vande Mataram” sung by the Santans in the novel is like an invocation to the Mother who is worshipped annually in every Bengali home for 4 days. The Mother as portrayed in this third image represents all the attributes necessary for a country to be prosperous and happy. These three images are the allegorical representation of the country’s dignified past, her present degradation and the radiant future achieved through the dedication of the Santans. According to Tanika Sarkar, the first divine image in the tripartite sequence was that of Jagadhatri, the goddess of agriculture who tamed wild animals and cleansed the forests. The second goddess, Kali, symbolised the end of civilization and productivity and the return to the forest. The most splendid representation of the Mother of the future, the era of becoming, the demon-slaying Durga, who embodies might and glory, learning and prosperity, prevails over the demons, and finally covers the goddess’ past and present (Sarkar, 3965 - 66).

The way the country is deificated by bestowing in it the images of the Goddesses who strengthen the bond between the country and its inhabitants as mother and children or as goddesses and devotees is an example of how national culture is “invented” and how the nation is “imagined”. While inventing the tradition of conceiving the country as a Goddess, Bankim has taken sources from the society of the time. Tanika Sarkar points out the annual worship of Jagadhatri started in Bengal as late as the eighteenth century by the leading conservative Hindu king Krishnachandra Ray of Krishnanagar. She thinks, “Bankim’s invention, therefore, followed an established tradition of expanding the sacred pantheon, of increasing the occasions of collective worship” (3966).

In *Anandmath*, the Santans developed a kind of psycho-spiritual attachment to the land. As the mother is the nourisher, who gives the child life, similarly it is the land in which one is born and also grows with the air, water, and grains given to him by the land. With their belief in their mind that the land in which they were born is their mother, they differentiate themselves from others who do not conform to this view. This is “the self-designating shared belief”, which Grosby talks about, and which subsequently leads to the “collective self-consciousness”- a necessary component for a nation. This collective consciousness is promoted through the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments under the guise of paying

respect at Vishnu’s lotus feet. It is also to be noted here that the Santan’s struggle against the Muslim rule is given a valid reason in the text when Bhabananda asks, “But does our Muslim King protect us?” (Chatterji, 147). The resistance of the Santans also had a mass appeal indicated in the numbers of the Santans. In *Mrinalini*, Pashupati’s love to his Motherland as expressed in his attempts to topple the Sena rulers in Bengal is an example of this idea of viewing the land as Mother. In *Rajsingha*, the Rajputs’ unwavering commitment to their land is reminiscent of *Anandamath*’s explicitly displayed mother-child relationship.

Shanti : the Woman Warrior in *Anandamath*

Set during the Sanyasi rebellion and the devastating famine in 1770 when Mir Zafar was on the throne of Bengal and the British acted as tax collectors, the novel *Anandamath* narrates how the aesthetics called Santans in the novel liberates the country from the decadent Muslim rulers. Shanti is the most prominent character in the novel. Brought up in a reckless and carefree manner in the company of boys, education finally refines her character and she is able to encourage her husband to adopt the path of celibacy and revolution:

You are a hero! The great joy of my world is that I’m a hero’s wife! How can you abandon a hero’s duty for the sake of a lowly woman? Do not love me. I don’t want that happiness. But never abandon your duty as a hero (Chatterji, 166).

As an ideal wife, she comes forward to help her husband in his endeavour to liberate the mother. When Satyananda catches her, she persuades him using examples from classical Hindu mythology to show how women have long provided the strength and inspiration for brave men. She counters Satyananda’s belief that the entry of women in the *Anandamath* can distract a man from his duties: “I am a celibate woman, and I’ll live as one with my husband. I’m here to practice virtue, not to attend to my husband. It is not that I’m pining for him. Why can’t I have a part in the code my husband’s adopted? That’s why I’m here” (184). By sacrificing herself and exercising self-control, she has elevated womanhood. In the novel, Shanti appears as a symbol of Shakti, who is the animating force in Jibananda’s life.

