

Revolutionizing Agency: Sameness and Difference in the Representation of Women by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Mahasweta Devi

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the sameness and difference between two distinguished Indian authors, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) and Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926), representing two generations almost a century apart, will be under analysis in order to trace the generational transformation in women's writing in India, especially Bengal. Situated in the colonial and postcolonial frames of history, Hossain and Mahasweta Devi may be contextualized differently. At the same time their subjects are also differently categorized; the former is not particularly concerned with subalterns whereas the latter specifically focuses on the effect of race and class on gender. The quest for the 'self' and 'subjectivity' is more pertinent in the latter and consequently the appeal for agency is based on a crude power struggle. Hossain, a philanthropist who championed the woman question, believed that striving for equality should be a collective process which could be achieved by spreading awareness among fellow-inmates inhabiting the prison of patriarchy. Like Euro-American first-wave feminists, Rokeya advocated the necessity of education among women in order for them to be able to comprehend their plight and 'awake' for the cause. She addresses fundamental issues of feminism like education and the systematized claustrophobia within the domestic space. Whereas Mahasweta Devi, has been an activist writer who is regarded as the brand ambassador for the support of the marginalized, deprived and denotified tribes of India. It is her mission to provide succour to the marginalized sections, especially tribes from the Purulia district of West Bengal, like the Kherias and Shabars. As an activist writer she explores tribal life and allied socio-political issues which reflect their agony.

KEYWORDS

agency, colonial studies, Bengali literature, feminism, marginalization, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, Third World women, powerlessness

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The female literary canon in India may be traced back to the 6th century BC comprising songs in Pāli, mainly composed by Buddhist nuns who sought emancipation from domestic power politics by renouncing the same and seeking solace in the cult of Buddhism. But they were, or chose to be unconscious about patriarchy which was the cause of angst in their lives. Since then it has traversed a long trajectory and evolved in due course. However, women's writing as a modern phenomenon has emerged and evolved as a result of several socio-cultural conflicts that originated in nineteenth century India. 'The Woman Question' was a matter of much upheaval both globally and locally and in India the emancipation of women was an outcome of the efforts of reformers like Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) who challenged the existing social order in colonial Bengal.

As a consequence of Western domination and influence, the educated elite (*bhadralok*)¹ adopted certain reforms and/or liberation policies like campaigning against the rigid caste system, polytheism, idolatry, animism, *antahpur/purdah*, child-marriage and *sati*.² Parallely they pioneered the imperative need for educating the masses, particularly women and Rammohan Roy, the Father of Modern India declared women morally superior to men but unable to demonstrate their capabilities because they were denied education. In the process they took recourse to the *Vedic* era, also called the Golden Age of Hinduism during which women were believed to be the possessors of *śakti* (energy/power) and deified as Durga (protector) Kali (destroyer), Lakshmi (nourisher) and Saraswati (creator). Also, masculine and feminine forms like Uma-Mahesh, Radha-Krishna, Lakshmi-Narayan and Sita-Ram were worshipped which represented androgynous synergy, much in sync with the concept of Ardhanarishwara in Hindu mythology. In those times however, women were entitled to advanced education in the *brahmacarya aśramas* after the sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana saṁskāra*) during which they studied the Vedas and eventually entered the marital domain at the age of 16 or 17 years where they commanded respect from the family and was on the same platform as that of her consort. The revivalists of the 19th century used the aforementioned condition for underpinning their strategies of socio-cultural development which could be achieved by means of edification alone. Though the Calcutta School Society was set up to promote women's education, certain problems continued to plague

¹ The *bhadralok*, literally meaning respectable men/gentlemen, was a new social group of the late 18th or early 19th century who gained a high status on the basis of their economical and cultural standing.

² Certain customs specific to women in the staunch Hindu community. Cf. KUMAR 1993: 7.

the same. Geraldine Forbes in *Women in Modern India* (1999) identifies three major setbacks that it suffered: the colonial authorities did not guarantee moral or financial assistance; the British model of schooling could not be successful due to Indian customs and prejudices; Indian daughters were used to the *Zenana* system of education and could not adapt themselves to schooling. However, a breakthrough was achieved when the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society came forth to champion the cause.

