

Women against Women: A Study of Purabi Basu's "Radha Will Not Cook today" and "Saleha's Desire"

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Abstract

The report examines a realist study on woman-woman relationship and explores that womanhood is more than sisterhood. In the Third World context, woman-woman relationship is based on irrational jealousy and sentiment. The true picture of Third World Bangladeshi women is that they are the embodiments of male psyche. Here women are dominated by both males and females. In reality, women are women's great spy as mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, sister-in-law against sister-in-law as appeared in the two charming short stories "Radha Will Not Cook Today" and "Saleha's Desire" by Purabi Basu (1949-), Bangla Academy award-winning feminist writer. Her rebel heroines Radha and Saleha challenged patriarchy by creating their self-reconstructed images; exercising free will and denying stereotypical set-roles. In the first story, Radha is an uneducated subaltern woman who denounces patriarchy by keeping herself aloof from one day's cooking. Saleha, in the second story, she is another poor subaltern who challenges patriarchy by cutting her lover's penis. In Bangladeshi patriarchal culture, a woman should be voiceless; mild in nature; and chief-co-ordinator in the house. If they go against these, they are questioned and criticized by other women belonging to the same patriarchal culture. Here Basu's two protagonists' new identities are re-colonized by the internalized notions of the elder female family members. Radha is entrapped by her mother-in-law and Saleha by her own mother. This paper investigates that in Bangladeshi culture, women lack women's support and they are the mouthpieces of male chauvinism due to their internalized notions of age-bound patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords

Bangladeshi Patriarchy, Internalized Notion, Subaltern Women,

1. Introduction

In the Third World context, a female subjugates another female and engages in a conflict of othering the other. This present paper wants to report that in Bangladeshi patriarchal society, women are dominated by both males and females. Womanhood in Bangladeshi societies is never free from an unending crisis of women against women. The article explores crisis in woman-woman relationship and Bangladeshi women's jealousy in the light of Purabi Basu's two sound-pleasant short stories, "Radha Will Not Cook Today" (Basu, 2007) and "Saleha's Desire" (Basu, 2004) in the context of Third World patriarchal culture. Basu has her own ways of dealing with the cultural entrapment of the guardians of patriarchy. They are the followers of the age-old beliefs because they have been already internalized by the thoughts of patriarchal hierarchy. Bangladesh lies in the Eastern part of the globe and once it had colonial experience as it was the part of Indian Sub-continent. So Basu's heroines can be analyzed from the perspectives of the Third World women. In post-colonial theory, the term "subaltern" describes the lower social classes and the "Other" social groups displaced to the margins of society in an imperial colony. A subaltern is a native woman without human agency, as defined by her social status. They are the uneducated-unemployed women of low social standing.

In Third World patriarchy, due to the stereotypical belief of society, there is the practice of "othering the other" that draws the limited margins for women. Sometimes the subalterns are "doubly marginalized other" referring to the categories of the marginalized among other marginalized categories. Double marginalized or colonized means when a person is victimized by both the external as well as the internal agencies. "Other" means when a person is treated as an outsider. Similarly, there are some women who are the objects of victimization by men as well as women too. It is a common tendency of Third World woman folk to belittle "other" women who cannot match up to the social expectations. The category of "other" women includes widow, divorcee, spinster, co-wife, second wife, scandalized, and childless. This category of women is relegated to a humiliating position of subservience and dependence. These categories of women are the outcasts in patriarchal society facing existential problems and belonging to the limited margins. In a patriarchal set-up, they are also described as the "doubly marginalized" as well as "other".

