



## **THE ISSUES OF BANGLADESHI WOMEN: A SOCIO-LITERARY STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Bangladesh has historically been a land of many races. Long before the arrival of the Aryans in the 5th and 6th centuries BC, the Bengalees were already racially mixed; on that count, the Aryans described them as “sankaras” or “hybrid people”.*

*The ancestors of present day inhabitants of Bangladesh have therefore emerged from the fusion of such diverse races as the Austric, Dravidian, Mongoloid, Homo-Alpine, Mediterranean Brown, Aryans and so on. The earliest historical reference to organised political life in the Bangladesh region is traced to the writings on Alexander’s invasion of India in 326 BC. The Greek and Latin historians suggested that Alexander the Great withdrew from India, anticipating a valiant counter attack from the Gangaridai and Prasioi empires located in the Bengal region. Historians maintain that these empires were succeeded by the Mauraya, the Guptas, the empire of Sasanka, the Pala empire, and the Senas.*

### **1.1 Introduction**

Bangladesh is a melting pot of races therefore, has a mixed culture. Deep rooted heritage is amply reflected in architecture, literature, dance, drama, music and painting. Bangladeshi culture is influenced by three great religions Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in successive order, with Islam having the most pervading and lasting impact. Like a colorful montage, the cultural tradition of the country is a happy blending of many variants, unique in diversity but in essence greatly symmetrical.

### **1.2 Literature:**

Bangalees have a rich literary heritage. The earliest available specimen of Bengali literature is about a thousand years old. During the mediaeval period. Bengali Literature developed considerably with the patronage of Muslim rulers. Chandi Das, Daulat Kazi and Alaol are some of the famous poets of the period. The era of modern Bengali Literature began in the

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late nineteenth century Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate is a vital part of Bangalee culture. Kazi Nazrul Islam, Michael Madhusudan Datta. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Mir Mosharraf Hossain and Kazi Ahdul Wadud are the pioneers of modern Bengali Literature.

### **1.3. Women Legal Rights and Practice:**

In Bangladesh, Islam as a religion plays a vital role in determining women's rights and obligations. In conjunction with the general laws of the country, "Muslim Personal Laws, following the principles of sharia (Islamic principles and teachings), govern significant matters, such as succession, property rights, marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody of children, and fundamental rights"(Ahmed & Chaudhury, 1980). Muslim Personal Laws perpetuate gender inequalities by placing women under the control and authority of men. For example, a wife inherits only one eighth of her husband's property if she has only one or more children and one fourth if she is childless; a daughter inherits only half of a son's share; if there are no male children, a daughter inherits a fixed share and the rest of the estate is inherited by other agnatic relatives, such as a brother or father of the deceased. In brief, under the rules of inheritance, men always inherit more than women. Furthermore, there is a difference between women's inheritance rights and actual practice. In the name of local custom and culture, married daughters are expected to give up their inheritance in exchange for nair. The result is that many women lack property or resources to fall back upon in the event of divorce or a husband's death, and this puts women in a more dependent and vulnerable position. "The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, which governs marriage and divorce, allows up to four wives, provided each wife is treated equally." (Qadir, 1968) The fact that there are specific conditions under which polygamous marriages are allowed in Islam seems to be scarcely remembered while taking a second wife. Thus, Muslim women never enjoy equal rights in marriage and remain vulnerable in marital life. The husband in a marriage has a unilateral right to divorce without even showing grounds, whereas a woman seeking a divorce has to undergo extensive and complicated legal/judicial procedures, and suffers social stigma and often insurmountable difficulties in earning a living after divorce. As a result, more women stay in marriages, even abusive ones, rather than seek divorces. During my research in Bangladesh in the summer of 1996 and 1997, I interviewed several women (presently unattached either separated or divorced) who told me how much physical and mental torture they had endured in their marital relationship before leaving their husbands. According to their accounts, their sufferings were made worse by a number of factors, such as economic dependency, absence of state support, and the legal procedure, which seems particularly prolonged when divorce cases are initiated by women. All of the women are currently economically independent and their experiences have made them conscious about women's issues.

