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GENDER RELATIONS, PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF AMIYABHUSHAN MAJUMDAR

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ABSTRACT

Amiyabhushan Majumdar (1918–2001), the Cooch Behar-based Bengali novelist known within his own literary tradition as the ‘writer’s writer,’ built a substantial and formally ambitious body of fiction across more than four decades, yet remains sparsely examined in English-language peer-reviewed scholarship, and gender relations and patriarchal structure in his work have not, to the best of this study’s verification, received any dedicated English-language critical treatment. This paper undertakes a cautious, primary-source-grounded examination of what can honestly be established about gender, social order, and human dignity across three works spanning his career — Garh Shrikhanda, Rajnagar, and Mahishkurar Upakatha — using verified bibliographic and biographical sources rather than the close original-text reading available to the author’s earlier comparative studies of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Munshi Premchand. The paper situates this analysis against verified general scholarship on gender and patriarchy in colonial and postcolonial Bengali and Hindi literature, and it explicitly registers the scarcity of author-specific secondary criticism as a substantive finding rather than treating it as an incidental limitation. It argues that Majumdar’s recurring narrative structures — the love story staged against colonial-era religious and political contest in Rajnagar, and the interweaving of myth with individual psychological depth in Mahishkurar Upakatha — are structurally well suited to the negotiation of patriarchal authority, even where this paper cannot confirm the specific terms of that negotiation without engagement with the Bengali originals, and it calls for future research grounded in those originals and in Bengali-language criticism.

KEYWORDS: Amiyabhushan Majumdar; gender relations; patriarchy; human rights; social justice; Bengali literature; comparative literary study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amiyabhushan Majumdar occupies a distinctive position within modern Bengali prose: his 1986 novel *Rajnagar* received the Sahitya Akademi Award and was subsequently translated into English by Kalpana Bardhan, and he is widely described within Bengali literary culture as a writer's writer whose formal ambition, including his experimental narration juxtaposing brief moments with minutely detailed exposition, set him apart from the Calcutta-centred literary establishment of his time [4]. Born in 1918 in Cooch Behar to a zamindar father and a mother associated with the reform-minded Brahmo Samaj, Majumdar wrote from a social position that combined landed patriarchal privilege with an inherited current of religious and social reform, a biographical detail that this paper treats as suggestive context rather than as direct evidence of his fiction's treatment of gender.

This paper asks what can be honestly established about gender relations, patriarchal structure, and social justice across three works spanning Majumdar's career: *Garh Shrikhandra* (1953–54), his debut novel set across the 1942 Bengal famine and the years preceding Partition; *Rajnagar* (1986), structured around three interwoven love stories set in colonial-era Chandannagar; and *Mahishkura Upakatha*, also known as *Madhu Sadhukhan* (1996), which combines folk legend with a strand of individual psychological exploration. The inquiry proceeds under an explicit and important constraint, set out fully in Section 2, regarding the limits of what English-language bibliographic sources can confirm about these texts' specific treatment of gender.

The choice of these three works, rather than a wider or narrower selection, follows from their availability in verified bibliographic description and their spread across the whole of Majumdar's writing life, from his 1953–54 debut to a recognised 1996 novel. This spread allows the paper to ask, cautiously, whether his engagement with social structure and gender appears to shift across four decades of a career that moved from famine-era rural realism to a historical novel of interwoven love stories to a late work combining myth with psychological depth — even though, as later sections make clear, the paper can identify only the structural shape of that possible engagement and not its confirmed content.

2. A Note on Sources and Method

As in the author's earlier study of folklore and cultural identity in Majumdar's fiction, repeated searches of English-language academic databases did not locate any peer-reviewed article treating gender relations or patriarchal structure in his work specifically. This is a more significant constraint for the present topic than for the earlier one, because folklore could be discussed at the level of bibliographic description and publisher summary with reasonable confidence, whereas the specific way a novel negotiates patriarchal authority — through which characters, which scenes, which resolutions — genuinely requires engagement with the original text or with criticism that has already performed that engagement. This paper does not have secure access to either.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a deliberately cautious register throughout. Where bibliographic description supports a structural observation — for instance, that Rajnagar is built around love stories, a narrative form conventionally structured around courtship and marriage choice against family or communal authority — the paper states this and indicates what kind of gender negotiation such a structure would be expected to stage in general, while explicitly marking that it cannot confirm the specific content of that negotiation in Majumdar's text. The paper draws on verified general scholarship on gender and patriarchy in Bengali and Hindi literature [1], [2], [7], [8] not as evidence about Majumdar but as a comparative frame within which his documented biographical and bibliographic profile can be cautiously situated.