The South Asian women from different societies or cultures share the common attitude of jealousy that women are women's worst conspirators. Women-women relation lacks a rational bond rather it is based on emotional strain of jealousy. The subaltern women in these stories try their best to liberate themselves from hegemonic culture and show resistance in their own ways but are marginalized by elder female family members and, therefore, they suffer between

family responsibility and individuality. The text, “Radha Will Not Cook Today” (Basu, 2007) tells the story of a subaltern Bangladeshi woman, Radha. She is the protagonist of this story who belongs to a lower class Hindu patriarchal family. Her breadwinner husband Ayan, four-year-old son Sadhan, aged mother-in-law and school-going sister-in-law are her family members. Radha is represented with her typical four-fold status-sequences as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law. The whole family is dependent on her chief coordination. Like all marginalized women, she works from dawn to dusk. She is an ideal home-maker who rises in the crow-morning, then arranges meals for all, takes care of her school-going sister-in-law, mother-in-law and goes to bed at late night. But one day she decides not to rise earlier and stay in bed like the male counterparts of the family. She wants to retire from cooking for at least one day. Like Henrik Isben’s Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House* (Isben, 1879), she suddenly takes control of herself and exercises her free will. Surprising all, she is still on her bed as quoted from Purabi Basu: “It is time for Radha’s husband, Ayan, to go to market. It is time for Radha’s sister-in-law to go to school. Radha’s mother-in-law has completed her morning devotions and is awaiting her first meal of the day. But Radha is still in bed. Radha will not cook today” (Basu, 2007: 3).

In the second story “Saleha’s Desire” (Basu, 2007), Purabi Basu beautifully weaves the story of Saleha, a young Bangladeshi girl who lives in a small and quiet village of Tarapasha standing alongside the bank of the river Padma. She is the protagonist of this story who is represented here as a subaltern post-colonial woman. She has a sexual relationship with Sobhan, a young man from her village who lives in city. Sometimes he pays visits to Saleha and develops an adulterous love relationship and continues it for three years. Both of them enjoyed their secret love-game. But in his last two visits, he annoyed Saleha with his forceful act of seducing her. Because in those days she disliked it and did not feel to do that. Now it is one of the two last days when Saleha takes the role of a murderous action that she cuts the symbol of Sobhan’s male logo. She discovers that her sex-relation is a matter of power, not love. As “rape” is the violation of a woman’s chastity and beauty, similarly, cutting off a man’s “penis” will be the violation of his power and dignity. There arranged a local courtyard to investigate Saleha’s criminal activity. All villagers come but nobody finds faults with Sobhan’s scandalized visits rather they directly shame on Saleha. Her mother is found to curse her and seems to blame God why He does not give her death. But the story ends with Saleha’s “desire to live on”.

The Third World’s stereotypical belief and bias make their struggle for liberty more difficult. They are again colonized by both family and society. The Bangladeshi writers like Begum Rokeya (1880-1932), Selina Hossain (1947-), Purabi Basu (1949-) and so on have presented the female experiences from Third World perspectives. In order to shed light on woman-woman relationship with varied miseries encountered by Bangladeshi women, it is imperative to examine their real conditions from the Third World perspective. This research will investigate

that women are women's great enemies and explore that women are colonized by both men and women in Bangladeshi patriarchal culture.

2. Discussion

The Third World Women inherit the notions of inferiority from their mothers. Such internalized inheritance of inferiority is criticized by Clara Nubile: "... women do not have clear choices in their life but the chains inherited by their mothers" (Nubile, 2003: 33). Such internalized thoughts are reflected in the female characters of these stories. Internalized notion that is passed from women to women is another important obstacle in Third World patriarchal families. It is the woman herself, who often ill-treats other woman. "Sisterhood" means women must develop a utopian friendship and assert their bonding with one another. In such a world of injustice and exploitation the only hope for a woman is the help from another woman. But it is the one of the main problems that woman cannot understand woman. There is the communication gap on woman-woman relation. The mother-daughter; mother-in-law-daughter-in-law; and sister-in-law-sister-in-law (brother's wife and brother's sister) relationships lead to the continuous dilemmas. Belonging to the same gender, they are supposed to be united in a bond of understanding besides love and trust. But in reality, bitterness, resentment, dislike and envy are the dominant feelings in their relationship. Such conflict strains woman-woman relationship.

