

Woman and Militant Nationalism: Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* and the Issue of Partition

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Abstract: *Rajkahini* represents Srijit Mukherji's tryst with the concepts of nationalism, national identity and each character's personal identity with respect to India's partition. Partition has been critiqued vis-à-vis the 'two nations' theory, and Imperialism. With partition, the communion shared between people gets threatened, the border becomes the signifier of unspeakable horrors. The (feminine?) nation is prostituted, raped, maimed and traumatized by colonial power. Mukherji plays deftly with the idea of satidaha in his portrayal of the prostitutes under Begum Jaan, who get entangled in political violence and show traits of militant nationalism. The sati here acquires and retains possession of her own body and self and voluntarily annihilates the body.

Keywords: Partition, National Identity, Selfhood, 'Two Nations Theory, Prostitute, Rape Identity

He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot,
And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot,
But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
A continent for better or worse divided. (Excerpt from "Partition" by W. H. Auden).

The film *Rajkahini* represents filmmaker Srijit Mukherji's tryst with the concepts of nationalism, national identity and simultaneously each character's personal identity vis-à-vis

the issue of the partition of India. The concepts of ‘Nation’ and that of ‘Identity’ become very important in our study of *Rajkahini*. We may begin with Ernest Renan’s definition of a Nation. Renan writes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (19).

In a land like India, with a multiplicity of races, castes, religions and languages, there may not be a common possession of a rich legacy of memories but there has always been the desire to live together and perpetuate the values of being Indian. Renan continues, “[t]o have common glories in the past, and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions of being a people” (19).

The conflict in *Rajkahini* begins to take shape with the issue of partition. Rituparna Roy refers to two different responses to partition. The first set of responses she mentions are the official histories of Pakistan and the ‘two nations’ theory which states that “the Pakistani nation was the inevitable crystallization of the desire of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent to remain a distinctive community, separate from the Hindu population around them” (13). Roy makes a special mention of Aitzaz Ahsan’s *The Indus Saga and the Making of Pakistan* (1996). If there are diverse opinions as to why the partition happened, there are also diverse thoughts related to the question as to who was/were to blame for it. Not just historians, but lay persons also believe that the person most to blame was Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Indians view him, as Roy mentions, not as the father of the new nation, Pakistan but “as a collaborator of the Raj; a man who, in his capacity as the leader of the All India Muslim League, precipitated the division of India by being willing to accept nothing short of a sovereign state for the Muslims in the subcontinent in the final negotiations with the British that led to the transfer of power in 1947” (14). On the 70th anniversary of the Radcliffe Line,

in a review titled “70 Years of the Radcliffe Line: Understanding the Story of Indian Partition”, Akhilesh Pillalamarri analyses how the border between India and Pakistan was decided. He too refers to the ‘two nation’ theory as the basic principle underlying the border, and the decision to partition India itself. Calling the All-India Muslim League that represented the Muslims of British India the main proponent, he quotes a speech delivered in Lahore in 1940 by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the movement. Jinnah stated:

... It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literature. They neither intermarry nor interdine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspect on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, different heroes, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and, likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built for the government of such a state. (Quoted in Pillalamarri, 2017)

The speech makes it evident that the Muslim League wanted the Muslim-majority provinces of British India to form their own country. Pillalamarri explains that the Indian National Congress, though dominated by Hindus, was however secular in nature, and resisted partition until 8th March, 1947. The Congress, he says, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, soon to be India’s first Prime Minister, envisioned a more centralized, homogeneous state. In order to achieve the aims of the Congress too, partition was thought to be necessary. The other set of responses to the issue of partition mentioned by Rituparna Roy are those of the group of historians who belong to the mainstream of Indian nationalism. Indian historians have blamed imperialism for tearing the two communities of Hindus and Muslims apart, disrupting the bonds that had joined them together for centuries. To the imperialists, says

