

The Everlasting Shackle of Patriarchy: From Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to Anita Desai

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Abstract: *It is now over one hundred years that the women are fighting for their emancipation, equal rights and right to decision making from their male counterparts. However, this long struggle seems hardly providing equal rights to women, let alone the emancipation that they seek mainly. Although there has been significant change how women lead their life today from one hundred years ago, the inherent structure of patriarchy still suppresses them. This paper intends to scrutinize the condition of women in selected writing of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a major proponent of feminism during the then British Bengal, and Anita Desai, a contemporary post-colonial writer on feminism in India. The objective of this paper is to prove that the women cannot attain emancipation from patriarchy even if they are provided education and economic freedom.*

Keywords: *Feminism, female emancipation, female education*

Introduction

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a major advocate of the mutated womanhood of the then British Bengal and she wrote extensively during the first half of the twentieth century. Her *Aborodhbashini* [The Secluded Women], published in 1931, depicts the suffering of women in the then highly patriarchal society. The women are treated rather as inanimate objects in ‘purdah’ or robe than being human. They are devoid of their basic rights to speak in front of the males, get out of the four-walls of their households and to take parts in decision making. Generally speaking, these are the basic things that the women have been fighting for over a very long time. On the other hand, after almost one hundred years Anita Desai published a short story named “The House Maid” in 2014 that depicts the condition of women in the post-colonial India where women have the freedom to work outside their household and make some kind of decision. They are free in terms of economic dependency and decision making. Yet their inability to have psychological freedom is highly prevalent. Therefore, it seems the treatment of women in this era of knowledge has changed only physically but the psychological crises are still on for the women. The female can probably change the way they are treated from time to time but the essence of feminine qualities will give strength to patriarchy to lurk on them. Peter Barry (2009) can be quoted here,

“There is some natural, given essence of the feminine, that is universal and unchangeable.”

If this author is correct, then arguably patriarchy is going to dominate the world for a very long time. The female fight for emancipation will still need to go a long way.

Literature Review

There are a lot of scholarly articles and research papers on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s “The Secluded Women” and ‘Sultana’s Dream’. These works mainly focus on the miseries and sufferings of women because of male dominance in the society. The writers discuss how women were objectified during Rokeya’s time. While making her observation on *The Secluded Women*, Sania Sanjida (2016) mentions,

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“Rokeya, through her sketches in “Abarodhbashini”, has satirized the then prevalent patriarchal society which would treat women unequally. She is here trying to bring out the darker side of the society about women to ridicule the follies and frivolities of the males. And in doing so, she warns very skillfully the male members of the society about the demerits of bringing the half portion of the people, womanhood, into confinement.”

In another instance, Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah (2014) maintains that Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain satirized “purdah” system of her society by some stories through narrator or through her own experiences. He says-

“Rokeya held a practical view on purdah as she made a clear distinction between veiling (purdah) and confinement or seclusion (Abarodh). Veiling as a means of suppression and seclusion in the name of religion and with the aim of denying women access to formal education and social interaction was completely unacceptable to her and so, this doctrine received merciless attack from her.”

Again ‘House Maid’ by Anita Desai got huge acclamation among the literary scholars and academics due to its portrayal of women in the twenty first century where women holds apparent power. In an observation over ‘House Maid’, Roohi Rachel D’cruze(2016) said,

“The story although lucid and simple at the outset provokes several arguments about the status of women in the post-colonial India”

Scopes and Limitations

Although there has been many critics both in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Anita Desai, none of them portrays light in the perspective that this paper intends to prove. However, due to the time constraints, this paper is no way a total glimpse on both these authors. Therefore, this paper is not an end in itself rather it invites positive criticism.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This is a qualitative assessment work. This paper will shade light on the mentioned works of both these authors through the lens of feminism. All through the time, different feminist writers have been writing from different perspective but getting almost nothing to equalize the voices of women or to provide freedom to the larger female folks. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) discusses the portrayal of women in male writer’s e.g. Milton, Pope and Rousseau work of fiction. Besides, Olive Schreiner’s *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, and Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* are also major works over the period to talk about the condition of women in different spheres of society. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain like them also wrote extensively to provide education and basic rights to women in her many essays. Education, Rokeya believed can only eradicate the ignorance among women and lead them to the path of glory and freedom. However, it is time that we evaluated the belief she held.

Portrayal of Women in Abarodhbashini

In *Abarodhbashini* Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote 47 short stories to portray the condition of women in her society. Basically she satirizes ‘purdah’ system of Muslim families through humor and sometimes through vividly pathetic stories of women. This ‘purdah’ system actually was the reason of their sufferings. The women of *Abarodhbashini* were like dolls of house to be played by the men and were not expected to perform any public role. They only took part in procreation and bringing up their children. It is important to note that they seemed in no way thinking of freedom and accepted the over-lordship of men. They seemed happy to be mastered by them. It becomes strange for the modern and post-modern readers with the lens of feminism and female rights to comprehend the lack of perception among the women about their rights. *Abarodhbashini* portrays

the real stories by which Rokeya Sakhawat wants to convey the message that God has asked the women to veil but not to confine them from the outer world.