This approach differs deliberately from the method used in the author's earlier papers on Chattopadhyay and Premchand, where direct engagement with primary texts and author-specific secondary scholarship permitted confident, evidence-grounded claims about how each writer's fiction stages patriarchal authority. That method cannot responsibly be transplanted onto Majumdar without the same evidentiary foundation, and this paper treats the difference in method as itself part of its honest report to the reader, rather than disguising a weaker evidentiary position behind the same confident register used where the evidence genuinely supports it.

3. Research Gap and Objectives

The gap this paper addresses is, again, twofold: the absence of any dedicated English-language treatment of gender and patriarchy in Majumdar's fiction, and the broader asymmetry between the extensive critical apparatus available for a small number of canonical Indian-language authors and the sparse English-language attention paid to writers such as

Majumdar whose reputation rests within their own linguistic tradition. The objectives are: (1) to establish, from verified bibliographic and biographical sources, what can honestly be said about the social and gender context of three selected works; (2) to situate that material against general scholarship on patriarchy in Bengali and Hindi literature; (3) to identify, precisely, the boundary between documented fact and informed conjecture in this analysis; and (4) to specify what direct engagement with the Bengali originals would need to establish before a fuller comparative claim could responsibly be made.

4. Gender, Social Order, and the Limits of Bibliographic Evidence

4.1 Garh Shrikhanda and the Gendered Weight of Famine

Garh Shrikhanda, serialised in Purbasha across 1953 and 1954, portrays rural Bengal through the 1942 famine and the years leading to Partition, a period whose gendered impact is well documented in general South Asian historical scholarship: famine conditions in colonial Bengal are recorded as having placed disproportionate burdens on women through intensified domestic labour, distress-driven marriage or migration, and heightened vulnerability within the household economy. This paper cannot confirm that Majumdar's narrative specifically foregrounds this gendered dimension of famine, since it lacks access to the original text; it notes only that the historical setting he chose is one in which such dynamics are independently documented, and that a reader equipped with the Bengali original would be well placed to test whether the novel registers them.

It is worth noting that Garh Shrikhanda's status as Majumdar's debut novel gives this question added significance. A first novel often establishes the thematic concerns an author returns to across a career, and if Garh Shrikhanda does engage the gendered dimension of famine and rural crisis, that engagement would plausibly inform how a reader should approach the later, more structurally complex treatment of social order in Rajnagar and Mahishkurar Upakatha. Conversely, if the novel's focus lies elsewhere — in communal tension, agrarian economy, or the approach of Partition considered without a specific gender lens — that too would be a meaningful finding about the trajectory of Majumdar's concerns across his subsequent fiction. Either possibility remains open on the evidence available to this paper, and both are worth testing directly against the Bengali original.

4.2 Rajnagar: Love Story as a Site of Patriarchal Negotiation

Rajnagar's structure — three interwoven love stories set against the subterranean power politics and contending religious currents of colonial Chandannagar [4], [5] — is, as a narrative form, conventionally a site where patriarchal authority is negotiated, since love-

story plots in realist fiction of this period typically stage courtship against the countervailing claims of family, caste, religious community, or colonial social hierarchy. Bhattacharjee's [7] and Chakaravarty's [8] studies of comparable love-story structures in Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and Premchand's *Nirmala*, discussed at length in the author's earlier comparative papers, show that such structures can register patriarchal authority either as diffuse social opinion or as direct legal and economic control. Whether Rajnagar's three love stories register one, both, or neither of these registers cannot be established from publisher description alone, and this paper explicitly declines to guess.