Through her action in the novel, Shanti becomes an embodiment of gender equality who like other Santans challenges Captain Thomas equally. She possesses the essential courage to make fun of an English Major. Through her intelligence, she befools Major Edward with her disguise and collects necessary information that helps the Santans to conquer in the final war. In her dedication and courage she even, to some extent, surpasses her husband Jibananda. Bankim's essay "Samya" deals with the inequalities prevalent in Indian society, especially in caste and gender. By projecting Shanti as equally brave and responsible as Jibananda, Bankim is emphasizing the supreme truth of equality between men and women. In her fearlessness, Shanti can be compared to Prafulla of *Devi Chaudhurani*, written after *Anandamath* in 1884, who also led many operations with his gang of bandits. Both of them proved superior in ability to men and rise in defiance against the accepted social codes.

In representation of women characters, Bankim stands apart from his contemporaries Pyari Chand Mitra⁹ and Dinabondhu Mitra.¹⁰ Their female characters are a poor imitation of English novels and Sanskrit kavyas- quite different from the strong and independent real Bengali women. Taking the disguise of a youth and laying down life for the sake of his country, Shanti occupies, as Lipner thinks, an ambivalent status – not indeed of *ardhanarishvara*, but of being, in a sense, fully woman-and-man. She expertly morphs from a manly Santan in appearance to a coquettish wandering singer of holy songs in accordance with the demands of the circumstance. With all these transformations she becomes the symbol of the new-woman Bankim envisioned for Mother-India-as-she-would-be who "preserves the essence of her glorious womanhood; but she does so by reinventing both her husband and herself according to one enduring ideal of traditional Hinduism – that of ascetic renunciation" (13-14).

But, towards the end of the novel, Santi resists Jibananda to join the Santans in their celebration of the victory and persuades him to build a hut on the Himalayas and worship God. They even did not know that the country was given to the British. The country was rescued from the Muslims but the Santans did not become the rulers. So, we may say that their endeavour was half-successful. If we look into the other women characters of Bankim- Kundanandini of *Brishbrikha* and Rohini of *Krishnakanta's Will* - are very brave representations of the time. But these two widow characters are not given good life to live after their transgressions. The courageous and defiant Prafulla of *Devi Chaudhurani*

who participates in the freedom struggle against the British, finally returns to her in-law’s house accepting her role as a respectable wife.

Now this where I come to my second argument of the paper how Bankim limits the role of women in his novels. Wondering on the question why Bankim reduced these defiant and rebellious freedom fighters merely to a housewife in the end, I find two strong arguments. The first reason, I think, he might have in his mind the conservative society of his time which was not ready to accept such rebelliousness from the women. The second reason might be that he had certain beliefs in the values of domesticity to some extent as he himself came from an orthodox middle-class family. It is also a very pertinent point that born five years after the abolition of Sati (1829) and a youth of 22 when the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) was passed, he had not spoken openly on the issues of widow remarriage and Child remarriage.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by quoting an extract from his essay “Prachina and Nabina” where he compares the virtues and faults of women of an older age with those of the women of modern times:

In all societies, women are less developed than men. The reason is men’s biased attitude. Men are strong, so they are the agent-the doer. Women have to be subordinated to them at work. The biased men are concerned with the betterment of their wives as far as self-pleasure is concerned. Not more than that. This is especially true in our country than other societies.
(Chattopadhyaya, 219)

It is very clear that Bankim himself was a part of that society he so vehemently criticizes. And this is how the English educated Intelligentsia of the eighteenth century Bengal who are popularly called as “babus” tried to reform their societies.

Laki Molla

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Bhairab Ganguly College
Belghoria, Kolkata

Works Cited

- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Bose, S. K. *Bankim Chandra Chatterji*. Govt. of India Publications Division, 1974.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.
- Chatterji, Bankim Chandra. *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood*. Translated by Julius J. Lipner, Oxford UP, 2005.
- Chattopadhyaya, Bankim Chandra. *Collected Works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (Vol. II)*. Sahitya Samsad, 2020.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Anandamath: A Political Myth." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 17, no. 22, 1982, pp. 903–905. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4370972. Accessed 22 Mar. 2020.
- Sarkar, Tanika. "Birth of a Goddess: 'Vande Mataram', 'Anandamath', and Hindu Nationhood". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 37, 2006, pp. 3959–3969. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4418703. Accessed 30 Mar. 2020.