

Countering Subordination: Muslim Women's narratives from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Women of the Indian subcontinent by and large have been silenced, oppressed, and marginalised by varied patriarchal, orthodoxical, and socio-cultural forces. History of colonialism, partition, and struggle for independence further accentuated their oppression in the name of the state, nation, and freedom. In context to traditional Muslim society of Bangladesh, women's oppression is prevalent on a large scale in the form of dowry, male dominance, illiteracy, poverty, pardah, incessant childbirth, preference for a male child, oppressive family pressures and stringent social norms for women. The physical, reproductive, sexual, and psychological health of women is severely impacted by marital violence. Muslim women short story writers from Bangladesh have enacted, contested, and negotiated the internal and external forces of dominance and control through voices of resistance that find expression within the framework of their creative works.

Keywords: Patriarchy, oppression, poverty, corruption, societal norms, customs etc.

In the context of Muslim women's short stories from Bangladesh, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein stands as a beacon introducing the creative world of women's writing from this region. Bangladeshi short story writers up to 1947 were predominantly Hindu, but a few Muslim women writers too started writing. Sufia Kamal (1911-1990) started her literary career during the 1930s and she became a leading poet of the country, she wrote prose fiction too. The actual flowering of women's writing in this region can be seen from the 1940s. With the establishment of *Begum*, a literary magazine in 1947 in Kolkata and later in Dhaka in 1950, women writers and readership emerged. From political issues to health matters, and scientific

debates *Begum* provided a literary space for women's essays, short stories, and poetry. The short story writers like Razia Mahbub, Helena Khan, and Rabeya Khatun were regular contributors to *Begum*.

The early period of Bangladeshi literature, which spans between 1947 and 1960, can be distinguished by its emphasis on rural life. This was because, despite Dhaka being the center of literary activity, the majority of writers were from rural backgrounds and based their works on their rural experiences. This category includes writings by early women authors. The characteristic features of the earlier decades of Bangladeshi literature were the existent oppressive feudal systems within the village, the role of zamindars, moneylenders, religious groups, religious beliefs, prejudices and orthodoxy, the system of veil, child marriage, polygamy, as well as the dowry system affecting the social and personal life of rural people.

With urbanisation and industrial growth in Bangladesh, the representation of urban life too became a part of literary writings. However, the literature from this time period illustrates the alienation that emerged with mass displacement and migration from villages to cities. The Language Movement (1848–1951) promoted a Bengali identity in order to take an oppositional stance against to the threat posed by the Muslim governing elite of west Pakistan. Bangladesh was eventually founded in 1971 as a result of Bengali nationalism, which was born in opposition to West Pakistani dominance and language issue. The fight for ethnic-linguistic identity has had a significant influence on Bangladeshi literature.

After 1971, the writing from this region attained a respectable stature. Women writers of fiction and short stories such as Jahanara Imam, Selina Hossain, Purabi Basu, Nasreen Jahan, Shaheen Akhtar, Makbula Manzoor, Neeman Sobhan, Niaz Zaman, Rizia Rahman, Saleha Choudhary, Parag Chowdhury, Syeda Farida Rahman, and others emerged and gained recognition in the literary horizon of the nation. Some younger and lesser-known writers such as Audity Falguni, Papri Rehman, Jharna Rahman, Dilara Hashem, Shabnam Nadiya, and others also made their mark on the literary scene. From Utopian fantasy to domestic realism of the mid-twentieth century, nationalism, social realism, and post-

independence were the issues taken up by these short story writers. Portraits of displacement, migration, resettlement, aftermaths of war, marginality, political corruption, ethnicity, and poverty are sharply etched through the women characters of these writers.

Short stories by Saleha Chowdhury and Purabi Basu, such as ‘The Daughter and Returning Home: 1972’, the story ‘Double War’ by Selina Hossain, ‘Why Does Durgati Weep’ by Parag Chowdhury, and ‘What Price Honour’ by Rizia Rahman highlight the fate of women in a liberated country where promises made were broken. Bangladesh’s creation in 1971 coincided with the deaths of 3 million people and the rape of 200,000 women (according to official numbers) in a nine-month period. A substantial number of ‘war babies’ were born as a result of the rapes. Parag Chowdhury’s ‘Why Does Durgati Weep’ illustrates the war’s long-term impact on Bengali Muslim women of East Pakistani. It is the story of Jamila and her daughter born of raped, along with many other helpless women during Bangladesh’s civil war. However, very few authors have tried to shed light on the war of Liberation saga from the perspective of a woman who had been raped.