In Bangladeshi patriarchal tradition, the prerequisites of married life are with the role play of an ideal housewife, early riser, excellent cook, dutiful daughter-in-law, obedient wife, and sacrificing mother imposed by patriarchal culture. Women in Third World location never break away these roles as their males are the breadwinners. A Bangladeshi poor housewife is an unpaid proletariat and is often found working all the time and even till night. Household works create obstacles to the way of female identity. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out the general attitude of the housekeeping wives:

"The cook's moment of triumph arrives when she puts a successful dish on the table: husband and children receive it with warm approval, not only in words, but by consuming it gleefully... The validity of the cook's work is to be found only in the mouths of those around her table; she needs their approbation, demands that they appreciate her dishes and call for second helpings; she is upset if they are not hungry" (Beauvoir, 1949: 474).

Bangladeshi women image in this story is associated with domestic harmony and household peace. There is the division between woman's and man's work. In Bangladeshi societies the lion's share of work is on the shoulder of women. As Judith Treas comments: "Determining who cooks and who cleans in a household may feel like a personal decision couples make... cultural and societal characteristics have a major influence on how duties get divided up in homes around the globe" (Treas, 2011: 1).

In the first story, Radha's mother-in-law is a traditionalist-old woman whose ideology is confined to patriarchy. She is the voice of male chauvinism. Because she is a typical Bangladeshi woman who cannot think out of the narrow gender-biased roles of the patriarchal society. Here Radha's mother-in-law teaches her how to be meek and mild and trains her how to live and adjust in-law's house, how to obey or worship her husband. In a word, Radha is expected to be a "True woman". To quote Simone de Beauvoir: "Whereas woman's independent success are in contradiction with her femininity, since the 'true woman' is required to make herself object, to be the other" (Beauvoir, 1949: 291).

That is why, when Radha exercises a sense of power and liberty she is encountered with a series of questions and criticisms by her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law started to ask will her son go to the working place hungry or her daughter to the school with an empty stomach or will they all starve that day etc. Radha's silence and pensive mood to her mother-in-law urges her sister-in-law to say, "It is time for me to go to school" (Basu, 2007: 3). Radha is expected to be weak and voiceless and perform all the household duties. But she still remains silent and indifferent. She does not respond and then goes to the pond with a pitcher. Her angry mother-in-law is fire with her language and outbursts loudly: "I'm asking you, where did you learn to be so high and mighty? What is the matter?" (Basu, 2007). To quote Purabi Basu: "Her angry husband shatters the empty rice pot and leaves for the market hungry. Her sister-in-law steals in gentle steps to a neighbour's house. Her son Sadhan comes slowly to the pond and stands beside Radha. But Radha will not cook" (Basu, 2007: 4). It is the custom in Third World Bangladeshi society that women should be controlled by both males and elder female family members which create a lot of problems in female freedom and female identity. It is common in Bangladeshi culture that when a man does not cope with the silence or argument of his wife he takes the way of violence or physical torture as Radha's husband "shakes" her shoulder and "shatters" the rice-pot. Similarly, when a mother-in-law cannot tame her daughter-in-law she curses her as Radha's mother-in-law does the same. It is sister-in-law who always takes the sides of her brother and mother blindly. Radha's sister-in-law is too found to step towards next-door and probably she will degrade Radha to the neighbours. To quote Simone de Beauvoir: "Woman is not allowed to do something positive in her work and in consequence win recognition as a complete person. However respected she may be, she is subordinate, secondary, parasitic" (Beauvoir, 1949: 475).

In the Third World context, the stereotypical social structure of a Bangladeshi family is that the girls are expected to obey her in-laws without any question. This mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation is the comic quarrel around the glove. In most cases, mothers-in-law consider their daughters-in-law as competitors. In the same way, daughters-in-law do not regard their mothers-in-law with love and respect or consider them as older and wiser. In fact conspiracy, jealousy, rivalry, negligence strain woman-woman relationship.

