



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

LITERARY ESSAY

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## **“The Tyranny of Niceness” in “Lady Land”: Politics of Women’s Liberation in Twenty- First Century South Asian Fiction, 1905-2014**

ABSTRACT

This article creates an alternative literary historiography to counter the excessive male-centric narratives that flood mainstream literary discourse. It argues that we often club together the experiences of all women under one broad category of “feminist caste.” In order to counter that, this essay explores four distinct female literary characters in the fictional works of authors from West Bengal and Bangladesh to understand their individual struggles against patriarchal reminiscences, social hierarchization, and their journey towards individual freedom. The aim is to understand their different experiences as well as connect the common roots of oppression through the theoretical lens of *standpoint feminism*, a theory urging feminist social science to be practiced from the standpoint of women. The agenda, according to theorist Dorothy Smith, is to create a sociology for women.

Keywords: male-centric, circumstantial contingencies, standpoint feminism, social hierarchization

This article brings to the forefront the perspectives of women in their everyday worlds as well as “the ways in which women socially construct their worlds.”<sup>1</sup> It implies the need for an alternative theoretical lens to interpret their condition, a lens that does not succumb to the “existing male-biased conventional wisdom” because women’s lives are structurally different from men’s.<sup>2</sup>

Antionette Burton, in the book *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, introspects how the narratives of the home were not restricted as just the “dwelling space for women’s memory, but also as one of the foundations of history—history conceived of, that is, as a narrative, a practice, a site of desire.”<sup>3</sup> Women have fought for social rights like education and active involvement in politics, and also against the daily waves of patriarchal reminiscences within the domestic sphere. The battles are fought both in public and private spaces. And some are fought within the mind.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonised Women: The Contest in India,” talks about the construction of a modern Indian historiography during the colonial regime. Since the West had established technological dominance over the East with a

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Macionis and Linda M. Gerber, *Sociology* (Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 256–272.

<sup>3</sup> Antoinette, Burton. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

tendency to make the East inert and more “civilized,” Indian nationalists attempted to make India retain her “self-identity,” i.e., to journey into the spiritual (inner) side in opposition to the materialistic (outer) domains that were forcefully imposed on India. This resulted in the “inner/outer” distinction in day-to-day living, separating the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity.”<sup>4</sup> Here, the home should remain unaffected by the profanities of the outside world. Women became the representation of home that restricted their involvement with the public world.

This article explores how the demarcation of these social roles facilitated traditional patriarchy. I examine four authors from West Bengal and Bangladesh to study their female protagonists’ role in redefining their social and domestic circumstances. The article straddles the two geographies where the dominant spoken language is Bengali. The language is important as it carries a certain post-colonial history that expects women (especially housewives) to behave in a certain way. The paper will delve deeper into their inner psychologies and the socio-cultural milieu of the characters to understand their daily resistances of a patriarchal system.

In the introduction to the novella, *Sangati*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out the instability in the notion of women’s identity and the power imbalances between different groups of women under the blanket notion of gender. This is further amplified by Sharmila Rege, who speaks about “how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored to underline caste-class identities, or at other times

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<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 622–33.

differences ignored for ‘the feminist caste.’”<sup>5</sup> This article assesses the episteme of experiences of each protagonist through the theoretical lens of the feminist standpoint (without clubbing them under one broad category of ‘feminist-caste’) to pay heed to their social circumstances. The diverse experiences of women have often been ignored by clubbing their individual experiences under one category, i.e., of the feminist caste. In this way, we fail to recognize their individual struggles and desires, often applying a male-centric theoretical lens to judge the experiences of women, leading to misappropriations of their experiences. There needs to be an alternative literary epistemology that caters to only women and their individual experiences to serve to analyze how those experiences connect to the larger questions concerning rights and opportunities for women. This approach helps me to analyze how women reclaimed their spaces of emancipation in their individual social contexts. The study attempts to create an alternative literary narrative, as Dorothy Smith posits how women’s experience of oppression was largely “grounded in male control.”<sup>6</sup> The most intriguing factor is that the accounts of resistances are not always magnified in their approach, but they exist as a part of daily life, suffused with the power of bringing about psychological transformation.

In “Sultana’s Dream,” a short story by Bangladeshi author Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein written in 1905, we get a glimpse of a utopian dreamland curated by women who talk of a society that is preceded by

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<sup>5</sup> Bama, *Sangati*, trans, Lakshmi Holmstrom (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-10.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, “Sociology from Women’s Experience: A Reaffirmation,” *Sociological Theory* 10, no. 1 (1992): 88-98.

women's intellect.<sup>7</sup> In "The Ballad of the Nihar Banu" (1998) by the Bangladeshi author Mesbah Dilara we observe a land of imagination created by a woman who breaks patriarchal stereotypes and opts for social transformation. "In the Story of a Poem" by the Indian author Chandrika Balan (2014) we get snippets of the deepest corners of a woman's mind who uses her creative skill as an act of resistance and a tool for expression. In "The Wife" by the Indian author Vandana Singh (2008) we see the reformation of Padma who has recently come out of a broken marriage and eventually reclaims her own space as an individual. The four tales speak stories of dissent and resistance highlighting the women's lived experiences as a separate category that celebrates their uniqueness and diversity. The stories explore their experiences as women with other women, even though they did not share or agree on any common experiences.

