Rajmohan's Wife: The First Indian Novel in English

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894): *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Anandamath* (1882 – about c.18 Bengal famines & Sanyasi Rebellion against East India Co.), *Devi Chaudhurani* (1884), etc.

Thomas and William Daniell; JMW Turner, Joseph Vernet

(a) Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling... The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. **(Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* 1757)**

(b) Because of the military successes of Cornwallis and the greater security provided by the new presence of large numbers of British troops, [Thomas] Daniell and his nephew [i.e. William] would be the first of the artist travellers to India to be able to journey through all three Company Presidencies – Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. **(Hermione de Almeida & George Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India*, 2005)**

A very rough timeline –

1600s: East India Company begins trading with Mughal Emperors; Calcutta [i.e. Kolkata] is growing
1700s: Increasing British tensions with Portuguese/Dutch/French; EIC militarises; 'Presidencies' start to be established
1757: Battle of Plassey; Bengal Presidency claimed by EIC
1786+: General Cornwallis as Governor of Bengal Presidency & Commander in Chief of British India
1780s-90s: The Daniells travel around British India
1799: Siege of Seringapatam (Kingdom of Mysore) – see e.g. *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins (1868)
1838: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay born into a Brahmin family in Naihati
1857-8: Indian Rebellion (sometimes known as the 'Sepoy Mutiny', etc.) – see e.g. *The Sign of Four* by Arthur Conan Doyle (1890) or novels about the Rani of Jhansi
1858: Government of India Act. Crown takes over; EIC dissolved & start of the British Raj
1864: Bankim writes *Rajmohan's Wife*

(c) Between the outfitter, and the Hindustanee, and the India House, and the Passage preparations, I thought I descried that he was getting dazed. **(CD to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 10 July 1857)**
I left the poor fellow on board the Indus yesterday, in good spirits – as little cast down as, at 16, one could reasonably hope to be with the world of India before one. **(CD to John Deane, 21 July 1857)** I am sorry that at this time I know no one in Calcutta. My second boy was there the other day — or is there now — but whither he will be sent, in these distracted Indian times, it is impossible to calculate. **(CD to J. Sheridan Muspratt, 4 Sept 1857)** Our Indian boy was at Dum-Dum (which means a school of musketry, some 6 miles from Calcutta) when last heard of… He likes the country and the life, of all things, and is quite happy. **(CD to Mrs Richard Watson, 7 Dec 1857)** My second boy is attached to the 42nd. Highlanders, and in the thick of the Indian tussle. **(CD to Cavendish Spencer Boyle, 5 Feb. 1858)** On the last day of the old year at a quarter past 5 in the afternoon he was talking to the other patients about his arrangements for coming home, when he became excited, coughed violently, had a great gush of blood from the mouth, and fell dead;—all this, in a few seconds. **(CD to Angela Burdett-Coutts, 12 Feb 1864)** My poor boy died in a very few moments, and with his mind full of coming home. **(CD to WC Macready, 10 Feb 1864)**

(d) There is a small village on the River Madhumati. On account of its being the residence of wealthy zemindars it is regarded as a village of importance. One Chaitra afternoon the summer heat was gradually abating with the weakening of the once keen rays of the sun; a gentle breeze was blowing; it began to dry the perspiring brow of the peasant in the field and play with the moist locks of village women just risen from their siesta. It was after such a siesta that a woman of about thirty was engaged in her toilet in a humble thatched cottage. She took very little time to finish the process usually so elaborate with womankind; a dish of water, a tin-framed looking glass three inches wide, and a comb matching it sufficed for the task. Then, a little vermilion adorned her forehead. Last of all some betel leaves dyed her lips. Thus armed, a formidable champion of the world-conquering sex set out with a pitcher in her arm and pushing open the wattled gate of a neighbouring house entered within it. **(Bankim, *Rajmohan's Wife*, 1864, 'The Drawers of Water')**

Some important terms: zemindar (landowner), bhadrolok (Bengali gentleman who embraces British culture), the Radha-Krishna tradition (esp. Vaishnava poetry), dacoit (bandit)

(e) As to Madhav, Champak and the rest, some are dead, and the others will die. Throwing this flood of light on their past and future history, I bid you, good reader, Farewell. **('Conclusion')**

(f) We need not detain the reader with a detail of either the dialogue or the prattle, as of their purport we will do him the justice to presume he has already some conception. **('The Protectress')**