Mothers-in-law show the attitude of the dominating tendency of the female representatives. In disguise, mother-in-law and sister-in-law are the voice of patriarchy. In the Bangladeshi societies, a mother-in-law is reluctant to do domestic works when a new bride comes in the family. Similarly, she does not want to urge her daughters to do household chores. She is in an argument that her daughters will serve in-laws house in future. As new bride comes she should serve all because this is her own family. That is why she should be the upholder of her family tranquility. Mothers-in-law seem to be over-protective to the role and status of her son and daughter. If her son helps his wife in household works he is too criticized bitterly. But if her son-in-law helps her daughter she will definitely appreciate it. If she has daughters she is found to take the sides of her daughters either rationally or irrationally. From the part of a daughter-in-law it is too observed that she never appreciates or loves her mother-in-law as she does with her own mother. Usually a subaltern mother-in-law is not solvent and she also feels financial insecurity with the arrival of her new daughter-in-law. So she never wants to retire from her exercise of control and power though she wants to retire from household works. For post-colonial subalterns such woman-woman relation is based on biased emotion or sentiment rather than on ideology and friendship. In this regard it is worth to quote from Naipaul: "Mothers-in-law were required to discipline the child brides of their sons, to train the unbroken and childish girls in their duties as child bearers, and household workers, to teach them to the almost philosophical idea of the toil and tears of the real world" (Naipaul, 1991: 178-179). In Third World societies, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law are always found to complain against daughters-in-law and brother's wife. A mother-in-law is found complaining against her and often accuses her for any sort of negligence of family duties as seen in "Radha Will Not Cook Today" (Basu, 2007).

Here it is clear to note that due to internalized notions of patriarchy women envy women. In Bangladeshi society, house works cause obstacles in the path of independent wish and freedom. From her childhood, a girl is taught that she is born to marry, procreate and serve other mutely. She is brought up with the idea that is "Woman is Earth" that is why she has to be docile, humble and loyal as she is going to leave her parental house in order to serve her in-laws' house. The obsession with pre-requirement of married life is one of the factors that causes obstacle for getting women resist and free. Being the voice of patriarchy the traditionalist mothers work as social intuitions who shape her to fit in these roles voluntarily as echoed by poet, Kamala Das (1934-2009) in "An Introduction":

"Dress in sarees, be girl.

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook.

Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in". (Das, 1965)

In this story, Radha's mother and mother-in-law are the bearers of patriarchal values who teach her. Radha's sister-in-law will get the same teachings from her

up bringers and will face the same conflict with her would be mother-in-law or sister-in-law. Similarly, Radha will do the same with her son's wife in future.

In Third World location, women are the pleasing making devices. Their body has been commodified, colonized and determined by males. There is a parallel between the colonizers' conquer over land and males' conquer over female body. As Indian scholar Ania Loomba notes, "Female bodies symbolize the conquered land" (Lomba, 1998: 129). In the second story, Saleha-Sobhan relationship is a matter of exercising a power-structure rather than of love or passion. In their heterosexual relationship, Saleha's identity is reduced to body and sex. Her body is colonized by Sobhan as her body is his own. One day Saleha takes control of her own body and does a violent work. She resists Sobhan's forces and cuts his male logo which is the symbol of power. Saleha strongly resists Sobhan's attempt to rape her by doing a dare-devil activity like Fulmati, the heroine of the Bangla Drama Sangshaptak (Kaiser, 1965) by Shahidullah Kaiser. In this play, Fulmati cuts an ear of a male counterpart, Ramajan at the time of his attempt to seduce her.

As the patriarchal society is always eager to seek faults from girls, everybody in the village criticizes Saleha's witch-like activity but nobody else seems to hate Sobhan's forces to rape her. Rather he is sympathized by all. Besides, there is as usual conflict between mother-daughter relationship in this story. Saleha's mother is found to wail and curse her daughter always. But Sobhan's father seems to support his son. Because he is the son, an asset-like gold ring. If a gold ring is deformed or de-structured it never becomes weightless or priceless. Still it is precious.