Here Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's and Mahasweta Devi's fictionalized women serve as representatives of the literary sub-genre of women's writing thereby portraying characters who delineate social marginalization almost akin to ostracism, which is meted out to women — specifically South Asians in this case. In fact as cultural commentators, both Hossain and Mahasweta prove to be adept in the art as there is a fine blend of fact and fiction within their narratives despite the mode of treatment being slightly different. The sameness lies in the choice of subjects whereas the difference lies in their time frames and respective modalities which will surface in the course of the discussion.

Similar was the contention of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932), a pioneer of women's emancipation in undivided Bengal/colonial India, who firmly believed that the only getaway for women into a haven of their own was by being educated. The colonizers of the nineteenth century were more concerned about 'how' women can be modernized rather than 'what' (FORBES 1999: 12) women want. They were on a 'civilizing mission' and condemned the moral crutch that India strictly adhered to. But Susie Tharu observes that:

[...] embedded in the explicit programs of the reform movement were massive ideological reconstructions of patriarchy and gender that underwrote the consolidation of imperial power [...] and it is these agendas [...] that the more radical and subversive women's literature of the period addresses (THARU and LALITA 1993: 152).

Hossain belongs to this category of writers and it is overtly expressed in her non-fiction. In *Streejatir Obonoti* [The Degradation of Women],³ where she observes that the very term *streeshikhya* — education of women (HOSSAIN 2001: 22) is considered ominous by both the genders due to hegemonic social conditioning. The *lakshmi* — angel in the house, is preferred since she would be naïve and easily malleable like *mati* — clay (HOSSAIN 2001: 23). She refers to the condition of women as *kada* —

³ All translations in this paper are done by Prasita Mukherjee, unless otherwise is indicated.

slimy, mud/trampled clay (HOSSAIN 2001: 23) and *jorpodartha* — inanimate objects (HOSSAIN 2001: 30) and argues that the sole method of effective ‘resistance’ to such systemic and systematic oppression would be the proper and overall education of women which would enable self-emancipation, both physical and psychological.

Hossain bases her proposition on the crude power-play of patriarchy which her sisters⁴ fail to identify. She asks them to rise from their slumber and wage a war against the existing order to acquire freedom from their ‘enslaved’ condition and ‘parasitic’ existence. She introduces several tropes underpinning ‘imprisonment’ — *karagar*, *beri*, and *churi* (HOSSAIN 2001: 17, 433). She validates her point further by stating that women are made to wear jewellery to prove their marital status — as being married women and also being the wife of a wealthy man. This is only an extension of the subject-object/colonizer-colonized binaries based on the ‘worldview’ that the ‘absolute superiority’ of the ‘human’ (colonizer) over the ‘non-human’/‘sub-human’ (colonized) is parallel to that of the ‘masculine over the feminine’ (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS and TIFFIN 2006: 256).

As subjects of patriarchal domination and as objects of the ‘male-gaze’ women are made to believe that they look beautiful but the essence of it, argues Foucault is “the materialization of the prisoner’s body” (BUTLER 1995: 33). Perhaps the oppressors would defend themselves by arguing that “subjection is not only a subordination but a securing and maintaining [...] of a subject” (BUTLER 1995: 34) which may be related to the custom of *bou-bhaat*⁵ at a traditional Bengali wedding. The politicized domestic space is called the *jotil*, *kutil*, *sansar* — complex, hypocritical, domestic and it is the (in) voluntary imprisonment within this claustrophobic environment that makes life stifling for women. This was a culmination of the norm that was introduced by post-Vedic society under the influence of Manu which had envisaged an inextricable bond between women and the domestic space which acted as the centripetal force of her life, forcing self-(d)ef(f)acement.

She specifically mentions a disparate custom in Islam whereby the *swami* — the husband alone has the right to divorce — to give *talak* to his wife, the last line of which (the *talaknama*) states: “aaj joru re dilam talak” (“today I leave my wife”) (HOSSAIN 2001: 454) and gets another charming young bride for himself. Thus marriage too becomes a ‘trade’ (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS and TIFFIN 2006: 308) in such an incongruent setup. In this

⁴ Hossain calls her oppressed sisters *bhoginigon*. Cf. HOSSAIN 2001: 433.

⁵ The bride is given food and clothes by her husband signifying that he will be the custodian of all her necessities and comforts.

manner the 'Absolute' acquires control over the 'body' of the 'Other'. In this context the 'body' becomes the 'signifier', and consequently domination is regarded as the 'signified' within the patriarchal system.