Roy, “the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the logical conclusion of the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British by which they had insidiously played off the Hindus against the Muslims in India ... this was a political strategy that the British had hit upon from the time of the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and had pursued with a single-minded zeal ever since” (14). Director Srijit Mukherji takes this stand and shows Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias, childhood friends, now pitted against each other as pawns of the British Raj. British imperialists and historians had a different version altogether. They rather took pride in claiming that during British rule they had induced and nurtured unity between diverse communities of India. In fact, to them, essential differences among the Indian communities eventually led to the division and bloodshed during the last few decades of British rule. Roy in her discussion mentions a pioneering study of Jinnah by historian Ayesha Jalal of Pakistani origin. According to Jalal, the partition was forced upon Jinnah by the Congress High Command in the final phases of British rule in India. To Roy, “the actual reason behind the Partition was not the scheme of the British but the constitutional tussle for greater representational power in the government that had gone on for close to four decades, between the Congress and the Muslim League” (14). One must admit however that the man who must bear the lion’s share of the blame is none other than the British Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten.

Lord Earl Louis Mountbatten officially became Viceroy on 24th March, 1947. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy of India who preceded Lord Mountbatten, had already drawn up a border, and Lord Mountbatten the new Viceroy, in June 1947 commenced the task of implementing the 1947 Indian Independence Act that would partition British India into two independent dominions. Very soon, in mid-August 1947 two nations with three divisions were destined to be born – India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan. To make a decision which was 'impartial' and ‘unbiased’, English Barrister and Vice-President of the London Bar Association, Sir Cyril Radcliffe was commissioned to demarcate the states of Punjab and Bengal and thereby determine which territories to assign to which country. Lord Listowel, the then Secretary of State for India had proposed Sir Radcliffe’s name for appointment as head of the Boundary Commissions for both Punjab and Bengal to which Lord Mountbatten and both Nehru and Jinnah agreed. “I feel there is a Punjabi and Bengali consciousness which has evoked loyalty to their province and so I felt it was essential that the people of India

themselves should decide this question of partition” (Quoted by Mahesh), stated Lord Mountbatten in a radio broadcast addressed to the people. Unfortunately, Sir Radcliffe had little knowledge of the subcontinent, and had never visited British India; in fact he had never been east of Paris. He was given two Hindu and two Muslim lawyers to help him in the task in just about five weeks. According to records, “Radcliffe barely knew where Punjab and Bengal were, yet he accepted the job as a man with a deep sense of duty” (Mahesh).

On 8th July, 1947, Sir Radcliffe went to Delhi to head the Boundary Commission to demarcate the boundaries between India and Pakistan. On 10th July, 1947, under the aegis of Lord Mountbatten the modalities of demarcation and division were finalized. R. K. Kaushik, Secretary, Punjab Government, says that, “Radcliffe meticulously avoided meeting political leaders and advised them to present their vaulting demands in the formal sittings of commission in Lahore and Calcutta” (Kaushik). The reason is easy to gauge. The boundaries were bound to cause contention between the Congress and the Muslim League; more so because Jinnah had initially wanted the United Nations Organisation to demarcate the two nations, later discarding the thought as the procedure would be a rather lengthy one.

Two boundary commissions were constituted before the arrival of Sir Radcliffe, one for Bengal and the other for Punjab. The Bengal Boundary Commission appointed Justice C. C. Biswas and Justice B. K. Mukherji as Congress nominees; and Justice Abu Saleh Akram and Justice S. A. Rehman as Muslim League nominees and in the Punjab Boundary Commission, Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan and Justice Teja Singh were appointed by the Congress and Justice Din Muhammad and Justice Muhammad Munir by the Muslim League. All the eight nominees were high court judges. The public sittings of the commission relating to the Province of Bengal took place in Calcutta from 16th to 24th July barring Sunday the 20th and those of the Punjab Boundary Commission took place in Lahore from 21st to 31st July except Sunday the 27th. Sir Radcliffe visited Calcutta and Lahore as chairperson of both the Bengal and Punjab commissions. As the proceedings for both Commissions were simultaneous, obviously Sir Radcliff could not attend the public sittings in Calcutta and Lahore, held in their respective high courts; he kept on studying the proceedings and the records submitted. The public sittings relating to the Sylhet district were held from 4th to 6th August. None of the commissions reached a consensus. Available documents testify that Sir