The legal conditions in which women live in Bangladesh increases their vulnerability to male violence. The Bangladesh legal system, derived from the British Penal Code and Common Law, has done very little so far to diminish women's vulnerability or protect them from violence. For example, when a woman is raped, the legal requirement of proving the rape through physical examination exposes the woman to tremendous shame and social disgrace. Jahan Roushan observed that,

*"In rural areas, where traditional village benches may adjudicate such incidents in the light of Islamic law, the requirement of proof also includes at least three witnesses! provides examples of many cases of rape, molestation, and abduction where women were deprived of justice due to minor technical or legal issues." (Jahan 1994)*

also gives examples of the sex bias that exists in law enforcement in Bangladesh. Women accused of having hurt or killed their assaulters are usually promptly arrested, whereas, in many instances, male suspects or aggressors remain free even when they are formally identified by the affected women. One of the women I interviewed shared this story:

*I wanted to go to the police station to report my husband's physical torture and verbal abuse. My brother, who is also compassionate, told me that the moment the police will be informed, they will contact my husband and will mention the charges laid. Then my husband will bribe them to be silenced and will increase his physical and verbal abuse. (Interview 1996)*

Such stories are common in Bangladesh. Women rarely go to police stations for protection because there are many cases of rape and sexual assault of women in police custody. It is clear that the legacy of the British Penal Code, Muslim Personal Laws, and the legal systems backed up by the state agencies condone gender discrimination, inequality, and thus perpetuate violence against women.

#### **1.4. Growing up as a woman in Bangladesh:**

A woman in Bangladesh experiences neglect and various forms of discrimination and violence systematically from the moment of birth. These practices are tacitly condoned and are legitimized through laws and customs in the name of cultural and religious practices that blatantly discriminate against women. In this section, I demonstrate the state of Bangladeshi women's vulnerability by showing how these discriminatory practices affect women through-

out their lives, from birth to childhood to adolescence to adulthood. I augment this section with my own personal experience of growing up in Bangladesh.

Ritualistic discriminatory practices begin at the time of birth in Bangladesh. For example, the birth of a male child is announced through azan (Muslims' call for prayer), welcoming the person to the Muslim community. "In contrast, no azan is given when a girl is born, and thus her arrival is not ritually recognized by the family and the community." (Noman, 1983) In rural areas, the body of a newborn male child is touched with a stick, whereas the newborn female body is touched with a glass bangle and a lazzabati vine a plant whose leaves fold when it comes in contact with other substances. Metaphorically, this ritual indicates the strength and unbend-able quality of the male as opposed to the fragile, shy, and submissive quality of the female. A son creates joy and optimism for the family, whereas a daughter receives a half-hearted welcome. When my fourth and youngest sister was born, my paternal grandfather was so upset he refused to see her.

From childhood, a girl in Bangladesh is expected to have two important virtues, patience and modesty, to comply with the socio-cultural values and practices that favor boys. For example, the best food is served to male members of the family, however wealthy the family is. According to a Daily Morning Sun article Malnutrition Rates Higher Among Girls,

*"Malnutrition rates among girls in rural Bangladesh are reportedly four to five times higher than among boys.<sup>2</sup> Nutritional deprivation is one example of the subtle violence perpetuated on women. In general, boys are considered to be assets who remain in the family to carry out responsibilities in later life. In contrast, a daughter is likely to be regarded as a burden by her own family." (Article Daily Morning 1994)*

A son is always preferred over a daughter for schooling. Physical care of the daughter and her schooling have been compared to "watering the neighbour's tree; you take all the trouble to nurture the plant, but the fruit goes to someone else" (Ka-beer, 1988) In Bangladesh, a child's sex accounts for variations in access to basic necessities of life more than any other factor.

In adolescence, a girl in Bangladesh spends much of her time looking after younger siblings, assisting her mother in the kitchen, doing the cleaning work at home, and performing other household chores rarely recognized in national surveys or statistics. During this stage, a girl is taught to sacrifice her individual identity for the religious and social values that make up an ideal wife and a good mother. The prevailing social attitude is that the earlier the daughter's marriage takes place, the more blessings befall the parents. Also, by the time a girl attains puberty, her parents or guardians are seriously concerned about protecting their daughter's premarital chastity. The adult life status of a woman is symbolized by her marriage, which is

expected to be arranged by her parents or male relatives. Furthermore, as men have control over the means of production by virtue of ownership of land or property, so also men have control over women's sexuality and reproduction throughout their lives. As Ka-beer notes, "a woman can be expected to be maintained by her husband as long as she is obedient, faithful and fertile" (Kabeer, 1988) The status and future of a marriage is dependent upon the wife bearing children. Due to patrilineality, the more sons a woman will bear, the more status she will earn in the house of her in-laws. This unequal gender relationship in social structure makes women vulnerable to subtle and overt forms of violence.