Hossain, like Gilman believed that women should "stand beside man as the comrade of his soul, not the servant of his body" (GILMAN 1994: 237) and also that it could be achieved through education alone. She advocated the setting up of schools for girls and ultimately went on to establish one herself in 1911, after combating much criticism from the protectors of religious orthodoxy. It began as an institution for Muslim women in Bhagalpur in the memory of her husband which was later shifted to Kolkata and is presently run by the West Bengal State government. Emphasizing on holistic education of women Rokeya said that "our girls" must "obtain University degrees" and also be "obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers". In *Sugrihini* [A Good Homemaker], she substantiates her point by stating: "sugrihini howar nimitte shushikhya aboshyok" ("in order to be a good home maker proper education is essential") (HOSSAIN 2001: 37). This concept of education is in accordance with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* (1792) which was incidentally a counter-argument to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). On the education and duties of women the latter opined:

The education of women should always be relative to that of men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable; these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy (WOLLSTONECRAFT 1975: 79–80).⁶

However, in Britain, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a later and more caustic critic of the same in *Three Guineas* (1938) where she interrogates the practice of spending private family funds (Arthur Education Fund, AEF) to send the "boys of the family" (WOOLF 2005: 786) to college and not the women. She also asks another pertinent question: why are women not allowed to engage in professional work? — thereby, vouching for a society promoting employment of professional women. One will note the cross-cultural similarity and difference among these discourses which

⁶ Here Mary Wollstonecraft argues against Rousseau's contention that Sophia, Émile's wife-to-be, should be a perfect woman and the attributes which make a woman perfect according to him. In Book V of *Émile or On Education*, Rousseau focuses on Sophie's education and says that there are few things that men and women have in common but a perfect man and woman should not resemble each other physically and/or intellectually! He also opines that men should be active and strong whereas women passive and weak. From this, he deduces that women were created to please men.

may be linked to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's opinion that: "(the construction of 'Third World women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group is based on a particular socio-economic system". She also refers to the concept of defining women with respect to their 'object status' — "the way in which they are affected/not affected by certain institutions and systems" (MOHANTY 2003: 23).

Interestingly, these premises on the need for educating women are in contrast to the one presented in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) where, as Barnita Bagchi aptly notices in her *Introduction*:

[...] the driving force behind the success of the feminist utopian country of Ladyland is women's education [...]. In the unconventional, inverted world of *Sultana's Dream*, the men whose advantage is brawn rather than brain, remain confined to the *mardana*⁷ and perform the daily mundane chores, while the women [...] use their superior intellectual ability to govern the country wisely and well (HOSSAIN 2005: xii).

Moreover the thirteen year old queen —

[...] circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was allowed to marry before she was twenty-one (HOSSAIN 2005: 7).

Hossain's *Padmarag* (1924), on the other hand, presents "a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia" (HOSSAIN 2005: xiii). Rokeya envisions a world in which women will bond as sisters and the educated and competent among them will provide succour to the less advantaged to attain self-reliance. She covers a wide trajectory while elucidating on the importance of women's education. Though her non-fiction is primarily concerned with the benefit of the family, her fiction affirms that women must be educated to be able to fend for themselves and be economically independent. In the process the existence of men is de-recognized. Moreover, in the feminist utopian world they become the powerless group whereas the women control the state. In both the cases women ultimately contribute towards social change, actively in one and passively otherwise. Education thus becomes a mandatory pre-requisite for the 'empowerment' of women in colonial India which may be a 'process' or an 'outcome' (DATTA and KORNBERG 2002: 2). As a 'process' it provides the developmental strategies of the Global South that affected

⁷ *Zenana* refers to the inner apartments of a house in few South Asian countries which is reserved for the women of the household. *Mardana* is the outer apartment which the men of the family inhabit. But in *Ladyland* it is represented as a subversion of the usual connotation.

women and offered an overview of the gendered power-play as an obvious 'outcome' of socio-economic factors.

Rokeya's premise in her non-fiction concerning the importance of the education of women as a prerequisite for their development and emancipation is subverted in the writings of Mahasweta Devi. In her narratives there is a predominance of the subaltern subject which brings micro-issues of postcolonial India to the forefront. Instead of presenting them as the apartheid, Mahasweta paints a true yet positive sketch of their condition where they are active participants in the process of social change. Noteworthy is the doubly marginalized category of 'women' who form a crucial part of her discourse and are concerned with the stride towards empowerment. The role of women as active agents in the welfare of the social order is quintessential as recommended by Amartya Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* where he says:

Women are [...] not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society, but are active promoters and facilitators of social transformations (which) influence, of course, the lives and well-being of women, but also those of men and all children — boys as well as girls. This is a momentous enrichment of the reach of women's movements (SEN 2005: 222).