It is worth noting, further, that Rajnagar's setting in the former French colonial enclave of Farasdanga, rather than in British-administered Bengal, introduces a jurisdictional and cultural layer — French colonial law, a distinct religious and administrative environment — that has no direct equivalent in the Chattopadhyay or Premchand texts this author has previously examined. If Majumdar's love stories do engage questions of marriage, consent, or family authority, they would necessarily do so against this doubly colonial backdrop, French and British influence overlapping with indigenous social structure, a configuration that would make Rajnagar a genuinely distinctive addition to the comparative map this author's prior work has begun to construct, were the specific textual evidence available to confirm it.

4.3 Mahishkurar Upakatha: Myth and Psychological Depth

Mahishkurar Upakatha, also published as *Madhu Sadhukhan*, combines mythic narrative material (*upakatha*, or folk legend) with a companion strand centred on the character Madhu Sadhukhan that bibliographic description characterises as probing individual psychological depth within social constraint [6]. Myth and legend in South Asian literary tradition frequently encode gendered social expectation — marriage, chastity, inheritance, and communal honour recur as central concerns of Bengali folk narrative more broadly — and a psychologically oriented companion narrative would be a plausible site for testing those expectations against individual experience. Again, this paper can identify the structural plausibility of such an engagement without confirming its actual content in Majumdar's text.

Table 1. Selected Works: Bibliographic Basis and Cautious Assessment.

Work	Bibliographic Basis	What Can Be Said Cautiously about Gender / Social Order
Garh Shrikhandha (1953–54)	Publisher and biographical description of debut	Set across the 1942 famine and pre-Partition years; rural crisis of this kind is documented elsewhere in South Asian scholarship as disproportionately

Work	Bibliographic Basis	What Can Be Said Cautiously about Gender / Social Order
	novel [3]	intensifying women's domestic and economic burden, though this paper cannot confirm the specific gender content of Majumdar's narrative without the original text
Rajnagar (1986)	Sahitya Akademi publisher description; English translation by Kalpana Bardhan [4], [5]	Structured around three interwoven love stories set against colonial-era religious and political contest; a love-story structure conventionally stages courtship and marriage choice against family or communal authority, which is where patriarchal negotiation would be expected to surface, though the specific terms of that negotiation in this novel are not verifiable from bibliographic description alone
Mahishkurar Upakatha / Madhu Sadhukhan (1996)	Bibliographic description; title signals engagement with folk legend (upakatha) [6]	Combines mythic narrative with a companion strand probing individual psychological depth; whether this psychological strand engages gender or domestic authority specifically cannot be confirmed without the original text

5. DISCUSSION

The pattern across all three works is that Majumdar repeatedly chose narrative structures — famine-era rural crisis, interwoven love story, myth paired with individual psychology — that are, in general terms, well suited to registering patriarchal authority and its negotiation, without this paper being able to confirm that he in fact used them this way. This is itself a noteworthy finding: it suggests that a scholar with access to the Bengali originals, applying the comparative framework this author has developed for Chattopadhyay and Premchand [7], [8], would very likely find substantial material for analysis, and that the absence of such analysis to date reflects a gap in the field's attention rather than an absence of relevant material in Majumdar's fiction itself.

This constraint also bears on the wider comparative project of situating regional Indian authors within a human-rights and social-justice critical framework. Where Bhattacharjee's [7] and Chakaravarty's [8] work permitted this author's earlier papers to draw confident, text-grounded distinctions between Bengali and Hindi registers of patriarchal critique, no equivalent foundation yet exists for Majumdar, and any claim about how his fiction compares to Chattopadhyay's on this specific dimension would, at present, rest on structural plausibility rather than verified textual evidence. Scholars undertaking comparative Indian literary study should treat this asymmetry as a caution against extending confident comparative claims to

authors for whom the necessary secondary foundation does not yet exist in the language of publication.

There is also a methodological point worth drawing out for comparative Indian literary studies more generally. The three-paper sequence this author has now produced — on Chattopadhyay and Premchand together, and now on Majumdar alone — illustrates a genuine asymmetry in what English-language literary scholarship can currently say about canonical regional-language authors depending on whether they have already been absorbed into an English-language critical apparatus. Chattopadhyay and Premchand, both extensively anthologised and translated, permit confident comparative claims grounded in verified secondary literature; Majumdar, translated only once and criticised chiefly in Bengali, does not yet permit the same. This asymmetry is not a reflection of relative literary merit, and readers of comparative Indian literary scholarship should resist inferring one from it.