In Bangladesh, a woman is expected to be escorted by a close male relative, an elderly woman, or even a minor child, for any visit outside the boundary of the home. As a young, unmarried, female faculty member in a Bangladesh university, I lived on campus in a female students' dormitory. The dorm was surrounded by tall brick walls and had male guards on duty 24 hours of the day. Although I was a faculty member, I was expected to return to the dorm before sundown. Nowadays, young Bangladeshi feminists call it the "sundown law." Recently, female students of Dhaka University protested and staged demonstrations against this law and forced the university authorities to relax it so that women could use the university library until 9:00 pm. I was able to stay outside beyond sundown only with prior permission from the superintendent, who, incidentally, had a lower position than I did in the hierarchy of the dorm administration. After all, I was young and unmarried! I needed to be supervised and protected! I achieved my adult status only after I married, and only then was I able to maneuver through the mechanism of social control and free myself from various forms of subtle violence adopted even by the university culture.

### **1.5 Feminism in Bangladesh:**

One of the most important women's groups in Bangladesh is Women for Women: A Research and Study Group, located in Dhaka. It is a pioneer non-government, non-profit, voluntary women's organization, engaged in research and public education programs on gender issues with a view to enhancing the status of women. It was established in 1973 by a group of committed woman professionals, representing a variety of academic disciplines. The Group strongly felt the need for developing a sound information base for identifying the issues relating to the disadvantaged status of women in Bangladesh and for creating public awareness with a view to ameliorating the existing situation. Since then, Women For Women has been engaged in research, information, dissemination, advocacy awareness and motivational programs.

It is important to scale the global feminist discourse to the situation on the ground, that is, Bangladeshi Muslim women and their encounter with democracy and human rights. The government of Bangladesh has emphasized women's equal citizenship as a goal within an Islamic national framework. And although Bangladesh has legislated equality, it is far from



ensuring equality for female citizens. Bangladesh has signed the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with reservations. Bangladeshi Islamic political parties have unsuccessfully attempted to pass a blasphemy bill in parliament since 1998. In Bangladesh, family courts dispense Muslim personal laws in accordance with national laws. Yet in rural areas, the clergy run their own informal sharia adjudications that lie outside the control of the courts.

In recent years, Riaz observed that,

*“Women’s issues and violence against women in Bangladesh have received both national and international publicity because of the case of Taslima Nasrin, a controversial feminist writer now in asylum in Sweden. Nasrin has been highly vocal through her writings against religious fundamentalism, sexual discrimination, gender violence, and oppression of women in Bangladesh.” (Riaz, 1995)*

The inequality that women in Bangladesh face in nearly all aspects of life is legitimized and reinforced by the existing socioeconomic order and the state system. Therefore, gender inequality and its resolution in gender violence is embedded in the socioeconomic political structure of Bangladesh. “In many instances, not only is gender inequality practiced, but the demonstration of unequal power relations between sexes is encouraged in order to perpetuate the interest of the patriarchal order.” (Jahan, 1983) This becomes especially clear in an examination of women’s rights and of laws relating to violence against women.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Bangladesh is kind of considered to be one of the world's few Muslim democracies. We’re very moderate. We have this huge Hindu history and culture which people are really sensitive talking about. With India’s partition in 1947, we became East Pakistan, so a big part of our identity was to be Islamic. Despite the threat of radical Islam, we maintain our moderate identity which is why we wanted to break with Pakistan in the first place – one of many, many reasons.

But yes, I do write about those issues a lot. I write about women in south Asia, women in Bangladesh, Muslim women, stereotypes about women in the Middle East because - not only can I relate to it - but the big reason why I started my blog was because I was so frustrated with how our stories were framed. You know, how Eastern women’s stories were framed in the western media. I felt it was always coming from this kind of condescending point of view of, "Oh, brown women suffering?" or you know, "let’s give some sympathy or charity to brown women".

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## Interviews

This interview was taken in the summer of 1996 while I was conducting research for my project "*Women, Work, and Social Change*."