### **How the "Lady Land" in "Sultana's Dream" Improves the Condition of Women**

"Sultana's Dream" can be seen as utopian fantasy that comments on various social prescriptions related to gender roles—and largely reverses these roles. We see a land where women decide on affairs related to science, technology, politics, and economics. Women are the only decision makers in the land—from participating in scientific developments like using parabolic reflectors to focus the sun's heat on invaders to save the land from the enemy, to taking an active part in the

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<sup>7</sup> This article studies four short stories: (1) "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (New York: Feminist Press, City University of New York, 1988); (2) "The Ballad of Nihar Banu" by Dilara Mesbah in *Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh*, edited by Niaz Zaman and Firdous Azim (London: Saqi, 2005); (3) "The Story of a Poem" by Chandrika Balan in *Arya and Other Stories* by Chandrika Balan (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2014); and (4) "The Wife" by Vandana Singh in *The Woman Who Thought She was a Planet and Other Stories* by Vandana Singh (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

political discourse, and the invention of a balloon that draws moisture from the atmosphere. Interestingly, men are forced to stay within the confines of the home and participate in domestic chores. They perform the roles that were always prescribed for women. The “lady land” provides better living conditions for women by reducing the existing social gaps between the “lady land” and the real societies we live in. The author situates the lady land as a land “free from sin and harm” where virtue reigns.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have argued that the word “dream” in the title infuses an essence of utopia where equality in gender seems to remain an aspirational endeavor that will never culminate in real-life change. In this paper, however, I argue that it represents a significant step forward to showcase an alternative functioning of a society that awakens readers about the significance of resistance, eventually sending a positive message of social metamorphosis. Here, access to education becomes a baton for social change that helps women break free from the shackles of oppression, stereotypical gender roles, and social practices.

The Bangladeshi author Hossein’s short story is a direct critique of social practices like purdah and what it entails. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard defines purdah as the “practice which includes veiling, dressing modestly, gender segregation, and the seclusion of women in the *zenana*, or in women’s quarters.”<sup>9</sup> While walking in the streets Sultana (whose age is not mentioned) says that she feels awkward “being a *pardahnishin* woman” as she has never walked unveiled.<sup>10</sup> Although she experiences

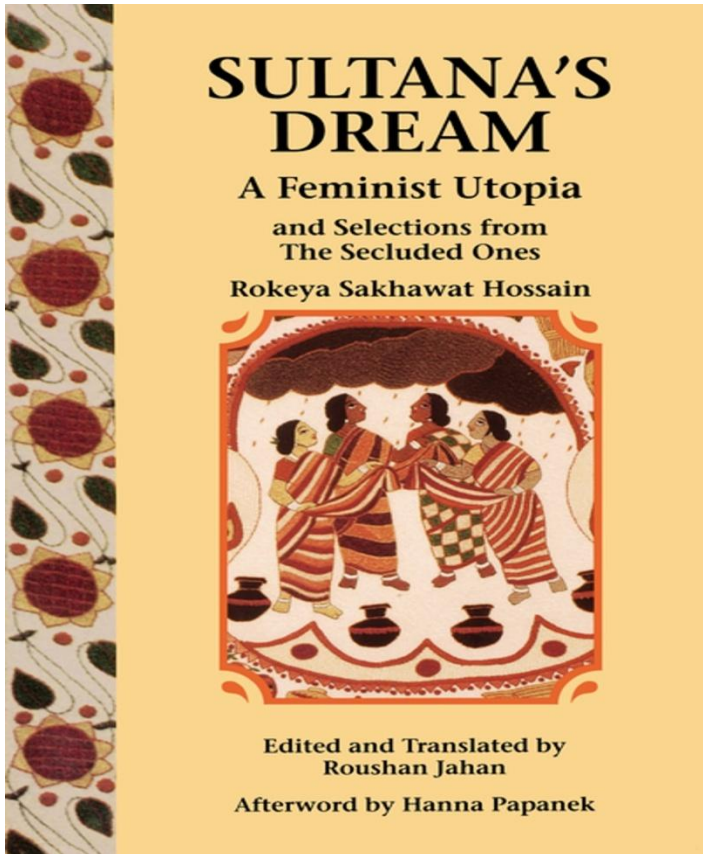
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<sup>8</sup> *Katha: Short Stories by Indian Women*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (Telegram Books, 2013), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, “Futuristic Technologies and Purdah in the Feminist Utopia: Rokeya S. Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*,” *Feminist Review* 116 (2017): 144-153.

<sup>10</sup> *Katha: Short Stories by Indian Women*, 18.

freedom, she feels awkward as she is accustomed to wearing the purdah. In the story, we see how women's right to education acts as an antidote to subjugation by strengthening their mental determination to fight against physical confinement. It also becomes a weapon to save their land from enemies.



The short story breaks preconceived stereotypical conventions. It highlights how women have “neglected the duty they have owed to [themselves]” by shutting their eyes to their interests.<sup>11</sup> This comment is poignant as we reside in a world where sacrifices made by women are

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

valorized, fetishized, and considered noble. Helen Lewis discusses how women from infancy are taught to be agreeable and accommodative. They are expected to care for the family by putting their needs before hers. Moreover, they are confined within the “tyranny of niceness.”<sup>12</sup> This results in several mental blockages, including the innate tendency of women to consider themselves inherently inferior to men. One such example is when Sultana’s guide asks her, “Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up [in the home]?” Sultana justifies with the banal reiteration that men are physically stronger than women.<sup>13</sup> The confinement, thus, becomes an act of self-protection. To which the guide replies, “Even a lion is stronger than a man, but that does not enable them to dominate the human race.”<sup>14</sup> Here, she breaks the stereotypical thought pattern of situating physical strength over mental strength. It raises significant questions about designated social positionings, tweaks moral expectations of gender roles, and shows how society may look if education is used effectively.