Since the whole country was engaged in war with then West Pakistan, there was a disruption in economic scenario which was later intensified by the 1974 flood and famine. Natural disasters and calamities devastated the unstable economy of Bangladesh. Heavy rainfall from April to July of 1974 and a succession of catastrophic floods along the Brahmaputra River devastated Bangladesh, destroying crops. Several people died due to the shortage of food and one of the deadliest famines in recorded history claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million people. The famine was made worse by the new government’s inability and failure to provide relief to people.

During that period of crisis, several Bangladeshi writers raised their voices against extreme poverty, rampant corruption, and death by hunger. A journalist of *The Daily Ittefaq*, a Bangali newspaper, took photographs of two people living in extreme poverty, one wearing a net and another one posturing as if about to eat vomit, and published them in the newspaper. Rafiq

Azad (1941-2016), a Bangladeshi poet saw the photos and wrote a poem in anger “Bhat DeHaramazada” (Give me food, bastard! Or else I will eat the map). The poem presented a stark picture of utmost poverty and starvation in Bangladesh. It was indirectly aimed at targeting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, prime minister of Bangladesh, and his government’s failure to help the poor starving people. Extreme poverty, natural disasters, the failed government policies, and dying humanity find projection in the short stories of Muslim women writers of Bangladesh. Rizia Rahman’s short story “What Price Honour?” is written against the background of flood and famine and depicts the life of poor orphan woman Halimun and her struggle for survival. Through Halimun’s life, Rizia Rehman projects a realistic picture of her country and its people: “First, the army destroyed half the country. Then poverty added to our suffering. This time the floods have come like Azrael, the angel of death. The floods devoured the paddy and the betel leaves, now they will destroy our homes.” (Zaman & Azim, 85). Caught between war and natural calamity, it is the poor who suffer the most.

Khaleda Salahuddin’s short story “Relief Camp” is also written against the backdrop of flood and famine. The story is about homeless people who lost their homes due to the flood. The government set up relief camps for them but the food and other amenities could not reach their area. In a flood situation, the story projects a collective struggle of people from different strata of society living in the relief camp which ironically provides no actual relief. The story is a critique of the government’s flawed policies, poverty, and corruption. Bangladeshi Muslim women writers represented a variety of issues in their writings. Nation’s political history to the socio-economic scenario and issues related to women’s lives has been taken up by Muslim women writers of this region.

Bangladeshi writer Niaz Zaman's story “The Daily Woman” reveals the life of poor Bangladeshi domestic helps. Through the lives of Khalamma, the rich woman, and her domestic help, "the daily woman", as well as the domestic help and the Americans who adopt her infant girl, Zaman poignantly explores the economic disparity of third world women vis-

à-vis the first. A “daily woman” gives up her young daughter to an American couple who are unable to conceive their own child. She was leaving him because she couldn't feed him. Daily woman surrenders to her adverse circumstances as she could not feed her children and so accepts her owner's proposal. Niaz Zaman critiques the dominant first world power against the third world and their subsequent exploitation of third world marginalised people.

Bangladeshi women experienced oppression perpetrated by patriarchal systems, customs, and the laws governing marriage and divorce. Women are forced to occupy a subaltern space due to the patriarchal repressive practices that have eliminated female subjectivity and established male dominance. Contesting this viewpoint is Selina Hossain's short story “Motijan's Daughter”. The protagonist Motijan takes a stance against her mother-in-law's dowry demands, for which she is physically abused and denied food. She takes her own decisions and rejects her uncaring abusive husband who spends most of his time with his mistress. She gives birth to two baby girls from her lover and rejects the preference displayed by her mother-in-law for a male child. *Nasreen Jahan's story*, ‘The Stranger’ opens up spaces for interrogating patriarchal assumptions that strangle women's lives and aspirations. The protagonist Kusum is divorced by her husband for no particular reason. Later he wants her back and so arranges for her a hilla marriage, where the divorced woman is required to marry another man for a night and consummate the marriage first before being remarried to her former husband. Married off against her will to a vagabond, her former husband warns her against the stranger touching her body. Kusum rejects her husband's decision and decides to stay with the stranger. Kusum's growing awareness of her right over her own body and sexuality challenges her former husband's patriarchal mindset raising question about women's identity.