The generalized gender bias that pervades human minds is contagious as women themselves also reconcile with the o/object status which is assigned to them. It is the breaking of this valorized silence that Mahasweta Devi's protagonists seek for and also accomplish successfully. Their resistance to the existing patriarchal ideology is by way of demystifying the idealized notions of womanhood and proclaiming themselves as makers of their own destiny. The author's assertion that "I believe in documentation [...]. After reading my work, the reader should face the truth of facts" (DEVI 1998: vii), underpins the semi-fictional nature of her works and authenticates the social dynamics of the under-represented sections that she explores.

The tribal world consisting of a sixth of India's total population (DEVI 1993: i) finds space and voice in the works of Mahasweta Devi (b. 1926); more specifically the inhabitants of the Palamau district of Bihar which she considers to be the 'mirror of India' (DEVI 1998: vi) and those of West Bengal. It is believed that the practice of labelling these groups was introduced by the British government with qualifiers like hill, jungle, aboriginal and indigenous. Historically the term may be traced back to European historians who used it to refer to Gauls and/or Anglo-Saxons in Europe or local political groups as Lichchvi, Mulla, Yaudheya and Khasa in erstwhile India or 'descent groups' in

Israel or West Asia (Arabs).⁸ In postcolonial India this has been adopted and a set of features which demarcate the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes as a homogeneous group has been mentioned by its Commissioner in the report of 1952.⁹ However, their ultimate goal lies in coalescing with the mainstream and activist authors facilitate the same through their narratives by engaging with the angst of the challenged sections and initiating modes of resistance and succour.

The tribal women in the works of Mahasweta Devi's works are agents of the crude power-play that is operational among the sub-proletariats. At times they even subvert the same as in the cases of Dopdi and Mary. Their bodies serve as weapons in their struggle for subjecthood. Draupadi Mejhni, wife of Dulna Majhi, "most notorious female" (DEVI 1997: 19) is the protagonist of the story named after her is considered to be the primary instigator of the tribal disturbances caused in her area of domicile. After a series of guerrilla incursions the Senanayak and his Special Forces finally manage to imprison her. But the revolutionary zeal that is inherent in her does not leave her till the end. In fact she is determined not to give up and even after a brutal rape she emerges victorious in the battle of sexes by humiliating and making the custodians of law and order (police) feel 'afraid' of her. She uses her 'mangled breasts' to push the Senanayak aside and the expression of her body language that comes through from the narrative is that of a woman who has finally been able to break free from the shackles of socially construed rigours.

Mary Oraon identified as the "daughter of an Oraon mother" in *The Hunt* is "eighteen years old, tall, flat-featured (with) light copper skin" who appears to be "most seductive" from a distance, "but up close (one discerns) a strong message of rejection in her glance" (DEVI 1993: 2). Both Bhikni and her mother represent the white man's burden that was imposed upon many women as an aftermath of the cultural nuances of imperialism. Mary's mother looked after the Dixon's bungalow and on return to Kuruda for disposing off his holdings, the Australian plantations' owner "put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left" (DEVI 1993: 2) In her case a three-tier ostracism is operational — on the macro level it is gender and class whereas on the micro, it is an intra — Oraon decision to relegate her as the *O t h e r* as her origins are questionable. Thus her

⁸ Cf. TOPPO 2000: 16.

⁹ There are eight features: (i) live away from the civilized world, in inaccessible areas like forests and hills; (ii) belong to Negritos, Australoids or Mongoloids; (iii) tribal dialect; (iv) practitioners of Animism, a primitive religion; (v) live by primitive occupations; (vi) compulsively carnivorous; (vii) unclad or semi-clad with leaves or bark; (viii) nomadic life style and passion for drink and dance. Cf. TOPPO 2000: 16.

position remains as that of a detached participant within the community. But surprisingly her recourse to agency is not to be part of the whole; instead she takes pride in them and constructs a separate identity for herself by subverting social constructions. She takes pride in her roots as she asks her admirers: "Why aren't you tall and white like me" (DEVI 1993: 5). She also decides upon marrying a non-Oraon (a Muslim boy called Jalim) much to the closeted disapproval of her tribe who do not interfere merely because her father is not a "Somra, or Budhna or Mangla Oraon" (DEVI 1993: 5) Here the author's role as a social commentator becomes an indictment on the system. Devi says:

Because she is the illegitimate daughter of a white father the Oraons don't think her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their own society upon her (DEVI 1993: 5).