(g) His elder brother had willfully left his inkpot behind when going to school. The child's eyes had fallen on it, and he was joyfully smearing his face with the ink. He seemed to be afraid of his brother coming back and snatching the inkpot away, and so was emptying the pot. **('Drawers of Water')**

(h) The walls of all the chambers above and below were well striped with numerous streaks of red, white, black, green, all colours of the rainbow, caused by the spittles of such as had found their mouths too much encumbered with *pan.* **('The Protectress')**

(i) The sun was shedding its mellowed parting beams on the house of Mathur Ghose, and the day which had been ushered in amidst the gloomy deeds which threatened the fate of Matangini was hastening to a close. The slanting rays fell at intervals on an open veranda, on the second floor. Tara was seated on the bare ground and was employed in tying the hair of her daughter into a *khompa.* **('Between Rival Charmers')**

(j) "You weep!" said Madhav, "you are unhappy." Matangini replied not, but sobbed. Then, as if under the influence of a maddening agony of soul, she grasped his hands in her own and bending over them her lily face so that Madhav trembled under the thrilling touch of the delicate curls that fringed her spotless brow, she bathed them in a flood of warm and gushing tears. "Ah, hate me not, despise me not," cried she with an intensity of feeling which shook her delicate frame. "Spurn me not for this last weakness; this, Madhav, this, may be our last meeting; it must be so, and too, too deeply have I loved you—too deeply do I love you still, to part with you for ever without a struggle." Did Madhav chide her? Ah, no! He covered his eyes with his palm and his palm became wet with tears. **('We Meet to Part')**

(k) *Rajmohan's Wife* and the 'world'—

On the two remaining walls, and placed lower than the terrific Kali and the gorgeous Durga, might be seen arrayed a few specimens of European art, and the exquisite conception of the Virgin and Child might itself be seen adorning the chamber the inmates of which had little knowledge what the artist's genius and engraver's skill had strove to represent. **('The Protectress')**

Some two or three English books were scattered on the couch, and one of these Madhav held in his hand but he hardly read it. He sat with his abstracted gaze fixed on the dark but star-besprinkled heavens which were visible through the open windows. **('What Befell Our Hero')**

…shrewd and restlessly active Irishman… **('The Last Chapter')**

She was still of that tender age when wives in her country speak always timidly to their husbands. **('History of the Rise and Progress of a Zemindar Family')**

It is unnecessary to try the patience of my readers by reproducing all of his [Rajmohan's] Billingsgate. **('The Truant's Return Home')**
…Brajendranath Banerji's 1935 translation of Bankim's Bangla self-translation of the first few chapters of *RW*…

I won't torture my readers' ears by quoting those sweet [lit. honey-coated] words here. **(UD's mum's translation, 2025)**

(l) The (Indian) 'country' and the 'city'—

…no daughter of the banks of the Madhumati, but was born and brought up on the Bhagirathi in some place near the capital… **('Drawer of Water')**

It was a far, far country whither she was going, and would she ever come back to the scene of her earliest affection? **('The History of the Rise and Progress of a Zemindar Family')**

(m) The 'local', the 'provincial', the 'regional'—

The characteristics of this setting are that it is *distinctive*, differentiated from the metropolis or from other regions within the nation, and that it is at the same time *familiar*… the province or region may represent an authentic site or source of national identity – a distillation of the nation; or it may take the place of a larger national identity that has failed; or it may register a wholesale disintegration of the categories of home: origin, community, belonging […] Regional fiction specifies its setting by invoking a combination of geographical, natural-historical, antiquarian, ethnographic, and/or sociological features *that differentiate it from any other region*. A provincial setting is defined more simply by its *difference from the metropolis* […] The region, then, is a place in itself, the source of its own terms of meaning and identity, while the province is a typical setting defined by its difference from London. **(Ian Duncan, 'The Provincial or Regional Novel', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger & William Thesing)**

There is a small village on the River Madhumati. On account of its being the residence of wealthy zemindars it is regarded as a village of importance. One Chaitra afternoon the summer heat was gradually abating with the weakening of the once keen ray of the sun; a gentle breeze was blowing; it began to dry the perspiring brow of the peasant in the field and play with the moist locks of village women just risen from their siesta. **('Drawers of Water')**

It is a notorious fact that many eminent zemindar families in Bengal owe their rise to some ignoble origin. **('The History of the Rise and Progress of a Zemindar Family')**

…mud floors and bamboo walls […] Some brinjals and salads were growing on the carefully tilled plot of land in front of the raised terrace before the outer room. The whole was enclosed by a reed fence with a bamboo gate. **('Drawers of Water')**

Some trees: mango, bur (oak), cocoa-palm, date-palm, acacia, tamarind, supari, bakul.