Jharna Rahman's “Arshinagar” is about a married Muslim woman, Halima from Bangladesh who is the mother of four daughters and two boys. She and her spouse Arafat live in a large house owned by her father-in-law. From the beginning of the story, Halima is presented as an obedient wife who carries out her household duties and gratifies her husband's daily sexual

needs. The turning point in the story comes with Arafat's mistaken death news and a body with resemblance to Arafat's physique is brought home. Halima too thinking of it as Arafat's body weeps bitterly over it. When after some time Arafat returns home and when he comes to know about Halima weeping over an unknown man's dead body, he condemns her of infidelity. The dedication of Halima is repaid with condemnation reflective of blind and irrational exercise of power vested in men by patriarchy.

"Projection" is a short story by Helena Khan that projects the insecurities of husband Rakib in relation to his wife, Husna. He thinks of Husna as his treasure, his property that he should wield full control over. Her behaviour, way of life, even despondency, and attitude was expected to be in accordance to Rakib's demands. The moment she tries to do things independently, Rakib restricts her. He begins to doubt Husna when he comes to know of Husna's friendly behaviour with other men. Helena Khan in this story tries to capture the day-to-day life of a middle-class couple where a married woman's life is controlled by her husband.

Bangladeshi women writers' questions raised in their stories are an attack on patriarchal society, biased tradition, customs, community, and state that are actual perpetrators of women's oppression. Shaheen Akhtar in her short story "The Make-up Box" debunks the Bangladeshi custom where sex workers are not given proper Islamic rights of an honourable funeral. Often treated as less than human in life, there has been little dignity in death for the sex workers and their bodies are frequently tossed into unmarked graves or dumped into the river. Mallika resists this custom and wanders from graveyard to graveyard to find just three and a half feet of land for her sister Mala's dead body. Wherever she goes for burial, Mallika sees a huge crowd who refuse allow burial space for the dead girl who had been a whore. After three days on the outskirts of the city near the river she finds an empty space to bury her sister. Mala was buried in a grave under the *hijal* tree. "Strangely enough, within an hour, small *hijal* flowers began to drop all over the grave covering it like a pink blanket" (Azim& Zaman, 225). Mallika gave an unconventional burial to her sister and rejects the rituals,

customs, and tradition that strangle human rights. For providing her sister a burial, she challenges society, patriarchy, and community that affirm no land for women.

Bangladeshi writer Nasreen Jahan in her short story “Different” project a different image of woman that societal expectations deny and mocks at her existence. The story is about a lame woman’s desire to be a writer who wants to write about her life’s harsh experiences and struggles. Her idea of writing and putting her experience in words is a subversive act that would undermine the working of hypocritical society in treating a differently abled woman as helpless and worthless.

Woman’s body has been idealised in its so called ‘perfection’ in which its attractiveness is measured by socio-cultural factors and the internalisation of such ideals of beauty that are constantly reinforced create either negative or positive image of the self. In south Asian countries woman’s beauty standards are measured on the basis of perfection of shape and skin tone. Colorism, or the preference for those with lighter skin over those with darker skin, is a feature of South and South-East Asian society that many women must endure. Colorism gets practiced within the same race against those individuals who do not fall under the approved category of shade of skin which is generally that lighter, fairer complexion is beautiful, whereas darker skin is not, a residual impact of colonialism. Naheed Husain, a Bangladeshi writer in her story “The Deal” criticises the mindset of Bangladeshi society, in which dark-skinned girls are not regarded as ideal for marriage, and hence are required to give a large dowry to the groom’s family. Aamirun is constantly rejected as her complexion is a big hurdle in her marriage and her father is compelled to offer dowry to settle her marriage. Naheed Husain by raising this issue of traditional South Asian societies condemns the commodification of women where dowry system treats brides as objects to be sold and bought.

The stories cover a wide range of topics. They deal with rural life, mother-daughter relationship, love, marriage, poverty, domestic violence, dowry, exploitation, oppression and

issues embedded in the everyday lives of women. With a great sense of compassion, imagination, and solidarity, writers portray the characters of day-to-day life. Most of the women writers delineate women from middle class or women who are underprivileged. Perhaps they try to trace the reverberations of their own self as women writers in the stories and characters they choose to represent. Their depiction of rebellious Muslim women characters attempt to question, challenge, deconstruct and subvert the dominant power structures that confine women's lives within the restrictive trajectory of domesticity and define their diminutive status in the world outside

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