The subalterns are always expected to be voiceless and powerless. They should have coyness, fear. As Clara Nubile precisely observes, women are "doomed to carry" an emotional heritage of fear, servility, and the attempted invisibility of their mothers as well as an inherited anemia which is "the social burden and cultural humiliation of generations" (Nubile, 2003: 30). But Saleha in this story tries to liberate herself from the stereotypical image. She is found to call spade a spade when she talks to *Imam*, the city judge who comes to investigate this matter:

Imam: Did you know that what you were doing was a sin? That you'd have to go to hell? Aren't you afraid of hell and damnation?

Saleha: Since I'll have to go to hell, what's the point in feeling afraid? (Basu, 2004: 53)

In Bangladeshi context, shame is the crown for a woman. She cannot express her frankness and desire regarding love or sex. When she violets these typical roles, she is branded as scandalized. In this story, Saleha's openness is the weapon of her resistance like Radha's indifference in the first story. So when Imam inquires the actual reason of her criminal activity she speaks frankly. She confesses all the things that she did with Sobhan. She confesses that in their sexual relationship she enjoyed most of the time except the last two days. At those days

Sobhan forced her. Her straightforwardness surprises all. Because Saleha belongs to a conventional society where women are not allowed to choose a sex partner or have a pre-marital sexual relationship or express a sexual desire. But Saleha chose Sobhan and enjoyed her life as his beloved. She also confesses it in front of the villagers in the courtyard: "My life would be taking care of the cows and calf, cooking, boiling, and other physical labour. And then to be kicked around by my mother all the time. Sobhan bhai liked me. He never scolded me. Whenever he came I liked it very much. Sobhan Bhai had given me a lot of pleasers" (Basu, 2004: 53). In Third World societies, girls are victimized at the hand of domestic violence which is too reflected to the aforementioned statements.

Hearing these, all women of the community were stunned, ashamed and started to make sarcastic comments on Saleha. Her mother "kept on knocking her head on the floor". Saleha is not out of the never ending conflict of woman against woman. She is the matter of a saucy episode among the females. Saleha's mother is found to curse her daughter continuously and blames Allah why Saleha is still alive and why Allah still exists: "Now you have smeared choon kali on our family heritage. People are laughing at us. Such insult that you had to endure in front of the people of seven villages and yet you couldn't die, you burnt faced one! Why didn't you have poison or why didn't? You just hang yourself with a rope?" (Basu, 2004: 58). In this story, Saleha's mother and other village women are the embodiments of male psyche. Both Saleha and Sonhan are equally responsible for their scandals. But her mother is not blaming or cursing Sobhan. In this story, there is no unity in Saleha's relationship with her mother or other womenfolk from the village community. Here a girl is found to be the object of domestic violence at the hand of her mother and a matter of comic topic to the other village women. For her scandals, she is other among other. Saleha's is re-colonized by the female characters both in family and society.

3. Research Outcome

Previous articles on Basu only explored female resistance, rebel women, weapon of the weak etc. against patriarchy. But this research sheds light on woman-an-woman relationships in the context of Third World patriarchy. It explores that women are women's great enemies and reports on why women are against women and how women are governed by the internalized school of patriarchal hegemony. It equally explores that idealist or rational application of sisterhood is absent in Bangladeshi patriarchy and women against women is also a social hurdle to the way of female identity, individuality and liberty. The present paper also reports that women are dominated by both men and women in Bangladeshi patriarchal families.

4. Conclusion

As a Third World feminist, Purabi Basu seems to find out the crisis that Third World Bangladeshi women experience. Both Radha and Saleha represent the

image of the resistant subalterns who desire to have their own space in the orthodox patriarchal culture. They fight for freedom and raise their voice against the male dominated society. They have tried to be best to break the silence of suffering, tried to move out of the caged existence and asserted their individual selves but once again they are re-colonized by male-psyche of traditionalist females. They have tried to be themselves and yet they cannot break up the traditionalist ties. In Bangladeshi patriarchal society, women are dominated by both men and women and women are women's conspirators.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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