Hosseini’s background as a Muslim woman aware of the downtrodden state of women in colonial (undivided) India is important for situating “Sultana’s Dream” as a short story. She is a credible witness of the regressive social practices that women faced as a part of their gender roles. One of them is the purdah system that excluded women from “any public observation,” often acted upon with the use of “veil/concealing clothes with the use of high-wall enclosures, screen,

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<sup>12</sup> Helen Lewis, “Fighting the Tyranny of ‘Niceness’: Why We Need Difficult Women,” *Cronicle* 33, no. 4 (2023): 3, 13-15. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://lhwc.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DecemberFINAL2023Newsletter.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



curtains within the home. It provided a strict separation from the public world.”<sup>15</sup>

“Sultana’s Dream” subverts the division of space, i.e., public for men and private for women. It can also be considered a voice to protest this social practice. In the “lady land,” women can roam unveiled, i.e., free from the regressive purdah custom. In addition, she is liberated from the innate fear of experiencing physical harm from men. Sister Sara says, “You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is lady land, free from sin and harm. Virtue itself reigns here.”<sup>16</sup> She adds, “we shut our men indoors.”<sup>17</sup>

Hossein creates this fantastical land where women enjoy the freedom impossible to achieve in real life. Mookerjea-Leonard explains that Hossein does not call for gender equality through the story but a total reversal of gender roles, promoting some measure of “poetic justice for the subjugation of women” for generations.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Roushan Jahan argues that Hossein does not provide an extreme scenario like Gilman in *Herland*, where “parthenogenesis was the means for continuing a unisex society.”<sup>19</sup> But her treatment of excluding men from accessing freedom is “also not less tyrannical in nature.”<sup>20</sup> I argue that

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<sup>15</sup> Google definition of Purdah, Oxford definition.

[https://www.google.com/search?q=purdah&rlz=1C1RXQR\\_enUS1072US1074&oq=purdah&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyDwgAEEUYORiDARixAxiABDINCAEQABiDARixAxiABDIHCAIQABiABDIHCAMQABiABDIHCAQQABiABDIHCAUQABiABDIHCAYQLhiABDIHCACQABiABDIHCAGQABiABDIHCAkQABiABNIBCTI3MzhqMGoxNagCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=purdah&rlz=1C1RXQR_enUS1072US1074&oq=purdah&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyDwgAEEUYORiDARixAxiABDINCAEQABiDARixAxiABDIHCAIQABiABDIHCAMQABiABDIHCAQQABiABDIHCAUQABiABDIHCAYQLhiABDIHCACQABiABDIHCAGQABiABDIHCAkQABiABNIBCTI3MzhqMGoxNagCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>16</sup> *Katha*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Mookerjea-Leonard, “Futuristic Technologies and Purdah in the Feminist Utopia: Rokeya S. Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

the author realized that it was only possible to “imagine utopian situations” of women holding positions of power with the exclusion of men to some degree.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the story, we observe direct comparisons between men and wild animals like lions. The comparison is a symbolic representation to consciously differentiate men from their categorization as human beings. If we go by the theory of evolution, humans have been able to control their primal animalistic instincts through reason and rational thinking over the years. Hossein’s numerous comparisons of men to animals hint at the inherent lecherous qualities of many men that tend to subjugate women through physical domination and violence. Like wild animals, many of them seem not to be able to control their libidinal impulses and possess primitive sexual desires that are quite easily aroused. In the story, Sara says, “How can you trust those untrained men out of doors,” substantiating the argument that men require training to be tamed.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, they need to be kept inside a specific establishment that provides proper surveillance over them, like animals in a zoo. Men are confined in the *mardana*—what Nilanjana Bhattacharya describes as “the masculine form of *zenana*.”<sup>23</sup> Hossein attempts to reverse the social practice of *purdah*. Bhattacharya describes *mardana* to be “Hossein’s neologism for men’s quarters, derived from *mard*, the Persian word for man.”<sup>24</sup> When asked about the men’s whereabouts, Sara replies, “in their proper places,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>22</sup> *Katha*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Nilanjana Bhattacharya, “Two Dystopian Fantasies,” *Indian Literature* 50, no. 1 (2006): 173. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23346372>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

where they ought to be,” shut indoors, implying the aforementioned quarters made for them.<sup>25</sup> If they were left uncontrolled, they would undeniably start showing the colors of their animalistic selves by inflicting physical/mental violence on women, making the environment unsafe for the women.

In the “lady land,” Hossein breaks social conditioning attached to the division of feminine and non-feminine activities that often becomes a way to define gender expectations for women. For example, we learn that Sultana knows embroidery because she has nothing else to do in the *zenana*. It becomes a leisure activity for her. Through this, we can understand how embroidery is a way to dictate gender roles to women. It is considered a feminine/indoor activity best suited for women as they are restricted from public affairs. When Sara asks if Sultana knows embroidery, she says, “Yes. We have nothing else to do.”<sup>26</sup> We observe that a liberated woman like Sara also knows how to embroider, providing an alternative explanation for knowing the task. Sara says, “. . . we do not trust our zenana members with embroidery as a man has no patience even to pass a thread through the needle.”<sup>27</sup> Hossein reinterprets the preconceived gendering of activity with the statement by Sara. First, the author raises the task of embroidery to an elevated position. She talks about the skill and patience required to create the piece of art, adding a certain leverage to the “feminine/indoor” activity, which often has derogatory connotations. She also challenges the notion that embroidery is only for a particular group of people (those who stay indoors). We observe Sara, a working professional, also enjoys it.

