

## Treatment of Women: A Comparative Study between British and Bengali Ballads

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***Abstract:** The depiction of women in both Bengali and British ballads is generally negative, and their depiction satisfies the patriarchal framework and stereotypical mindset. They have no identity of their own and are identified in relation with other men. But within this overall negative portrayal, women in Bengali ballads are depicted in a more positive manner than women in British ballads. Bengali women possess diversity in their attitudes, skills, and tastes; they are independent, confident, passionate, determined, and devoted. On the other hand, British women are considered wicked, jealous, lecherous, and murderers; they are treated brutally by their male counterparts, are tortured, raped, and even murdered.*

***Keywords:** Ballads, Patriarchal Society, Freedom, Infanticide.*

### 1. Introduction

Women are depicted in quite a large number of British and Bengali ballads either as protagonists or as characters and the depiction is both positive and negative. Although both the depiction is influenced by the patriarchal pattern of society, the contrast between Bengali and British ballads in the treatment of women is quite illuminating. In a number of British ballads, women are murdered, raped, and violently beaten by their male counterparts, are considered sinful temptresses and lecherous when they try to behave independently, disobeying their male counterparts; they are positively depicted when they are obedient and do not revolt, when they abide by their families, and follow their lovers, husbands, fathers or brothers without questioning them. In Bengali ballads, although women are depicted in a way to meet the demands of the patriarchal society, they are not harassed, tortured, or murdered by their men even if they disobey them. They are sometimes shown as meek, fragile, and dependent on their male counterparts. Again, women in Bengali ballads are symbol of loyalty, genius, honesty, and sacrifice for love. Interestingly, in quite a number of ballads the heroines have the ability to assert their freedom and they possess a towering grandeur. It is quite certain that in both types of ballads poor women suffer more than middle class and aristocratic women. Women appear much more inferior to men.

The source of inequality and discrimination between male and female characters emerges out of the principle of a patriarchal society where these ballads originated; a society where men control over women, and different structure such as religion, law, education, and so on influence the everyday life so much that male domination is perceived as a normal and natural state.

Through the characterizations of women characters, the balladeers satisfy the patriarchal framework and stereotypical mindset. In both British and Bengali ballads, the identity of woman is determined by her relationship with a male, e.g., somebody's wife, beloved, daughter, mother or sister. Most importantly, the portrayal of female characters is grounded on the belief that women are weak and insignificant creatures who need security from their male counterparts.

I am very much interested in the comparative study between British and Bengali ballads in regards to the portrayal of women. Although geographically both the lands are far distant and both the lands have different social systems, there are some similarities in the treatment of women. The depiction of female characters is, on the one hand, negative and full of violence, and on the other hand, positive, passive and objectified; the characters are socially constructed and are the part of a patriarchal hierarchy. Most importantly, I will show that although women in both kinds of ballads are considered and shown inferior to men, women in Bengali ballads are portrayed more positively than women in British ballads. I will prove this comparatively positive depiction of Bengali women by contrasting British and Bengali ballads on issues like women's assertion of independence and freedom of choice, cruel treatment by their male counterparts, murder of own child, education, and so on. I will analyze Bengali ballads "Mahua" in detail to show the determination, commitment, courage, passion and freedom of Bengali women; I will also analyze British ballad "Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie" (C. 239) to show social evils like infanticide and forced marriage, and to depict the helplessness of British women.

## 2. Brief History of Bengali Ballads

Although it is erroneously considered that Bengali literature is a derivative and a part of Sanskrit literature, it has a distinct tradition and has developed independently of Sanskrit literature. The evidences which are found in the forms of folk tales and ballads show individuality and distinctiveness in terms of style, language, and portrayal. "The Bengali ballads can be traced back to the early 'Pala Period' (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and even to times prior to it; it can reasonably be assumed that a long line of previous story-tellers and bards made and remade many of the old and often still unknown ballads and tales" (Roy, 1999, p. 25). "Eastern Mymensingh, an old and historical region, has been the repository of medieval Bengali ballads and it is from here that the gems of medieval Bengali ballads were first recovered" (p. 25). These ballads represent the life, culture, and love of the then people, and the style and magnificence of these ballads can be compared to the greatest lyrics of any time. Ballad in Bengali language is known as "Geetika" and Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen first coined the term to describe "Pala Gaan". Ballad is also known as "Gatha" which means narrative poems. Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sen has collected and compiled lots of ballads, especially Mymensingh ballads, and he can be compared with American scholar and folklorist Francis James Child for his fascination for ballads and folklores.