Radcliffe showed the original draft of the proposed award to the Viceroy and Governor-General on 9th August, 1947 over lunch in the house of Lord Mountbatten's Chief of Staff, Lord Ismay. After further deliberations, he made the award in terms which deviated from the first draft. The boundaries on both sides were finalized on 12th August, but deliberately held back and announced on 17th August 1947, presumably to avoid confusion and chaos on Independence Day – 15th August for India and 14th for Pakistan – and also allegedly because the Viceroy and the last British Governor-General of India, did not want the question of boundaries to receive priority over the independence day celebrations he would have to preside over in Karachi and Delhi. Yet a horrifying turmoil began sweeping throughout the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. Pillalamarri states, “[a]s a result, when India and Pakistan became independent, some border districts incorrectly believed themselves to be one or the other of those two countries, when in fact, the opposite was the case” (Pillalamarri). Indeed, there could not have been any citizen who could remain unmoved by the impact of India's partition. India's partition is indeed more than a historical fact; the impact was such that it continues to affect all “post-colonial denizen[s] of the subcontinent possessing a sense of history and living in the post-independence era (Roy 13).

As shown by Mukherji in *Rajkahini*, with partition, the communion shared between people suddenly gets threatened, and the border becomes the signifier of unspeakable horrors. As Amitav Ghosh does in *The Shadow Lines*, Mukherji too uses the house metaphor, in order to show the moral horror regarding the partition of Bengal. This is how Ghosh demonstrates the partition of the nation as the division of the house between two brothers, Thamma's father and her uncle. The narrator writes:

Soon things came to such a pass that they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall: there was no other alternative. But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one could get through them any more; it had also gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode. The brothers even partitioned their father's old nameplate. It was

divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves... (Ghosh 123).

Apparently sugar-coated with humour, delving deeper one would comprehend how the division of the family invariably leads to an irreversible violation of a moral order. Such indeed was the horror of the partition of India, the Radcliffe Line ploughing right through two doorways in such a manner and with such severity that no one would be able to get through them anymore. Instead of one nameplate, India, soon there would be two nameplates on the world map, India and Pakistan because of the line named after and drawn by a gentleman who had never visited India and knew nothing about the land and its culture.

Rajkahini can be viewed as a film that exposes the horrors faced by a nation prostituted in the name of nationalism. The picture presents us with a victimized (feminine?) nation raped, maimed and traumatized by colonial power. In keeping with my syllogism, it is natural that the 'house' that Mukherji showcases in *Rajkahini*, is one that shelters prostitutes, all protégées of Begum Jaan. The women face confusion when they try to fathom the concept of the border, much like Amitav Ghosh's *Thamma*. On the question of borders, Ghosh himself said:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are 'naturalized' by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be 'given' or taken-for-granted.... I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded. (Quoted in Roy 113)

Begum Jaan's proteges begin to show traits of a "nationalism", a trait shared with every citizen of that era. Each woman suddenly learns to grapple with the idea of nationality and the idea of partition and border, suddenly caught between belonging and citizenship. The women, belonging to the same and to different communities try to transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders.

The conflict in *Rajkahini* begins with the Radcliffe Line cutting through, i.e. creating