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<sup>25</sup> *Katha*, 147.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

The access to education for women is one of the most distinguishable features of the “lady land” that makes all the positive difference in the story. Describing the history of “lady land,” Sara mentions how the queen of the state had always promoted education for girls. This initiative had led to the development of the nation. The queen’s inclination toward science resulted in the establishment of schools for girls where scientific experiments were conducted on a regular basis. Sara says, “She [the queen], circulated an order that all the women in the country should be educated.”<sup>28</sup> Through the character of the queen, Hossein shows how the support of authority can help strengthen women’s status in the state. This can be compared to colonized India which was ruled Englishmen on behalf of British monarchs. Although efforts were made to provide education for women throughout the state, the purpose of the education differed from the type of education we observe in “Sultana’s Dream.” In colonized India, women were educated to acquire the status of *Bhadramahila* (respected woman). They were trained in western knowledge systems and taught skills like knitting, sewing, and playing the piano. They were trained in the English language to become effective partners of their husbands who worked under British officials. The right to education was primarily extended to a select group of elites that acquired a special status.

The article, “The Education of the Indian Woman against the Backdrop of the Education of the European Woman in the Nineteenth-Century” by Sunita Peacock, explains that guide books were written for Indian housewives by English women to teach them that “homemaking

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 21.

was an art.”<sup>29</sup> According to Partha Chatterjee the educated “new women” carried the “bourgeois virtues” characterizing the social norms of “disciplining , orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world.”<sup>30</sup>

The education system in “Sultana’s Dream” does not aim to make women better partners (hence making them dependent on their male partners) but provides an opportunity to enlighten themselves for their own good. Therefore, rejecting child marriages (which are still prevalent) and allowing them to study, experiment, and innovate is a big step ahead in defying these social norms. Sara says, “No woman was allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change, we had been kept in strict purdah.”<sup>31</sup> These strictures invariably enabled women to look beyond their identity as just a wife, and to explore life on their own terms.

We often succumb to stereotypical thought processes that consider subjects like Science and Mathematics to be the domain of men. We get the reference for such division of labor when the men of the country ridiculed the women’s scientific innovations to “draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun as a thing of the women, a ‘sentimental nightmare.’”<sup>32</sup> The men never believed that the

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<sup>29</sup> Sunita Peacock, “The ‘Education’ of the Indian Woman against the Backdrop of the Education of the European Woman in the Nineteenth-Century,” Forum on Public Policy Online 2009, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> *Katha*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

women scientists would be able to achieve much scientifically as science primarily remained a masculine domain. These are some of the mental blocks that Hossein attempts to break with her “women” scientists. In the short story, the lady principal wants the women to reply to the men through intellect and innovation, through their deeds, not by words. The access to education starts yielding positive results. We see how practical application of science, like making a balloon, helped draw water. “As the water was incessantly being drawn from the atmosphere by the university people, no cloud gathered, and the ingenious lady principal stopped the rain and storm thereby.”<sup>33</sup> The “lady land” was also advanced scientifically. We read a poignant description of the kitchen space which is situated in a beautiful vegetable garden where “every creeper, every tomato plant was itself an ornament.”<sup>34</sup> The women cook with solar panels. The kitchen has no smoke and beautiful decorations surround the windows.

In “Sultana’s Dream” the strength of the enemy was much more significant in number, as “nearly all men had gone out to fight, even a boy of sixteen was not left at home”<sup>35</sup> This battle reminds the reader of the epic *Mahabharata*, where the Pandavas (the five brothers) fought against the forces of the Kauravas for the throne of Hastinapur. It marked the Pandavas’ victory with Arjuna’s help, who acted as a diplomat and used his intellect to prevail over the physical forces. Similarly, in the “lady land,” the “lady principal with her two thousand students marched to the battlefield and arrived there by directing all the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23

rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy.”<sup>36</sup> The women were fighting both the intellectual and the patriarchal battles. With the scientific discoveries, they wanted to prove that they were no less than men. The discoveries that the men had earlier ridiculed as “sentimental nightmares,” forced the men to “runaway panic-stricken, not knowing in their bewilderment how to counteract scorching heat.”<sup>37</sup> The parallelism provides an exciting reinterpretation of the epic because it is primarily considered a sacred text for Hindus. The use of the epic by a Muslim author, situating it to counter the repressive social practices against Muslim women, demonstrates the spirit of communal harmony and fluidity in the marshalling of literary texts that surpass communal, geographical, and lingual confinement.

The use of the word “dreams” in the title provides a sharp perspective to the story. At first glance, “Sultana’s Dream” indicates that a gendered, just society is just a dream. Therefore, all the initiatives by women in the “lady land” are nothing but a utopian fantasy that is impossible to achieve. This argument has dual interpretations. First, it designates a place that has no real experience, with no connections with real-life situations. Although it describes a place that provides perfect living conditions for women, it is ultimately lacks any real-life implication. Second, it can be regarded as a tale of hope, a wake-up call for people to understand the power of resistance. It allows us to rethink the capabilities of women and acknowledge the power of education, a right that was denied to women.

This essay argues that every social change starts with an intent, a change in thought and perception. In the context of the short story,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

education acts as a practical resource that facilitates a change in the perception for women, enabling them to fight against an army of men. Hossein's story can be considered an applause to courageous women who refuse to step back. It may inspire readers to take small steps in their daily lives that may eventually result in significant social change.