## 3. Women in Bengali Ballads: Varied but Comparatively Positive Portrayal

In the history of Bengali folklore, the existence and contribution of women is very much important. Geetikas and other indigenous writings are composed by male writers with elaboration of female characters and their experiences. The appearance and depiction of women makes the Bengali ballads self-sufficient and convincing. Again depiction of women in ballads varies. “The female characters vary greatly; rarely belong to any particular pattern or stereotype, and surprisingly, never allow social inhibitions to regulate their love-life” (Roy, 1999, p. 27). In our society and in the ballads, women do not have their own identities and they are identified by their relationship with male figures. The female characters are busy maintaining the family, and they devote themselves in service of their male counterparts.

“Women in Bengali ballads, especially in Mymensingh ballads, have freedom in both social and sexual life and they get married according to their own choice” (Sen, 1988, vol 3, p. xxxvi). If the choice of the girls run counter to that of their guardians, they do not abide by them rather listen to their own hearts. In doing so, they remain truthful to their vows but behave as humble girls without showing any clear spirit of defiance. The characters in these ballads show great freedom and individuality. In the poem “Mahua”, the girl Mahua is meek and loving but shows her uncompromising attitude to her love. In the ballad “Firoz Khan Dewan”, the girl Sakhina is so bold and defiant that she, in spite of her father’s strong opposition, marries Firoz Khan and launches a war against her father to rescue her husband from prison. In the ballad “Andha-bandhu”, a princess falls in love with a blind beggar and leaves her husband for her true love. She does not cheat her husband by pretending to love him rather feels no remorse and hesitation in marrying the beggar. This spontaneous and mutual love between man and woman conveys the sense of freedom. “Behula” is another love ballad where Behula, the heroine, and Menoka, her friend, select their husbands at the age of seventeen. There is no restriction on their falling in love, and although they fall in love with strangers (not necessarily have sex) before their marriage, their activities are not questioned by anybody which shows the flexible attitude of men towards women.

### **3.1 Mahua in “Mahua”: The Epitome of Love, Determination, and Freedom**

In the poem “Mahua”, the Brahmin girl Mahua is kidnapped by Humra, a gypsy leader, at the age of six months and no reasons behind the kidnap is mentioned. The initial part of the poem glorifies her physical beauty where she is compared with a gem on a serpent’s hood or a bright stone in a dark house. She is so beautiful that her beauty can distract even a saint. The messenger of Naderchand describes her beauty:

“Hear me, O Lord, a new band of gypsies have arrived in our city

With them is a young woman.

I have never seen a maiden as beautiful as this gipsy girl,

He who sees her will get mad.” (Scene: 3, Line: 4-7)

I think, in this part of the poem the physical beauty of a woman is unnecessarily highlighted and her physical charm is considered more important than her virtues. This is because of the typical male psychology that wants to see female as more beautiful although gradually her virtues come to the foreground.

Mahua is used by her gipsy group to grab people’s attraction and attention. Not only that, she is also depicted as a device for gaining success. She is very much valuable to her group and they depend on her for making profit. This supports the fact that in Bengali ballads women are shown not only as physically beautiful but also as useful and important to their male counterparts. Mahua and Naderchand gradually fall in love with each other. Although Mahua is in deep love with Naderchand, she, at first, dare not marry him thinking of the evil consequences of their marriage. She, finally, decides to elope with him disregarding the consequences. This decision gives her character a certain grandeur and individuality, and by making the decision she asserts her independence.

Unfortunately Naderchand is drowned in the river and Mahua is taken away by a merchant. Here Mahua surpasses every other character. She frees herself from the evil merchant by her outstanding intelligence. She brings her lover back to life through determination, patience, and hardship. She saves her chastity from the very hermit who has shown her the way of bringing Naderchand back to life. There is a scene where she carries Naderchand on her back in order to escape:

“After much thought, she decided on her course. Slowly did she place Naderchand on her shoulders. It was midnight. She walked on but glanced behind all the while to see if the fiend of a hermit was following them.” (Scene: 20, Line: 86-88)

Here she is portrayed as superior to any other male character. Although Mahua is confined in a patriarchal society, she goes against her family, elopes with Naderchand, and by doing so, she, actually, breaks the convention, expresses her feelings, and asserts her independence.