Mary's masterstroke as a rebel with a cause is the murder of the *Tehsildar* — an emblem of local imperialism who uses his social standing as a bait to lure Mary but fails disastrously and pays with his life. As Mary rejoices wildly at the *Jani Parab* festival, Budhni's unintentional remark becomes replete with significance. He says: "Look how she's eating? As if she has made the biggest kill" (DEVI 1993: 16). The biggest kill of her life is a symbolic slaughter of class and patriarchy — the two stakeholders of her clandestine ignominy. Resistance in her case becomes an act of reverse coercion where she wields influence and eventually power over the 'subjects' and subverts the stereotype. In this context Nancy Hartsock's demarcation between 'power over' (control) and 'power to' (influence) (DATTA and KORNBERG 2002: 2) is relevant as she observes that the latter is the first step towards empowerment — a process of challenging existing power relations and subsequently gaining and exercising control over the sources of power.

The case of Jashoda is slightly different as she is not as vociferous in her actions towards the existing social order. But through the profession that she is forced to adopt — as a Mother — she becomes the harbinger of a change/stability in the financial dynamics of her family which passes unacknowledged. She is the primary and sole earners in the family and ultimately pays with her life. When Jashoda is diagnosed with breast cancer and the attending doctor enquires about her past, he is aghast to learn that she has nursed around 50 children — 20 of her own and 30 of the Haldar's. That is how she becomes a 'professional Mother' but unfortunately when she is in dire need of caregivers all those who had been created and/or nurtured by her abandon her. Through this Mahasweta

Devi delves into the micro issues operating within the domestic space, supposedly non-profit institutions which are precarious for women. The Haldar wives/daughters-in-law must stay healthy, yet be taken by their husbands according to the almanac, thus, as a brahmin's wife in need of self and familial sustenance is exploited. Marxist feminist critics would problematize the situation by identifying the capitalist mode of production as a threat, giving rise to a class structured society. Within this framework, gender oppression is seen as a form of class oppression which is sustained as it is favourable for the ruling class. Thus the status of a woman remains that of a sub-proletariat and it is believed that dismantling of the capitalist order alone is the means to liberate women as private property gives rise to unhealthy social relations due to economic inequality and dependence which is the root of women's oppression. Spivak however offers a macro-interpretation of Jashoda's situation:

By Mahasweta Devi's own account, *Breast Giver* is a parable of India after decolonization. Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer (DEVI 1997: 78).

A gradual shift in the trend of addressing women's issues has been noticed over the years which may be referred to as the 'Women's Renaissance' according to Joan Kelly. She also identified four criteria for the same — a comparison and regulation between male and female sexualities, a change in the economic and political roles of the genders, the need for education to influence the social process and contesting stereotypes (SINHA 2005: xv). These are fundamental for the emancipation and subsequent transition from a state of powerlessness to that of an empowered individual. Amy Allen's triad on a feminist critique of power is relevant in this case. She classifies it as an instrument for (male) domination and (female) subordination giving rise to a master-slave dialectic. The other two are positive — one looks at it as a resource for social change and the other as a tool towards empowerment. But both consider its inequitable distribution thus far, a condition which feminist praxes alone can terminate and bring about a "wholesale revision of the masculinist conceptions of social and political life" (ALLEN 1999: 7). In the writings of both Hossain and Mahasweta Devi all three are addressed as they cover a wide spectrum. The basic premise in both the cases is the emancipation of women but the manner in which they relate to the existing power structures is different. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is primarily concerned with the empowerment of women through education and awareness which are certainly crucial for development. But

Mahasweta Devi, through the subaltern voices, considers deep rooted prejudices of race, class and gender and envisages a more inclusivist realm. Though this futuristic agenda may seem fictional, it is only through the representation of facts in fiction that the spirit of egalitarianism may be inculcated among human beings whereby, not only gendered, but a holistic liberation for all may be obtained.

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