### **The Nature of Womanhood in “The Ballad of Nihar Banu”**

The Bangladeshi author Dilara Mesbah's short story “The Ballad of Nihar Banu” provides a sneak peek into the psyche of Nihar Banu, a young girl trying to escape from the daily barbs of oppression. We observe she inhabits a world of her own where she feels fully liberated from the shackles of life. The dreamland is a utopia she dictates herself, she expresses herself fully, and fulfils her desires. The author provides a peek into the mind of Banu where she reminds readers of the need to “beat one's drums” as otherwise nobody will care. It sets a very strong foundation for the character, making her able to speak out. In the opening paragraph, when a “disembodied voice” asks her, “O Banu, what are you doing?” she replies that she is “roaming in the realm of (her) mind,” a place where “no one wounds another.”<sup>38</sup> It is, thus, a land of peace.

In this section, I will delve deeper into this fantastical land to gauge how it acts as a point of liberation for Banu. It provides a space where she acts without inhibitions, making the reader wonder about the significance of this “lady land.” When she says that she is roaming in the (realm) of “her” mind—adding, “You understand, do you not, that it is my realm?”—the reader understands that the space belongs solely to her.<sup>39</sup> It is a place of solace, where “beautiful plants and trees, the red

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 124.



champak, the *beli* . . . breeze through the corridors of (her) mind.”<sup>40</sup> The reader soon understands why space is so unique, as Banu claims it is the “world of women,” a place where physical violence (rape or any form of sexual assault) is not tolerated because if a “devil dare violate a virgin, (she) hangs him straight away.”<sup>41</sup> It is a place where wrongdoers are not left without any punishment, and justice prevails for women. This is highly significant at a time when law and order is primarily restricted in the hands of powerful men, and the fundamental right to seek justice is often preserved for the privileged.

Many cases of wrongdoing often go unrecorded or are obliterated from the record due to foul power play by the authorities. Although it is highly debatable whether to impose the death penalty, Banu’s world assures justice that the real world does not. The author writes that “as long as she is in her world, words come cascading forth.”<sup>42</sup> Further, there is evidence of how this land of womanhood offers her a sense of empowerment that is impossible to achieve anywhere else. She also compares her experience in this world to “a quiet, middle-aged woman, who slogs in a Gulshan kitchen,”<sup>43</sup> referring to the Gulshan neighborhood in Dhaka. Although we should not undermine her work in a kitchen, the fantasy world gives her the freedom to engage in her desires that she cannot seem to achieve in real life. We understand how residing in her world makes her a more confident person. From this, we can also fathom the gap between what women want in their minds and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 124.

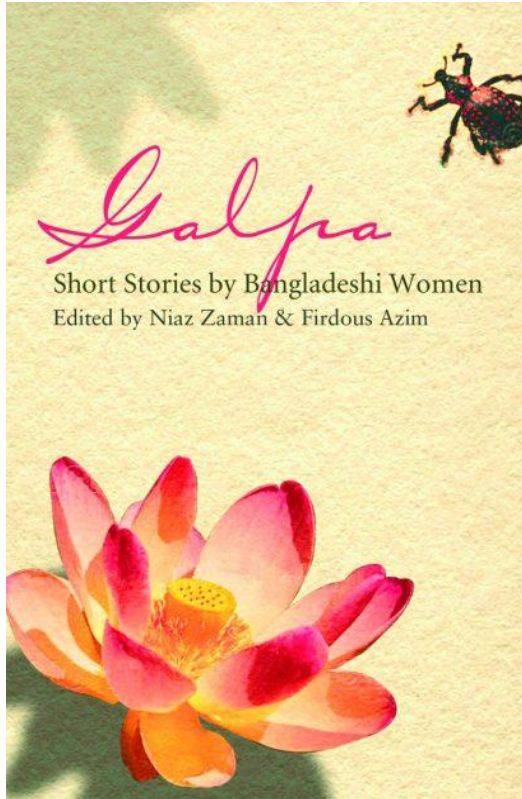
<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 125.

what they receive in real life, where women must constantly compromise with their need for sustenance. In her world she is safe—“Who can touch her there? Her body might remain behind in this cursed world, but her mind is free to roam as a woman.”<sup>44</sup> These sentences refer to the freedom she enjoys in “lady land” through her imaginative skills.



The author believes that women are weaker than men, in the same way as in Hossein’s “Sultana’s Dreams,” where Sultana explains that women must be shut indoors as men are physically stronger. Upon hearing the statement, the guide replies, “A lion is stronger than a man,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 125.

but it does not enable him to dominate the human race.”<sup>45</sup> It hints at how strength should not be equated only with physical abilities but also cognitive skills. Banu’s imaginative prowess to create her womanhood should be considered an essential cognitive skill that helps her grow and flourish.

I argue that this skill is necessary for gender equality, as every physical change begins with a change in thought or perspective. The ideas that now seem like distant dreams can have a physical manifestation someday. Banu is “troubled by how women continue to be oppressed and participate shamelessly in their commodification,” or how “she is tormented by the thought of how men’s soft words and touches succeed in touching women.”<sup>46</sup> We notice how she thinks about pertinent issues like women’s tendency to commodify themselves or men’s manipulations when she resides in her “lady land.” These conversations by a female protagonist facilitate dialogue on the critical issues for the sake of social change.

### **The Demarcation of Public versus Private Woman in “The Story of a Poem”**

I argue that the short story, “The Story of a Poem,” by Chandrika Balan represents how a woman must constantly choose between pursuing her creative endeavors and adhering to her familial responsibilities. Interestingly, she is never seen as capable of carrying out both tasks, as there is a strict distinction between working and non-working women. In this section, I will explore how women are expected to perform specific gender roles based on this division and to what extent the female

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 125.

characters within the short story, namely Sushama and Shriranjini, abide by or break away from those roles.