#### **4. Brief Overview of British Ballads**

It is normally accepted that ballads can be described as narrative stories that are sung. The storyline of the older ballads stress back many hundreds of years. Their theme and function may have a link with Scandinavian and Germanic folk tales and songs. “Musically they were influenced by the Minnesinger” (Jacobs, 1972, p. 20), people who wrote and performed “Minnesang”- the tradition of lyric and song flourished in Germany in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is quite difficult to identify the exact origin of ballads but “it is generally felt that the ballad had its origin in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the oldest recognized ballad is Judas” (C. 23) (Housman, 1952, p. 15). Although there have been many theories about the originators of ballads, the most prominent of

them are: minstrels, dance, dance tunes, monks, and communal composition. Caffrey (2002) comments that some ballads are distinctively English or Scottish in origin but the older ballads are more likely to have a European source as their beginnings, deriving from earlier poems and old folk tales brought into Britain by its many invaders, immigrants and soldiers returning from foreign wars. British ballads can be classified into three major groups: traditional, broadside and literary ballads. Francis James Child, well known for his collection of folk-songs, collected a total number of 305 ballads which were published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898.

## 5. Depiction of Female Characters in a Patriarchal frame in British Ballads

“Women characters in Child Ballads are caught in the bind that has been made evident through the feminist critique of the patriarchy; females in a male dominated world are subject to oppression whether they act or do not act” (Radner, 1993, p. 55). In rare cases a ballad woman is able to escape the bind through verbal quickness and great mental strength. Quite a number of ballad stories in the Child corpus are love-stories of some sorts or concern crimes of violence deriving from sexual relationship. What is surprisingly sad is that in many ballads female characters are cruelly treated by their male-counterparts; in many incidences they are raped, mutilated, severely beaten, and, in the worst cases, murdered. In these ballads, the arrow of blame is always shot at women. Peggy Seeger (1996), a folk singer and ballad scholar, points out to the fact that singers happily sing songs in which women are beaten, mistreated, marginalized, tortured, belittled, and murdered. Jean R. Freedman (1991) adds that even if a ballad ends happily for a female character, the happiness is often purchased at too great a price (p. 8-9).

From the feminist point of view, this imbalanced portrayal of men and women emerges from the principle of a patriarchal society where these ballads were composed. In that society male domination and women subordination are considered normal; even if a ballad was created by a woman she had to conform to the patriarchal framework as well. We can divide the depiction of women in British ballads into three types all of which arise from a patriarchal and misogynist society. Firstly, women as negative characters: here women are presented as greedy, lecherous, adulteress, sinner, and murderer, etc. The ballads “The Twa Sisters” (C. 10) and “Child Owllet” (C. 291) fall under this type. Secondly, women as oppressed by the forces of patriarchal society: they are helpless and are bound to obey the society; they are treated cruelly by their male counterparts. The ballads “The Knight and Shepherd’s Daughter” (C. 110), and “The Cruel Brother” (C. 11) can be included in this category. Thirdly, women as positive characters: Women are depicted positively when they are passive and obedient. Tam Lin” (C. 39), “Geordie” (C. 209) are two examples of ballads that deal with women under positive light.

### 5.1 “Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie”: Jeannie’s Forced Marriage and Death

This particular ballad is the story of Jennie, her forced marriage with Lord Saltoun, and her eventual death. This ballad depicts the plight and the helplessness of Jennie who loves

Auchanachie but is forced by her father to marry Lord Saltoun. The story of Jennie is the story of women in British ballads who have almost no control on their life and no freedom of choice. Jennie's parents are very pragmatic and they try their best to convince her to marry Lord Saltoun. They say that although Auchanachie is handsome, he has no wealth and land; on the contrary, Lord Saltoun has high tower and vast land area, and he is much more noble and superior to Auchanachie. Here, Jennie's parents select the bridegroom for her based on material wealth only; beauty and love bear no importance to them, nor do they care for their daughter's choice.

Jennie is shown quite defiant and bold as she insists on marrying Auchanachie although in the end she has to marry Lord Saltoun. She is the victim of such a society which does not care for her choice or desire. She says,

“O you that are my parents to church may me bring,  
But unto Salton I'll never bear a son;  
For son or for daughter, I'll ne'er bow my knee,  
And I'll die if I getna my love Auchanachie.” (Line 29-32)

After the marriage when Lord Saltoun asks Jennie to come close to him, she replies that she will never be in the bed of him. Her father asks one of the maidens to put off her gown but she pleads to them that if she does not get Auchanachie she will die very soon, and she dies in the same day. When Auchanachie comes and finds her dead, he kisses her cold lips and dies out of shock. The last stanza is very pathetic:

"He kissed her cold lips, which were colder than stane,  
And he died in the chamber that Jeanie died in". (Line 59-60)

Jennie tries her best to be independent but ultimately has to be defeated by the terrible forces of the society. In that society women's voice is not heard. They have to abide by their families and have to bury their freedom and individuality. They are tied by the evil and traditional notion of the society, are not able to go beyond it, and thus are helpless. Jennie's father compares her to a prostitute when she shows her love for Auchanachie in a direct manner and wants to marry him. This sheds light on the fact that women's choice, love, and desire are discouraged by the society. Jennie is the victim of a patriarchal society which wants to dominate women and portray them as helpless and sufferer.