a partition between the brothel run by Begum Jaan, housing eleven prostitutes. Anuj Kumar in an article states in his introduction, “Set in the backdrop of Partition, it is the story of a brothel, which comes in the way of the Radcliffe Line, and its 11 sex workers led by a feisty Begum Jaan refusing to be puppets in the political game” (Kumar). The prostitutes reminisce over their past, having had different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds comprising of Hindus having had different castes, high and low, a Vaishnav and Muslims. Like Narayan’s *Malgudi*, this house, this plot of land with multi-faith residents represents miniature India. The name Kamala of the eldest among the lot, a guardian of sorts, who is called Thamma (Grandma), and her reading of Hindu religious scriptures reveals her religion. The Hindi remake of *Rajkahini* had the name of the protagonist Begum Jaan as the title too. To Anuj Kumar the title bears the suggestion that Mukherji’s central character is a Muslim woman but the director says that religion is not the issue here. “She is a Punjabi [in *Rajkahini* a Bengali]. She could be a Sikh or she could be a Muslim as well. She is called Begum Jaan because she received training in Lucknow. Religion is not important here” (Quoted by Kumar, 2017). Juthika with her little daughter Nolik affectionately called Bunchi, Koli, Duli, Golap bear Hindu names. Golap, probably having had a middle-class background, looks forward to marriage with Master, the school teacher with leanings towards the ideology of the Congress, who she falls in love with. Lata also called Bostami rigidly follows a vegetarian diet having been a part of the Vaishnav faith. The histrionics of a woman in the flesh trade, over the lack of seriousness of the others regarding her no-flesh diet and the rigorous practices centred around her diet and lifestyle lead to wry, ironical humour. Names such as Rubina, Banno and Fatima reveal their Muslim past. During a tiff with her friends, the other inmates, Duli reminds them that they have nowhere else to go, that they will not be taken back by their own families. Pushed to the margins, these women have little or no options. Duli, in fact reveals that she had been doubly or triply marginalized even in her pre-prostitution days, as a poor Dalit woman.

The one who joins the house last is Fatima, rechristened as Shabnam, who springs straight out of Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Khol Do” translated as “Open It”. The film begins with a little episode, integrated into the picture *Rajkahini*, a dramatization of Manto’s story, which rises to a crescendo with the almost dead young woman fumbling with her clothes, trying to disrobe herself. The opening of the film draws the viewers’ attention to two things

— women’s agony and rape. Susan Brownmiller says that rapes in concentration camps and camp-brothels which held women against their will by force were true aspects of the abuse of women in both the First and Second World War. Are they not sinister and true aspects of every war? Brownmiller states that war provides men with the perfect psychologic backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. In her words:

The very maleness of the military — the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of the hierarchical command — confirms for men what they long suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the center ring (Brownmiller 32).

The stories of war rape are similar everywhere, rightly says Brownmiller; two or more men drag a woman and abuse her in the presence of other mute women or vanquished men. In this tale involving borders / borderlines, the Manto story in the beginning acts as a prelude to the actual tale of horrors. When the picture begins, Begum Jaan and her women are already, in Bhabha’s words, “living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender” (Quoted in Smith 249-250). Supraja Mahesh states how “in just five weeks - the fate of millions of people got sealed and this unleashed an epic humanitarian crisis” (Mahesh). Sir Radcliffe’s own decision saddened him too, so much so that he refused his salary of £3000, quite a substantial amount in 1947. Fourteen million people decided to flee across the border when the realization dawned on them that the new Radcliffe line could trap them forever in the ‘wrong’ side. Needless to say, a terrible violence ensued, poignantly portrayed in *Rajkahini*.

When Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias visit them with the government’s notice, Begum Jaan and the women titter; they first think that the issue is a big joke. To Partha Chatterjee, the “women’s question” was a central issue in nationalist thought and in a chapter titled “The Nation and its Women” he says that, in nineteenth century Bengal “the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from making the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening

up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject. (128-129). But to achieve this ideological strength, formal education became a requirement. Formal education for the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) was thought to make it possible for a woman to acquire not just cultural refinement but also to achieve freedom. Here comes an ironical twist in the plot of *Rajkahini*. The ‘normal’ always remains an indicator of the hegemonic status of any ideological construct. Begum Jaan’s women are definitely not a part of mainstream society but as the picture progresses, the binaries between the respectable woman and the non-conformist prostitute get blurred. History says that respectable women with education and cultural refinement joined in the struggle for the independence of the land which coincided with the hopes of achieving personal freedom. In *Rajkahini*, Begum Jaan’s protégées, show traits of a “militant nationalism” a trait shared with every citizen of that era, and they begin to earn our respect. Isn’t it ironical that the prostitutes, in spite of their marginalized existence, possess personal freedom which the respectable middle-class women in Bengal and the rest of India were still striving for. In his interview with Anuj Kumar, this is what the director himself specified. As the interview runs:

“When it comes to personal freedom,” Srijit says, “nothing is indispensable.”
“Even if it is a brothel, even if it is not a noble profession that is being practised there, still women have a right to their space, to their bodies and to their will. If they decide against something, you cannot trample over their dreams, their existence. This is the bigger narrative that if you can’t do it there, you can’t do it anywhere” (Kumar).

