

## WOMAN AS 'OTHER' IN THE SHORT STORIES OF CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESHI WRITERS

Mah-Zareen

Alumnus

Department of English and Humanities

BRAC University

email: mah\_zareen@hotmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Women, irrespective of all classes, races, religions and societies, have always been confined to particular roles sanctioned by the male-dominated society. The patriarchal ideologies regard women as "sexual objects" or mere "inessential entities" owned by their fathers or husbands. This parasitic treatment of women has robbed them of their individuality and independence, and rendered them powerless and dispensable. To get acceptance in the established order and avoid abnegation, women too have consciously or unconsciously incorporated these servile attitudes and paradigmatic norms endorsed by males and remodeled themselves as lesser beings or the "second sex". This incarceration and mortification of women has been exposed eloquently by Simone de Beauvoir in her *Le Deuxième Sexe* or *The Second Sex*. The despondent condition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century western women that Beauvoir unveiled still prevails in the lives of many 21<sup>st</sup> century Bangladeshi women. This paper will attempt to investigate the lives of these marginalized women of contemporary Bangladeshi society as reflected in contemporary Bangla literature to bring forth the discriminatory ideologies and beliefs that reduce women to subservient beings and detain them as universal gendered Others.

**Key words:** Simone De Beauvoir, marginalized Bangladeshi women, gendered Other.

### Woman as 'Other' in the Short Stories of Contemporary Bangladeshi Writers

Women have always been treated as 'Other', be it in history, literature, philosophy or in the actual world. They have been denied individuality, self-hood, power and agency. Their existence has always been evaluated in relation to their fathers, husbands or male children. They have been obliged to conform to the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society. Even then, they have not been granted respectable places in society after assuming these prescribed roles; they have been mandated to perform these roles in the paradigmatic fashion as well. To be just daughters, wives or mothers is not enough; women have to be servile, self-abasing, submissive, useful, uncomplaining, apologetic, and, above all, have functional wombs to be acknowledged as real women. As Monique Wittig (1993) has said, "'woman' is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a 'real' one" (104). If women fail to embody the mandated feminine features in them, they will be disgraced as lesser women and shunned from

society as abominable objects. These above-mentioned issues are splendidly portrayed in the translated compilation of short stories of five female writers of Bangladesh in *Celebration and Other Stories* (2015) by Mashrufa Ayesha Nusrat. These stories which gravitate around the lives of women unveil women's struggle for survival and individuation in the midst of patriarchy, poverty and persecution. In this paper I will investigate how the prescribed feminine roles affect the marginalized women in the poverty stricken society and strip them of liberty and individuality, and fix their positions as Others. Additionally, I will also discuss how these women attempt to negotiate their subject positions and yearn to free themselves from the agony of humiliation and violence within the limit of their marital/societal boundaries and how their endeavours fail or remain incomplete for lack of agency and acknowledgment.

Women have always been required to remain in a position of subordination imposed by the patriarchy. Abundant rules and regulations have been issued throughout history in different societies

to entrap women in a position of complete dependency upon men. Their confinement brings numerous baffling questions to our minds: What are the reasons behind women's relentless subjugation by men? Are women actually incapable of living freely with their own decisions and desires? What are women made of that makes it impossible for them to live without men's control and supervision?

To find answers to these questions, we need to inquire first what woman is. To this puzzling question "What is a woman?" Simone De Beauvoir readily provides the easiest and the universally accepted answer: "*Totamulier in utero*: she is a womb". (Beauvoir 23) Unfortunately, the treatment of women solely as a womb is still highly predominant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century society of Bangladesh, especially in the impoverished families. Here, women are entrapped in their roles as wives and child bearers and denied all recognition as independent sovereign entities. The patriarchal doctrine, "Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence", (Beauvoir 30) has been inscribed in women's minds and souls. Therefore, they only live in relation to their husbands and cannot rise over the boundary of marital sphere. They are locked in perpetual subordination and oppression, and regarded as burdensome, unwanted objects.

Lives of these marginalized women have found expression from various dimensions in the short stories of prominent Bangladeshi writers—Anwara Syed Haq, Papree Rahman and Nasreen Jahan. Their short stories "Pagli", "Parulee's Flying Episode", "Revenge", "Celebration" and "The Evening Mask" expose women's oppression, confinement and their parasitic existence in the society. All these stories (translated and collected from Nusrat's *Celebration and Other Stories*) deal with women who belong to the impoverished, uneducated and proletariat class. Sheuli, Parulee, Efu and Fulmoti are all robbed of independent identity and forced to find fulfillment in relation to others. As Beauvoir says, "They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands" (28). These women are reduced to the level of "sexual objects" meant for reproduction and carnal satisfaction. Even though the women abide by the laws and regulations imposed on them, their mere inability to satisfy the

demands of patriarchy brings them misfortunes and abrupt rejections.