The reports from *The Secluded Ones* presents the effects of seclusion, satirize sometimes with humour, and sometimes with pain. In the first short stories out of 47, Rokeya depicts the real picture of an orthodox Muslim family where women are not allowed to come in front of an unfamiliar person. We need to quote a whole story to have a glimpse of the condition of women. In authors words-

“A long time ago, the daughters of the zemindar of Pairaband, a village in the district of Rangpur, were performing the ritual ablutions prior to the zohr [midday] prayers. All of them were through except “Miss A”, who was in the middle of the ritual. Her personal maid, Altar Ma was pouring the water on her palms from a metal pitcher. Suddenly a tall and stout Kabuli woman walked through the back entrance of the inner courtyard. Alas! What a stir! The water pitcher dropped from Altar Ma’s inert fingers – she started screaming – “Alas! Where did this fellow come from?” The woman laughed and protested.

“Fellow? Which fellow are you talking about? I am a woman.” Miss A ran for her dear life and managed to reach her aunt’s room. Out of breath, she tremblingly blurted out, “Aunty, a woman in trousers is here! The lady of the house was startled and asked, “Has she seen you?” Miss A reduced to tears, nodded yes. The other women in the meantime stopped their prayers and rushed to shut all the doors to prevent the Kabuli woman from seeing the other girls of the family. From the speed and urgency with which they locked the doors one would have assumed that a wild tiger was loose in the courtyard.”(Hossain and Jahan, 2013)

Not only these instances but the women of the fictional place were not allowed to take any decision even about their marriage. Their marriage was controlled by the master of the house and it was not necessary to ask daughters’ opinion about marriage. Her stories 26, 30 and 34 depict the stories of women getting married without their consent. In that society the groom’s consent was taken as final judgment. Girl’s opinion was ignored by and large. The parents used to decide with whom she is getting married to.

Report 26 says the story of three sister’s marriage. The three sisters who are to be married have similarities in their name because in that time girl’s real names were kept hidden. So during marriage program the “Mulla” or the priest committed mistakes in uttering the names which resulted in the three sisters to be befitted with wrong persons. When the elder bride comes to know about the mistake, she prefers to keep silent rather than saying ‘kobul’ (the word of acceptance). But she is forced by her mother to say ‘kobul’. Later when one of the grooms sees that his wife is changed, he sues his mother-in-law to return his bride.

This situation was every day stories of the women which is prevalent in some other stories in the book. In another instance, the young girl forcefully married calls her own children illicit as she has not been asked about her opinion during her marriage and neither did she say ‘kobul’ during her marriage.

Traveling was another kind of torture for the ladies of *Abarodhbashinias* we find in stories 3, 22, 23, 24 and 25. The ladies are packed like inanimate objects while traveling outside. Women were put into the sacks, packaged like goods and what not? Rokeya mentioned that women are turned to be the heaps of things while traveling. People mistakenly sat on that and quickly stand up as they get frightened on seeing the heap moving. Report twenty five says Rokeya’s own experience while traveling. She visits her daughter’s house and requests her son-in-law to make arrangements for her to roam around and two granddaughters and her daughter are also to accompany her. Her granddaughters were excited to see different places through the window but their excitement doesn’t last for long to see the vehicle covered by black veil.

The Hindu women like the Muslim women were no difference to purdah system. In story 12, a Hindu woman who has gone to take a religious bath with her husband and mother-in-law also maintains purdah, some kind of obstacles to the eyes which restraints her from seeing anything. On her way back, she loses her companion in the crowd. After sometime, while looking for her husband, she sees someone wearing a yellow bordered “dhoti” and assuming that man to be her husband and starts to follow him. Few minutes later, the police stop them accusing the man for abducting someone else’s wife. Later the woman reveals that she has never seen the face of her husband and all she knows is that her husband normally wears a yellow bordered dhoti and so she mistakes the other man to be her husband.

In story 8, Rokeya depicts a house on fire like this-

“Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewelry in a handbag and hurry out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burned to death but did not come out. Long live purdah!”(Hossain and Jahan, 2013)

Without prolonging the writing, we can draw a conclusion about the condition of women depicted by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain that women had to protect thier “purdah” by all means.

Educated in the western ideas, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was hugely disturbed by the condition of women in her time and she evaluated the importance of education among the female. In her much acclaimed essay “Jago Go Bhogini (Be Awake Sisters)”, she tried to draw the attention of the male counterparts to provide education to the females. She argued providing education could lead the women to progress. She did the same thing in her famous novella “Sultana’s Dream” where she showed how women can take the lead of a state by educating them in science and politics. The text “Sultana’s Dream” is however considered an utopia by many. Whatever the case it, she was arguably naïve to the complexities of women that was to come or she could not visualize the complexities that will still hurt the greater women in the twenty first century.