## 6. Comparatively Positive Role of Bengali Women over British Women

I have mentioned earlier that I will compare both Bengali and British ballads based on some issues and will show that the depiction of female characters in Bengali ballads is more positive and less misogynistic than women in British ballads. The first issue on which I will compare both types of ballads is the women's assertion of independence and freedom of choice where Bengali women are much more ahead of British women. Women in Bengali ballads, especially

in Mymensingh ballads, can choose their own lovers and husbands. Sometimes they face opposition from their families but are never treated cruelly; they are able to make their voice heard. On the contrary, British women dare not go against their families and fail to assert their independence. Even if they go, their voice is silenced by the family members and they suffer bitterly in their hands. Mahua in the ballad “Mahua” leaves her family and caste to be united with her lover, and Sakhina in “Firoz Khan Dewan” shows her vigor and freedom by going against her father but we do not find this freedom in British ballads. The protagonist in “The Cruel Brother” (C. 11) is stabbed by her brother as she refuses to marry the man the family has selected for her, and in “Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie” (C. 239), although Jeannie, the protagonist, loves Auchanachie, she is forced to get married with Lord Saltoun and dies broken heart.

Unlike British women, Bengali women are treated positively by their male counterparts. Whereas in British ballads women are beaten, tortured, raped, and even murdered, nowhere in Bengali ballads do we find the evidence that women are cruelly treated by men. In “Andrew Lammie” (C. 233), the girl Annie falls in love with Andrew but her family does not agree and her brother beats her severely. She dies either by broken heart or her back is broken by her brother. The maiden in “Crow and Pie” (C. 111), is offered by a man to be his mistress and when she refuses, he rapes her. But in Bengali ballad “Mahua”, Mahua is captured by a merchant who wants her to be his mistress and is rejected. The merchant could easily assault Mahua sexually but instead he waits patiently for her consent. It is true that in some Bengali ballads women are seduced by men but we do not find any evidence where women are beaten, raped or murdered. In “Young Benjie” (C. 86), Benjie murders his beloved out of rage and throws her body in the river.

In Bengali ballads women are not accused of infanticide whereas in some British ballads women are shown pregnant either by having sexual intercourse or by being raped, and they kill their illegitimate child to save their face. “Mary Hamilton” (C. 173) is one of the finest examples of ballads that deal with the theme of infanticide. In Bengali ballads, woman are not put in such a bad situation to be bound to kill their babies as they are not deserted by their men, and even if they are deserted, their families take care of them and the babies. Although most of the female protagonists in Bengali ballads are portrayed as having self-confidence, courage and freedom, not a single ballad gives the slightest hints that they have sexual relation with their men before their marriage, and that is why they do not have to worry about unexpected pregnancy, the birth of illegitimate children, and the subsequent infanticide. The conservative Bengali society and the conservative depiction of women do not allow them to have pre-marital sex, and ultimately save them from suffering and committing a heinous crime like infanticide.

In British ballads we do not find any clear reference to women education but in Bengali ballads we do have the clear evidence that the citizens get proper education irrespective of sex and caste. In “Firoz Khan Dewan”, Sakhina can read and write and in old “Chandikavya” story,

Srimanta, a gipsy girl, receives the same education as that of a Brahmin. Princess Vidya, in the story “Vidyasundar”, is highly educated and learned. So, after analyzing all those issues it can be said quite clearly that in ballads Bengali women are more privileged, and are portrayed more positively than British women.

## 7. Conclusion

It is quite clear from the paper that the depiction of women in both Bengali and British ballads is to a larger extent negative. They are depicted the way the patriarchal society wants them to be. Women are depicted in all the possible negative ways; they are depicted positively only when the society thinks that they are within their limit and that they are conforming to the norms and values of society. But within this overall negative portrayal, Bengali women are depicted more positively than British women. Women characters in many Bengali ballads are more diverse in their attitudes, skills, and tastes. They are livelier and their voices are heard. They comply with their families but also defy when they need to assert their freedom. These women defy the framework of patriarchal society where they are dominated verbally. They possess different traits including love, patience, determination, devotion (to husband, family and lover), personality and self-confidence. On the other hand, British women are shown as evil, lecherous, jealous, greedy, murderers, and so on. They are shown being handled brutally by their male counterparts, and are helpless. Although Bengali society was and still is more conservative than British society, the depiction of women in Bengali ballads is more positive, tolerant and liberal than women in British ballads regardless of their (Bengali women's) compliance with and defiance of society.

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