In "Celebration", the writer, Papree Rahman, portrays the confinement, struggle and humiliation of a simple-minded, traditional housewife, Fulmoti. Fulmoti is the wife of Moijuddi and the mother of four daughters Bulbuli, Koitori, Tia and Moina. She has no notion of individuality and lives her life with her husband and children as she has been trained to do. She does everything that is asked of her, doing all the household chores, cooking food for everyone, catering the family including her old mother-in-law, bearing children, etc. But to borrow Beauvoir's insights, "the reproductive and domestic role to which" Fulmoti "is confined has not guaranteed her equal dignity" with her husband (Beauvoir 416). She sacrifices her interests and desires for the betterment of her husband and children. But she is never appreciated or shown any gratitude for her services. Their relationship replicates master-slave relationship where Moijuddi never considers Fulmoti's efforts valuable and praiseworthy; rather takes it for granted and holds her responsible for the slightest slip. On the other hand, Efu always considers it her duty and need to devote her life to her husband's demands. As Beauvoir aptly says, "however equally compelling the need may be to them both, it always plays in favor of the oppressor over the oppressed" (29). She carries on doing all the tasks by herself, even in a fragile and underfed condition with a full-term pregnancy. Instead of getting praised, she is constantly reprimanded and humiliated for her inability to produce a male child. Her husband, Moijuddi and his mother keep on accusing her for giving birth to female children. As it is of paramount importance to produce a son to continue the family lineage, Moijuddi goes on to take a second wife without Fulmoti's consent. He makes it very clear that Fulmoti cannot object, as her girls could not possibly continue the family line. In her mother-in-law's words, "A woman's word is valueless. She has to consent to whatever her husband decides" (Nusrat 49). Fulmoti frets under the humiliation and rejection cast upon her by this marriage. As she has always gained recognition through her husband, his departure from this bond means an annihilation of her existence. "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir 26). Thus, Fulmoti has been posited as

an Other by her husband and the society. As her life as a woman is inessential without marriage and husband, she is reduced to an unnecessary and unwanted object. The narrator says, "It was meaningless for Fulmoti to stay alive" (Nusrat 50). Fulmoti, along with her four daughters and one unborn child, sacrifices her life to flee from this burdensome world and the ever-servile existence as an "Other".

"Parulee's Flying Episode" by Anwara Syed Haq relates the demise of another compliant housewife, Parulee, unfortunately married to a drunk, penniless, imbecile and violent Shorfu. Parulee does everything to please him, remains half-fed with hardly any complaint and silently tolerates all tyranny inflicted upon her. Yet he accuses her of gorging food and often beats her to pulp. After getting kicked in her full-grown stomach, Parulee gives birth to a stillborn son. Losing her hope to find meaning in motherhood, Parulee descends into a stupor of frustration. "She roamed around in her unkempt hair, dragging along the loose end of her sari, from door to door and different locality" (Nusrat 94). Instead of sympathizing with her, everybody said she was possessed by some evil spirit and cringed away in fear. Thus, Parulee is condemned and eschewed as an Other. To borrow Friedan's language, "Her limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home" (Friedan 38). Still Parulee dare not leave Shorfu for she is too poor to bear her expenses and too weak to transgress the social codes. She knows all too well that "refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on" her (Beauvoir 30). Thus, Shorfu who sets Parulee up as an *Other* finds her in deep compliance. Yet she is not absolutely voiceless and compliant, she desires to break free from these patriarchal shackles and find a respite from her "forever unfaithful husband" (Nusrat 96). She longs to join the female labourers and to be the bread-earner of the family so that she could fight back at Shorfu. However, she cannot contemplate any of this and remains stagnant with Shorfu as she believes, "after all he was her *swami*, husband" (Nusrat 95). Parulee craves for motherhood "not to extend the bastard Shorfu's bastard family lineage" but for refuge from all the worldly worries and sorrows with "a bundle of joy" (96). She needs "a child to establish her own existence" (*Ibid*). Unfortunately, her dream miscarries with a still-birth for the second time. This time she cannot retain her sanity and meets

her death. Even though she is denied individuality even in death and marked as "Parulee, a mother of stillborn children", (99) she overcomes incarcerations and persecutions only through her death.