Portrayal of Women in The Domestic Maid

In the short story named ‘The House Maid’, Anita Desai brings up the psychological tension in a household maid named Geeta working in an upper class family which has this character named Asha, the house-owner’s wife. Geeta is seen as a very vulnerable women coming out from the village for work in the city. She hardly lives from hand to mouth with her husband who also works as a day-laborer. In this story, Anita Desai does not portray women as being dynamic and self-sacrificing but as helpless and frustrated. She focuses light in their frustrations, perception of failure and a very solid awareness of the futility of existence. In Anita Desai’s words,

“No one would give these women a second glance. Why would they; what’s special about them? Nothing.”

Geeta is seen working on odd jobs simultaneously in four houses within a view to earning some extra cash for her survival. But when Geeta becomes late for work, Asha threatens her with her income. She threatens-

“Have you taken up other work on my time? I have to leave for office and I will be late because of you. This time I will cut your salary.”

This is sure to send nervousness and discomforts through Geeta’s nerves. Geeta cannot help but think about Asha as a very rude and ungrateful woman.

She sobs about on her condition saying-

“These rich people have no compassion for poor women like us. Don’t they ever realize that life is a daily struggle for us? They have all the facilities in this beautiful house, bathroom, running water, kitchen stuffed with at least two months of rations and snacks. But we do not have even the basic necessities to lead a dignified life. Even small delays makes them shout and curse us like hell. Who should I complain to?”

Probably woman like Geeta reserves to blame their luck and hold the God responsible but that is never going to change their condition and bring their emancipation. This story of ‘elite residential complex’ is different from what Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain depicted in her stories but only in context. The basic essence of domination is everywhere the same.

Thus the women live with “their gaunt bony faces. Their cotton sarees damp and limp due to constant wiping. Their ill-fitting blouses hang on their emaciated bodies” (Desai, 2014: p.4).

One point of the story is however mentionable to understand the clutch of patriarchy even in the condition of women where women like Asha is educated and holds a power position in the society through her job. Geeta while talking to her fellow mate, realizes that-

“You know, these women actually take out their frustration on us... They are also women and have to live under their husband, in-laws. If they are working then there is the frustration at office as well. Because they cannot take out this anger and frustration on anyone else, they take it out on us. That’s all.”

This particular point is highly related in proving the point mentioned in this paper. Before going to any other discussion, let us have a look at another line.

“The only difference between their lives and ours is that their husbands don’t beat them black and blue; for us that is the eternal truth, day in and day out.”

That is the difference between a working woman and an ill-educated women providing care to the rich, apparently economically free, people like Asha.

We can easily make a comparison between Geeta of this story and the overall female folks during the time of Rokeya due to their economic condition, decision making restraints, vulnerability and the futility of existence.

On the other hand, woman like Asha would be a dream agent of change for Rokeya who thought providing education will liberate woman. In this story, we see that Asha works outside. This can easily lead to the assumption that she is educated woman and can make her own decision. However, she is also not free enough to have gotten rid of the patriarchal supremacy. If we consider her as the representative of the collective women folk of her time, she becomes metaphorically important in understanding the psychological nature of the women. In a word, she is apparently living a life of luxury, freedom and peace but she is psychologically shackled which she cannot break. This shackle is the shackle of patriarchy.

Roohi Rachel D’cruze commented,

The story throws light on also how the domestic space is seen as the woman’s only domain, even though both the protagonist Geeta and Asha are working women. There is no way of getting out of domesticity or sharing the kitchen with the male counterpart. It proves to be a quintessential subaltern phenomenon that dominates the Indian frame of mind.(D’cruze, 2016)

Conclusion

Feminism in the twenty first century has become highly complex with the differences in understanding among women from different parts of the world. Besides, the differences in lifestyle, economic capabilities and philosophical encounters make feminists more confused

everyday about the concepts and way-outs of feminism at large. As a feminist, Rokeya Sakhawat's work is the primary phase of work that could only raise awareness among the women but could not provide the ground for a large scale riot to overpower the male counterparts in changing the role and taking the lead. On the other hand, in the twenty first century, in the works of Anita Desai, we see that things have changed emphatically but only in appearances. This apparent progress cannot impact the lives and psychological struggle that a particular woman or the women in general has to face in this era.

Long ago the ladies of *Abarodhbashini* faced highly dominant patriarchy and now-a-days patriarchy still exists but the manifestation has changed. For the women of *Abarodhbashini*, there was no way out to get rid of patriarchy but is it still not the case with women? To conclude, we will probably end up thinking like Geeta of *The House Maid* that probably the women still "need to find a way out of their misery, or thinking there is no way out".

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