The story begins with Sushama writing a poem on paper, “A teardrop sways my lashes, as I think of you even now.”<sup>47</sup> From this, we observe how her angst is reflected in the poem. As the story progresses, we get several snippets of those reflections, of her using the poems as a medium of creative expression. We get to know Sushama’s inner turmoil through her poems. Parallely, we observe how she does her household chores while writing poems. The author provides fine details, that her kitchen table is filled with “sheets of paper, a broken pencil, a knife, diced vegetables...”<sup>48</sup> And then, “she leaves the half-sliced vegetables on the table to write the first two lines of the poem, then leaves the poem to return to the vegetables.”<sup>49</sup>

We observe how she is well-equipped to carry out both tasks. On the other hand, we observe that her husband would object if he finds out that his wife is a writer. The author explains that he would be suspicious of her writing, and that she was fearful of society’s attempt to blot out the autobiographical details from her works, as that is done to women writers. We understand that although the poems become her mode of expression, she is forbidden to bring them into the public domain. She cannot even showcase her talent or express her desire to her husband, lest he prohibit her from pursuing her passion. It serves as an example of how personal agency for women is systematically subjugated and categorized within the social expectations of what they can and cannot do. This is further amplified by Raghuraman’s character and his

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 103.

expectation of an ideal wife. Oblivious to his wife's artistic skills, we get to know that even if he fancies Shriranjini (his colleague), he prefers women like Sushama as his wife. Raghuraman's opinion of his wife is summed up in the narrative: "the woman is quiet, does not talk much, does all the chores without complaining, and is excellent in culinary arts."<sup>50</sup> According to Raghuraman, it is alright to "fancy" or "flirt" with working women (asking her to wear the red saree), but he cannot "marry" her. It shows the instilled patriarchal practices within society, where there is a stark division between the private and public women. Private women like Sushama (non-working women) are "wife material." She is restricted from accessing her agency and must take care of the family. She is expected to be devoted to her husband. Often, we observe how a woman's self-sacrifice is valorized; she is made to believe that the family will go haywire without her constant supervision. Although it gives women a superficial sense of ownership, it is futile in its application. As we see, the husband still makes the major decisions for the family.

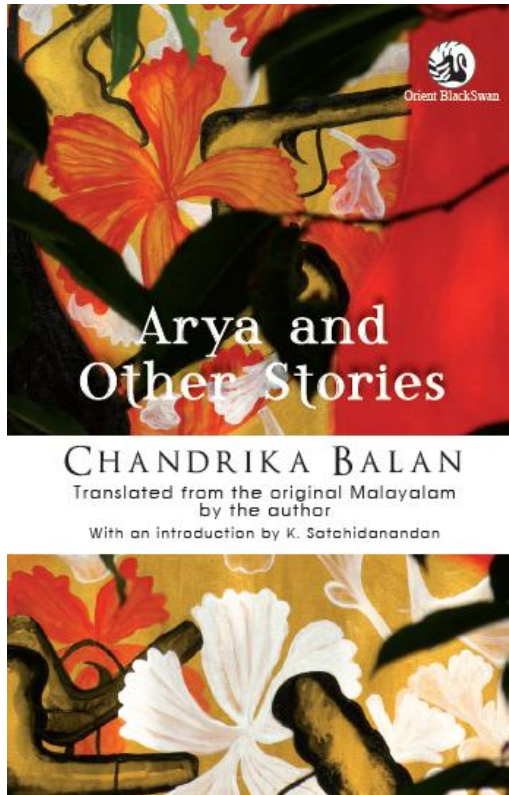
In the article, "Feminist Conception of Public and Private: A Critical Analysis," Hansen points out how women's "sanctimonious relegation to the home was an elevation of women's status to high moral pedestal" that subsequently resulted in her marginalization in society and the public sphere. Hansen argues that it gave the women a façade of superficial power to "mold the delicate minds of future generations and influence the actions of the men" that served to "herald women's sovereignty over home."<sup>51</sup> This superficial control of the private (domestic sphere) spurred the nineteenth century feminist movement

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>51</sup> Karen V. Hansen, "Feminist Conceptions of Public and Private: A Critical Analysis," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987): 115.

that, Hansen argues, led to counter the characterization of the “vulnerable wife” as an admirable quality for the woman.



In the short story, Raghuram says, “Sushama tried her best to buy a refrigerator.”<sup>52</sup> However, he does not allow it, as he wants freshly made, warm food. He “married an unambitious, unemployed woman” because she would readily prepare food for him. Butler in her essay, “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution” explains that “gender is no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity

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<sup>52</sup> *Katha*, 106.

instituted through a stylised repetition of acts...”<sup>53</sup> His act of not allowing Sushma to buy a refrigerator is a demarcation of gender expectations (between male and female), and how they are expressed in small acts. The expectations from the private and public women are so precise in Raguraman’s mind that he is shocked to realize that Shriranjini keeps a *vrat* (fast) for her children. He says, “What a combination of contradictions you are.”<sup>54</sup> He is shocked that Sriranjani (as a working woman) follows traditional rituals like fasting. Raghuraman’s remarks after reading Shriranjini’s poem showcases his obliviousness as a husband unaware of his wife’s creative skills. His compliment to Shriranjini, “Who else but Shriranjini can write such a beautiful line?” shows how impossible it is for him to imagine that even his wife can write such poems.”<sup>55</sup> Although her work is unpublished, Sushama writes beautiful poetry and expresses herself while actively participating in domestic chores—an irony where Raghuraman’s preconceived assumptions to box women into specific gender roles just projects his foolishness as a man. Through the female protagonists of the story, we see how both women try to break Raghuraman’s stereotypical categorizations.