"Revenge" is an exquisite short story written by Papree Rahman that tells the story of a bold and undefeated woman, Efu. Efu is the first wife of Mohor Ali, a prejudiced misogynist. She was an expert house-maker and embodied every quality required in women. The narrator says, "She had kept their house so neat and clean. Not only had she managed her daily chores, but she had spent time doing embroidery" (Nusrat 101). She has fulfilled every requirement to be accepted by her husband and society. Yet she fails miserably after giving birth to still-born children twice. She is accused of killing her own children just after. Efu fails to "take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity" as she lacks "functional ovaries" (Beauvoir 23). Efu's incapability of producing hale and hearty male child renders her a lesser woman, as "not every female human being is necessarily a woman" (*Ibid*). Therefore she is chastised and criticized and discarded as an undesirable Other. After that Mohor Ali remarries to save his family line and to prove his potency, without even divorcing Efu, his first wife. Efu does not voice any protest against the marriage, yet on the day the new bride enters house she severs all ties with Mohor Ali and starts living on her own. Ali still feels attracted to her and tries to retrieve her to gratify his sexual desire. But Efu persistently eludes his advances and creates trouble to make his life miserable. She is untamable and defiant, and unlike other women she expresses her protests against injustice through her actions, if not by words. Her pissing on Ali's bed is not only an act of defiance of marital incarceration, but also emancipation from societal strictures on women. Madness or a façade of madness permits her to transgress gender norms and renounce her role as an *Other*.

"Pagli" (The Madwoman) by Anwara Syed Haq is another poignant story of an insane woman, Sheuli, who, after losing her son— her only hope to find fulfillment—retreats from the world and sinks into the declivity of madness. Although Sheuli loses complete cognizance, rationality and sovereign subjectivity, she releases herself from the patriarchal ideologies in many ways. Subverting the paradigmatic norms, she seems to live in a

world of her own where other people's decisions simply do not count. Failing in her role as a mother, she becomes aimless, senseless and strips herself of clothes and all sanctioned codes of society. But society cannot allow a mad woman to wander on her own without any male supervision. Without inspecting the reasons behind it, they call her names and pelt her with stones. She is tortured, rejected, rebuked and molested. She is not only robbed of her clothes, but also of her name. She is now only "Pagli" for everyone and a "sexed body" for lustful men. To borrow Beauvoir's words:

And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called "the sex," meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute ... He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (26).

Therefore, Sheuli's full post-natal body invokes only "wonder and amazement" in the minds of men like Khorshed (Nusrat 80). The men marvel "at the beauty of the woman's body despite all the battering" (81). Hence, Sheuli becomes nothing but a mere "female body" ready to be ravished to satisfy a male's turgid desire.

Nasreen Jahan's "The Evening Mask" is a story of an utterly unfortunate teenage girl. She has been sent by her mother to work as a domestic worker at the residence of a newly posted man in a small town. She yearns to assume a new identity by putting on a stolen mask over her face; she wants to hide from people's demeaning censures and men's lascivious gaze. But little does she know that nothing could save her from men's dark desire and unquenchable sexual appetite. The employer, who is reputed to be an educated, benign man, fails to identify her as a human being and sees her as nothing more than a "sexual object". "To smother the fire burning in him", he barbarously rapes the girl who is around his daughter's age, slits her throat with a kitchen blade and buries the dead body in the backyard" (Nusrat 111). It proves Beauvoir's saying that "the most mediocre of males believes himself a demigod next to women" (Beauvoir 33). Her "body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it" (25) calls forth her doom by turning her into an *Other*, a sex toy for men. Her innocence and conforming

attitude bring her nothing but torture, sexual abuse and death.

These stories expose the harsh reality of sexual politics that pervades the lives of marginalized lower class women in Bangladesh as in most countries of the world. The way women used to be regarded as "second sex" or "Other" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western societies when Beauvoir wrote her book *The Second Sex*, is still practiced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Bangladeshi societies. Women are still treated as objectified sexual bodies and are exhorted to be a real woman and remain a woman. Even in this era of economic development and scientific progress, "Woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man" (Beauvoir 26). Our society still promotes the "sex role [that] assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female", which arrests her at the level of animal activity and allots her lower tier in every aspect of life (Millet 1977). Fulmoti, Parulee, Efu, Sheuli or the nameless teenage girl, all of them emblemize this discrimination through their struggle and sorrow. They fail to acquire individuation, selfhood and a sense of belonging. Nobody acknowledges them as independent subjects. Despite their incessant attempts and sacrifices to fit in this demarcated world, they remain unfit for all roles except child-bearing mothers.

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