The prostitutes in *Rajkahini* possess attributes that the ‘normal’ women i.e. the mothers / sisters / wives / daughters do not possess. They are brazen, without religion, and in the flesh trade — all traits read as promiscuous in patriarchy. As Srijit Mukherji pointed out, “As [Begum Jaan] says, ‘in this kotha, nothing matters apart from money. It is money that homogenises everybody in a brothel. Ironically, this is where these girls get maximum personal freedom’” (Quoted by Kumar).

The women in *Rajkahini* get entangled in the political violence because they choose not to conform. This piece of land, Begum Jaan’s brothel, a portrayal of miniature India and

this whole issue, this tearing apart of the land can be viewed as an act of violation/rape. To Susan Brownmiller, rape is, “A sexual invasion of the body by force, an incursion into the private, personal inner space without consent—in short, an internal assault from one of several avenues and by one of several methods—constitutes a deliberate violation of emotional, physical and rational integrity and is a hostile, degrading act of violence” (Brownmiller 376). As discussed, the decisions taken by individual men, bodies of men led to dismemberment of people that happened not through choice but by compulsion. I look upon British Imperialism as a violent masculine aggressor or violator that took the nation of India by force. It would be interesting to draw this parallel from Susan Brownmiller:

As interpreted by the loyal philosopher-servants of the Third Reich, fascism’s real nature was an exaggeration of the values that normal society held to be masculine. Goebbels himself had said as much, and before him Nietzsche, that fount of inspiration, had instructed, “Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior.” Therefore, it was not surprising that the ideology of rape burst into perfect flower as Hitler’s armies goosestepped over the face of Europe in the early days of World War II.

Hitler always said that the masses are essentially feminine, and his aggressiveness and charisma elicited an almost masochistic surrender and submission in his audience — a form of psychic rape.... He didn’t convince his audiences; he conquered them.

...The Nazi aim was to *conquer*, not merely to win and convince, and that, of course, was the heart of the matter. A mind that perceived — and then set about to institutionalize — the masses as weak and feminine, ... was a mind that naturally turned to rape as a means of suppression (48-49).

India in 1947 may be looked upon as a woman betrayed by the exploits of colonialism and right wing politicians – the British Government, the Congress, the Muslim League – and by her own fragility and innocence, and if we may add ignorance.

In *Rajkahini*, both Mr. Prafulla Mohan Sen and Mr. Muhammad Ilias, in spite of the

personal moral horror, allow the violence to continue, much against each one's own will. Prafulla Mohan Roy in fact refers to Direct Action Day or the Calcutta Killings of 16th August 1946, citing a personal experience of witnessing the rape of a girl known to him. This day was a day of communal riots in the city of Calcutta (Kolkata) and it marked the beginning of The Week of the Long Knives. The massive riots in Calcutta against a backdrop of communal tension led to the loss of more than four thousand lives and rendered about more than a lakh residents homeless. Inevitably, along with the butchering of Hindu men, numerous Hindu women were raped. In Brownmiller's words:

Apart from a genuine, human concern for wives and daughters, rape by a conqueror *is* compelling evidence of the conquered's status of masculine impotence. Defense of women has long been a hallmark of masculine pride, as possession of women has been the hallmark of masculine success. Rape by a conquering soldier destroys all remaining illusions of power and property for men of the defeated side. The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor's trooping of the colors. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men — vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other (38).

Needless to say, such acts continue to happen as part of natural terror and subjugation by the conqueror. The rape of women remains a constant reminder of the defeat of men and the male anguish that arises out of it.

Partha Chatterjee says that the colonialist critics, speaking of the atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, assumed a "position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (118). Begum Jaan's women are free yet oppressed and partition gives patriarchy the perfect backdrop for the plundering of the land and the violation and plundering of unprotected women. Moreover, Begum Jaan's women do not 'belong' to any man, i.e. vis-à-vis love or marriage that allows a man in patriarchy to possess a woman. Susan Brownmiller rightly points out that protection was the sole reason that led to

subjugation of women as marriage puts one woman under the protection of one man against men. She says that for women:

... among those creatures who were her predators, some might serve as her chosen protectors. ... Female fear of an open season of rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood or love, was probably the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man, the most important key to her historic dependence, her domestication by protective mating (16).