### **The Definition of a Private Space for a Woman in “The Wife”**

In the chapter “Interiors,” Edward Said explains how “every direct route to the interior, and consequently the interior itself, is either blocked or preempted. The most we can hope for is to find margins—normally

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<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–531.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

neglected surfaces and relatively isolated, irregularly placed spots—on which we put ourselves.”<sup>56</sup> The route to the interior, the desire to find a safe refuge within a space to call one’s own, is dealt with cogently in Vandana Singh’s short story, “The Wife.” Singh puts across several situations with the help of the female protagonist, Padma, who is newly separated from marriage, to raise a significant question of how a wife can never call any space of her husband’s home her own. Padma can merely find margins or corners that exist because of her identity as a wife. When the marriage breaks up, she is left with fragmented memories of her husband in every corner of the house. She is unable to find any place that belongs solely to her. At this point, the author recreates new memories through adventures that give her an added identity. Padma finds herself after losing her marriage. The story dives into Padma’s mind, her disenchanting desires, and estrangement as the wife through a unique narrative technique that travels back and forth to make readers aware of how she eventually reclaims her own space.

Padma mind is a nest of her inner desire, reflected in her dreams. Like Sultana’s dreams which create a utopian dreamland for women, Padma dreams to escape her loneliness. It can be argued that the dreams symbolize her suppressed desire to be free from the confines of her house, urging her to create an identity for herself. Since the interior of her husband’s house is bound by memories of him, she is seen to be dreaming of outer spaces like “the woods that came up the slope of the backyard” or the “creature she was following—a refugee or interloper.”<sup>57</sup> Author Singh extends Padma’s identity by taking her

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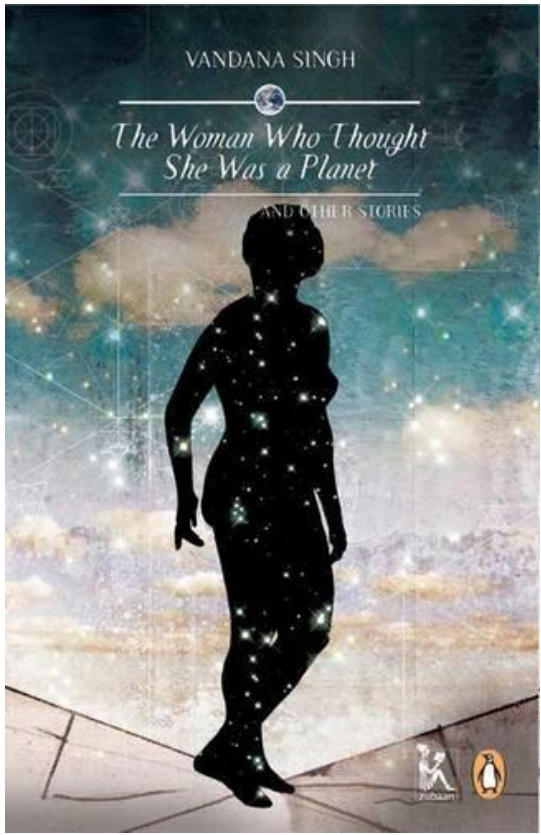
<sup>56</sup> Edward Said, *The Selected Works of Edward Said, 1966–2006*, originally published in shorter form as *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2019), 287.

<sup>57</sup> *Katha*, 158.





dreams away from the vicinity of her husband’s house, and she formulates newer spaces for Padma that, metaphorically, also extend her identity. In her dreams, she is not just her husband’s wife but also a woman with individual desires.



Vandana Singh raises significant questions about the defining role of women in South Asia, i.e., the role of the wife and the social expectations from her. In the essay “Contesting Cultures,” Uma Narayan reflects on her mother’s mistreatment in a middle-class South Indian family. She describes how her “injunction to be silent came from her mother, who had nobody to talk to about her sufferings in a conjugal

home.”<sup>58</sup> Her mother spoke about how she remained silent even when her mother-in-law harassed her with pride and satisfaction, as the innocence of Uma’s mother would indicate that she was a good wife.<sup>59</sup>

The role primarily focused on swallowing the wrongdoings, preventing her from recognizing the systematic physical, verbal, and psychological oppression she was subjected to. In “The Wife,” we get a reference of Padma performing that exact role of a good wife. “All the time she had been bringing up the boys, supplementing the family income with a series of small jobs, cooking, cleaning, and reading her mystery novels, she had been unaware that she was, in a subtle way, a failure.”<sup>60</sup>

In *Nari Dharma*, we get the account of Dayamayi Devi who drank the water from her husband’s feet. This example shows the need to make ourselves aware of the implications of a good wife who, apart from carrying the feminine virtues like submissiveness, kindness, and nurturing, is also expected to be devoted towards her husband. Walsh talks about the innumerable examples of “women’s willingness to identify with and immerse themselves in idioms of devotion to their husband.”<sup>61</sup> We get references of “another educated devoted woman,” Prabhait Debi, who was seen to worship the image of her husband instead of goddesses in a *Savitri Puja*. However, in the short story we understand how the role of a “good wife” may also have multifaceted

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<sup>58</sup> Uma Narayan, “Contesting Cultures,” in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-world Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Katha*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> Judith E. Walsh. “What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (1997): 641-677.

social repercussions, mostly negative in nature. Padma is mocked by Keshav's (her husband) colleagues, who think she is not intellectually compatible with him. For them, she becomes the "museum exhibit" in her silk saree. She was "the exotic bride of that brilliant, if unpredictable Keshav Malik."<sup>62</sup> This showcases the many facets of oppression. To elaborate, if you are a good wife that neither automatically guarantees her mental/physical security nor helps her to gain respect.