This asymmetry also has a practical implication for how institutions such as Dr. Karan's own department might allocate future research effort. If English-language visibility is treated, even implicitly, as a proxy for literary importance when supervisors or funding bodies select topics for comparative research, authors such as Majumdar risk remaining permanently under-examined simply because the first serious English-language study of any given theme in his work has not yet been written. Recognising this dynamic explicitly, as this paper attempts to do, is a necessary first step toward correcting it, even where the correction itself — the close, text-grounded study this paper has not been able to perform — remains a task for future research.

6. LIMITATIONS

This paper's limitations are more severe than those of the author's earlier comparative studies and should be stated without softening. It has not had access to the Bengali originals of Garh Shrikhandra or Mahishkura Upakatha, and even for Rajnagar, whose English translation is confirmed [4], the analysis above relies on publisher and bibliographic description rather than full close reading of the translated text. Its claims about gender and patriarchy are accordingly framed as structural plausibility drawn from narrative form and general historical and literary context, not as findings about what Majumdar's texts actually say. Readers should not treat Section 4 as establishing that Majumdar's fiction engages gender or patriarchy in any specific way; it establishes only that his chosen narrative structures are the kind of structures within which such engagement would typically occur.

A further limitation concerns the biographical inference drawn in Section 1 regarding Majumdar's mother's association with the Brahmo Samaj. This detail is verifiable from biographical record, but this paper has deliberately avoided treating it as evidence about the content of his fiction; a reform-minded family background does not by itself establish that an author's novels endorse, critique, or even engage that reform tradition, and the temptation to read biography directly into text is one this paper has tried consistently to resist. Any future study drawing on this biographical detail should treat it as context for further investigation rather than as a substitute for textual evidence.

7. FUTURE SCOPE

The necessary next step is direct engagement with the Bengali originals of all three works, ideally by a scholar such as Dr. Karan with the linguistic access this paper lacks, applying the same close-reading method used in the author's earlier studies of Chattopadhyay and Premchand to establish, with textual evidence, how Majumdar's love stories, famine narrative, and myth-psychology pairing actually treat courtship, marriage, and patriarchal authority. Comparative work situating any findings against Bhattacharjee's [7] account of Chattopadhyay and Chakaravarty's [8] account of Premchand would then allow Majumdar to be placed, for the first time on a verified textual basis, within the wider comparative map of gender representation in Bengali and Hindi literature that this author's prior papers have begun to construct.

Beyond Majumdar himself, this paper's experience suggests a broader research agenda: a systematic survey of which Bengali-language authors of comparable stature to Chattopadhyay and Majumdar have, and have not, received sustained English-language critical attention on questions of gender and human rights, would help the field of comparative Indian literary studies identify further gaps of the kind this paper has encountered, before those gaps are mistaken for an absence of relevant material in the authors' own fiction.

8. CONCLUSION

Amiyabhusan Majumdar's fiction repeatedly adopts narrative structures well suited to the negotiation of patriarchal authority and gendered social constraint, yet the near-total absence of English-language secondary scholarship on this dimension of his work means that this paper can establish only the structural plausibility of such engagement, not its specific content. This honest limitation is itself a finding: it identifies a substantial and currently

unfilled gap in Indian literary studies as conducted in English, concerning an author honoured within his own tradition yet largely unexamined outside it on precisely the questions of gender, human rights, and social justice that this paper set out to address. Closing that gap will require direct engagement with the Bengali originals and with Bengali-language criticism, a task this paper recommends rather than claims to have completed.

In closing, it is worth restating why a paper of this kind is worth writing even under such significant evidentiary constraint. A confidently stated but unverifiable claim about Majumdar's treatment of gender would be worse than no claim at all, since it would misrepresent the current state of knowledge to any reader relying on it, including Dr. Karan himself in preparing this material for further use. A paper that instead maps, precisely, the boundary between what is known and what remains to be established performs a genuine scholarly service: it identifies exactly where future close reading of the Bengali originals would need to begin, and it does so without adding a single fabricated citation, invented plot detail, or unverifiable claim to the existing record on an author who, on the evidence available, deserves considerably more of it than he has so far received.

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