Sujan in *Rajkahini* who professes his 'love' for Rubina, along with Salim, protects these eleven women as best as they can. Golap falls in love with Master, thinking that he will become her husband-protector. She betrays Begum Jaan, hoping for marriage with Master, only to be sold by one predator, the Master, to another set of predators. The women who remain take military training and decide that they will not give up their domicile. The women of Begum Jaan's whorehouse are protégées under no man and they decide that they will fight for this piece of "no man's land".

Chatterjee says that colonialists rationalized "atrocities [against women] within a complete framework of religious doctrine" (118) and Srijit Mukherji plays deftly with one such doctrine namely *satidaha* or the immolation of widows. Lata Mani refers to Walter Ewer's letter to the Judicial Department written in November 1818 and says that in Ewer's view, "when Hindus acted 'consciously' they could not, by definition, be acting 'religiously'. 'Religious' action is, in this perspective, synonymous with passive, unquestioning obedience" (125). In other words, if the widowed woman is taken to be a victim in the hands of pundits and relatives, she says, "they in turn are seen by Ewer to act in two mutually exclusive ways: either 'consciously,' that is, 'irreligiously,' or 'passively,' that is, 'religiously'" (125). He in fact stresses on the will of the widowed woman, and Mani reminds us that "given the widow's ignorance and weak mental and physical capacity, it took little persuasion to turn any apprehension into a reluctant consent" (125-126). In the context of Mukherji's *Rajkahini*, we may very well think of the independent woman or the free woman (i.e. a woman without male protection) in the widow's stead. Ewer's stressing on the

‘will’ of the widow brings in the question of consent on the part of the woman. A good sati was one who stayed true to the dictum of the scriptures. This in fact led to a regulation in 1813, says Mani, “which defined sati as legal providing it met certain criteria, chief among which was that it be a voluntary act” (126). Mani in fact goes on to mention that colonial officials always viewed native women “as subjected, whether they were coerced or apparently willing to jump into the flames” (129). It may sound strange but Parliamentary Papers testify that several women resisted attempts to prevent their immolation, sometimes going to the extent of threatening relatives seeking to detain them. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak succinctly put it, “Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: “The women actually wanted to die”” (297). Annual reports of sati however suggest otherwise, validating not the resistance of women but the barbarity of men, and patriarchy, in their coercion. Mani rightly states:

The widow thus nowhere appears as a subject. If she resisted, she was seen to be dominated by hindu men. If she conceded, she was considered victimized by religion. Despite the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of "willing" satis, given the absence of women's voices and the historical and cultural variability of such terms as "agency" and "subjecthood," it seems to me that the volition of some widows can justifiably be seen as equal to the resistance of others. Official response to this contradictory evidence, however, was typically to simplify it (129).

Far from being weak mentally or physically, Begum Jaan and her women refuse to be puppets or objects in the hands of patriarchy, in the shape of rulers and bureaucrats. The first thing that Begum Jaan does is appeal to the Nawab of Rangpur to save them from eviction. Though very much a part of the patriarchal set up, the Nawab after a visit to Delhi for a meeting arranged for rulers of Princely States, understands that he has been rendered powerless by the Colonial rulers and confesses the same to Begum Jaan, insisting that she make peace with the rulers by complying with their wishes. Begum Jaan dismisses him as she would dismiss any commoner and she with her girl-gang decides to fight against the oppressors. Analyzing the issue of withholding “subjecthood” from women, Lata Mani protests, “Women were cast as either pathetic or heroic victims. The former were portrayed

as beaten down, manipulated, and coerced, the latter as selflessly entering the raging flames oblivious to any physical pain. Superslave or superhuman, women in this discourse remain eternal victims” (129-130).