(n) Some etymologies from the Oxford English Dictionary—
Forest: also Mid.Eng. foreste. Old French *forest*… medieval Latin *forest-em* (*silvam*) the 'outside' wood… *foris* out of doors…
Jungle: also jangal, jingle, jungul. Hindi and Marathi *jangal* desert, waste, forest, Sanskrit *jangala* dry, dry ground, desert. In India, originally, as a native word…

(o) There are birds of evil as well as of good omen, and the owl is here, as elsewhere, a byword of ill luck. **(John Lockwood Kipling, *Beast and Man in India*, 1891, 'Of Birds')**

(p) Matangini in the jungle—

Childhood! That time when she used to lie in the open air, arm in arm with her beloved Hemangini, gazing on the silver orb that poured the sweet light and the interminable deep blue ocean on which she sailed! **('Midnight Plotting')**

In which the author narrowly misses an opportunity of introducing a few ghosts and regrets that he cannot gratify his young readers. **('Love Can Conquer Fear')**

At this hour of dread loneliness, a young woman would have to thread her way through a wild and jungly path. She was, naturally enough, superstitious and her rich imagination was stored with tales of unearthly haunters of the woods, and had fed on them since infancy […] The knotted trunks of huge trees showed like so many unearthly forms watching her progress in malignant silence. In each leafy bough that shot over her darkened path, she fancied there lurked a demon. In each dark recess she could see the skulking form and glistening eyes of a spectre or of a robber. All the wild tales she had heard of fierce visages and ghostly grins that had appalled to death the belated traveller, rushed to her imagination. The light crack of the falling leaf, the flapping wings of some frightened night-bird as it changed its unseen seat among the dark branches, the slight rustle of crawling reptiles among the fallen leaves, even her own footsteps made her heart fainter and fainter […] Gently gliding into the water at a spot where the spreading branches of the *Bur* cast a deep shadow, she sat down immersed to her chin, so that nothing but her head was visible, if indeed it could be seen where the dark water of the pool was made darker by the sombre shade of the tree. But still apprehensive lest the fair complexion of her lily face [should] betray her, she unloosed the knot of her hair and spread the dark luxuriant tresses on all sides of her head, so that not even die closest scrutiny could now distinguish from above the dark hair floating over the darkened pool […] "It might be an *apadevata* that I have seen." **('Love Can Conquer Fear')**

The reader will now follow us to the pool which had been the scene of Matangini's temporary danger and escape on the previous night. The sun had run a two hours' course in the heavens. Beneath a young tamarind tree, where the surrounding underwood lent a sort of cover, Matangini sat on the moist grass. Her clothes were wet; her *sari* had been soiled by mud, her usually curly tresses, washed by the drizzling rain, now fell in straight and loosely-flowing bands on her neck and arms; and her head was slightly bent to permit the sunbeams to play on that raven hair, darker than any cloud which had ever opposed their progress through the atmosphere. **('The Friends and the Stranger')**

Further Reading

If you'd like to read some Indian poetry in English, try Michael Madhusudan Dutt, *The Captive Ladie* (1849), anything by Toru Dutt, or an excellent anthology ed. Sheshalatha Reddy— *Mapping the Nation: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English, 1870-1920* (2013).
On trees being cut down: Charlotte Mew, 'The Trees are Down', GM Hopkins, 'Binsey Poplars'.

'Victorian Indian' issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 42 (2014)—cf. especially Sukanya Banerjee, 'Troubling Conjugal Loyalties: The First Indian Novel in English and the Transimperial Framework of Sensation'.

One study at the intersection of postcolonial and ecocritical theory: Graham Huggan & Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010).

Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915: Networks of British Empire* (2015).
Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (2002) & (ed.), *A History of Indian Poetry in English* (2016).
Supriya Chaudhuri, '*Rajmohan's Wife* and the Novel in India', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (2015).
Hermione De Almeida & George Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (2005).
Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (2011).
Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (2009).
Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (2002).
Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (1996).
Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000). See the *RW* chapter.
Susheila Nasta (ed.), *India in Britain: South Asian Networks and Connections, 1858-1950* (2013).
Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (2010) and *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (2016).

Important critics I mentioned in passing: Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*), Elaine Freedgood (*The Ideas in Things)*

On Billingsgate (the eighteenth-century place, and the idiom): Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2017).