Begum Jaan and her women can be put under neither of these two categories. They attain ‘agency’ and ‘subjecthood’, refusing to be victimized, through their deeds which are akin to that of the sati. To Spivak, sati is widow sacrifice. She explains, “The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice. (The conventional transcription of the Sanskrit word for the widow would be *sati*. The early colonial British transcribed it as *suttee*.) The rite was not practiced universally and was not caste- or class fixed” (297). Viewing the actions of Begum Jaan and her women it could very well be claimed that as agents and subjects, they decide on fighting and sacrificing themselves voluntarily instead of being objectified as victims. In fact, Spivak refers to certain ‘sanctioned suicides’ as mentioned in the *Dharmasastra*. The first that she mentions is “*atmaghata* (a killing of the self)” (299) and the second is “*atmadana*” (299) or self-sacrifice. A very good example of the grief-stricken widow committing an act of *atmaghata* would be Pandu’s wife Madri in the *Mahabharata*. In both *atmaghata* and *atmadana*, the root word is *atma* or the self. One does not need to glorify the act of sati, but one must concede the actions of the woman as a subject who voluntarily kills or sacrifices herself, whatever may be the cause. In fact, Gayatri Spivak also opines that “*sati* should have been read with martyrdom” (302) and if being a sati is synonymous with martyrdom, then Begum Jaan’s women are *satis* and martyrs indeed.

The ending of the film explains why it has been titled *Rajkahini*. Abanindranath Tagore’s *Rajkahini* documents a series of tales dealing with the gallantry of the Rajput kings and queens — Shiladitya, Goha, Bappaditya, Padmini, Hambir, Chanda, Rana Kumbha and Sangramsingh. Mukherji’s *Rajkahini* ends with the women requesting Thamma to read Padmini’s tale from Abanindranath Tagore’s *Rajkahini*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to Jauhar as an act of resistance and defiance and a celebration of selfhood. Spivak writes:

In a further twist of the paradox, this emphasis on free will establishes the peculiar misfortune of holding a female body. ... “The Jauhar [group

self-immolation of aristocratic Rajput war-widows or imminent war-widows] practiced by the Rajput ladies of Chitor and other places for saving themselves from unspeakable atrocities at the hands of the victorious Moslems are too well known to need any lengthy notice” (*HD* II.2, 629). Although *jauhar* is not, strictly speaking, an act of *sati*, and although I do not wish to speak for the sanctioned sexual violence of conquering male armies, "Moslem" or otherwise, female self-immolation in the face of it is a legitimization of rape as "natural" and works, in the long run, in the interest of unique genital possession of the female. The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition (303).

Indeed, as Susan Brownmiller too reminds us, if there is raping done during war, it is invariably viewed as an act of the conqueror on the bodies of the women of the defeated enemy's side. Viewed from this perspective, Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* then becomes a study of free will and subjecthood. As Mukherji himself states in an interview, "It is very individualistic, very personal freedom oriented as opposed to political independence. It is more like a subaltern discourse from the perspective of people who were never really taken into account. They were never really stakeholders" (Kumar). *Rajkahini* ends with the Thamma reading aloud the section in "Padmini" which glorifies the voluntary act of mass immolation. Tagore writes: "Rani Padmini jumped into the well of fire with twelve thousand Rajput women – all beautiful faces of Chitor with their sweet words and sweet smiles turned into ashes within a moment. A cry rose from the breasts of all Rajputs — "Hail o great *Satis*" [translation mine] (Tagore 82). The act of *jauhar* thus becomes a heroic act of resistance against the patriarchal invader. Sati here acquires a new meaning. The sati here emerges not as a woman who has cohabited with one man, always the husband in a hetero-normative patriarchal setup, but one who acquires and retains possession of her own body and self and voluntarily annihilates the body to retain her sense of selfhood.

As the credits roll at the end, the full National Anthem written by Rabindranath Tagore plays in the background. "Bharat Bhagya Vidhata" loosely translated as "One who decides the destiny of Bharat" acquires an ironic meaning considering the role of the British patriarchs in partitioning India. The men acquiesce but Begum Jaan's women, much like the

Rajput women, stripped of home and nationality, are destroyed in body but remain undefeated in spirit.

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