I argue that Padma is a victim of dual oppressions—professional and psychological. Padma is unable to pursue her career because of her full-time job as a housewife for which she receives no recognition from her husband, and subsequently becomes a subject of ridicule, leading to her psychological subjugation. In the essay, "In the Name of Love and Family: The Systematic Invisibilisation of Women's Work"—the authors provide a critical Marxist perspective to explain how "Capitalism and patriarchy collaborate in determining that the woman's work must be devalued as it is not directly related to the market."<sup>63</sup> It creates a stark demarcation of the inner and outer spaces—work and home—creating a hierarchy of social division. In *Strir proti svamir upadesh* ("A Husband's Advice to the Wife") we get a glimpse of a very revealing conversation set in late-nineteenth century Bengal:

HUSBAND: I've told you over and over again, but you still won't read or write.

WIFE: What's the point? Am I going out to work or something?

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<sup>62</sup> Katha, 162.

<sup>63</sup> Tahseen Fatima and Jyoti Kumari, "In the Name of Love and Family: The Systematic Invisibilisation of Women's Work," *Feminism in India*, March 23, 2023, <https://feminisminindia.com/2023/03/24/the-systematic-invisibilisation-of-womens-work/>

HUSBAND: Ha, Ha, Ha—so, reading and writing is only for work, is it! Such is the intelligence of women that you talk like this (Mitra, 1884, 1).<sup>64</sup>

This dialogue shows how impossible it was to even imagine that nineteenth century Bengali women could apply their education in the public sphere. Her labor to acquire knowledge through reading and writing, and to become *Sarvagun Sampunna* (versatile person), should only be devoted to her family members, an effort that would not even be appreciated or acknowledged. But who benefits the most from this unappreciated labor force? The answer would be capitalism and men. We can conclude that Keshav's professional career as a professor is indirectly aided by his wife's labor, which never gets acknowledged. We can argue that he can go and work *outside* as his wife takes care of the *inside* (the household chores and bringing up their child). Silvia Federici explains that unless women went to factories to produce wages they were not considered to be "labourers," as the "house was never looked as a place of struggle," and that "... by not seeing the unpaid labours that women do, not acknowledging the whole capitalist class, every employer has exploited that labour, by making it appear as a 'labour of love,' by not recognizing it as work."<sup>65</sup> Keshav not only dismisses her labor, but it becomes the reason for his emotional adultery with Professor Maya, equivalent to a non-physical affair. Here, Professor Maya can be categorized as a woman of the public sphere. She has visited many places and wrote a "monumental novel" about her travel experiences through war zones. She is intellectually more compatible with Keshav than he is with

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<sup>64</sup> Walsh, "What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal."

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Padma. When confronted with the rumors of extramarital affairs, Keshav denies them by saying, “I could have slept with her, you know, but I did not. What I want from her is intimacy beyond the merely physical.”<sup>66</sup> He adds, “Don’t you see, I am not interested in this woman as a woman? I want to find the words to make a box from metaphor and symbol, meaning and simile, and put her in it.”<sup>67</sup> Keshav seeks intellectual comfort in Professor Maya that Padma cannot provide.

Keshav’s retort demands an expansion of the definition of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir, writing in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, problematizes the classically construed “‘a woman is just a womb’ categorization that attaches only physical demarcations to the identity without considering the social or cultural factors that influence a woman on a daily basis.”<sup>68</sup> Keshav’s banal reply to Padma is evidence of rigid patriarchal mentality but with a twist. He is intrigued by the intelligence of Professor Maya but does not look at her like any other woman. He does not subscribe to typical feminine ascriptions (like looking at her with sexual intentions), thus categorizing her as a “non-feminine class” (as this is what women are for!). Because she is an intellectual, she is “not looked at like other women.”<sup>69</sup> As Butler mentions, the “gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Katha*, 161.

<sup>70</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”

Keshav's perception of Professor Maya as a female carries certain predetermined patriarchal expectations.

I argue we cannot situate Professor Maya as “conventional marriage material” as it would challenge the socially constructed role of a conventional marriage as a social institution. Sociologists argue marriages are meant to extend the familial legacy where women's primary roles are to act as reproductive machines. It is essential to control the institution as it leads to the development of familial ties that constitute the basic social unit upon which society is built. It leads to the creation of social roles that are sanctioned by society. For example, if you are a mother you are supposed to give birth to children and nurture them. Professor Maya's association with the public world would preclude her from this identification. In contrast, Padma takes care of the family, and stewards the household and community happiness. She is a woman of the interior with limited or no connection with the outside world. This tendency, referred to as the “new patriarchy in anticolonial nationalism” by Partha Chatterjee, can be traced back to nineteenth century colonial Bengal. It marked a reconfiguration “of extant patriarchal customs, rules, and prescriptions that was intended both to fit Bengali women for the changed conditions of life in British-ruled India and to create conditions and structures in the private sphere that would compensate Bengali men for their loss of power and position in public life.”<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, Bengali men, unable to exercise their domination in the public sphere, tried to hold onto their power over the wife in the domestic space.

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<sup>71</sup> Walsh, “What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late-Nineteenth-Century Bengal.”

We observe certain power dynamics in this entire phenomenon when we often come across Indian literature like Nagendrabala's *Nari Dharma* (women's dharma; duty), *Garhashtya Dharma* (domestic duties), and *Ramanir Kartavya* (the duty of a woman) that carried narratives of pickle-making recipes, or sock-darning exercises for women. These literary narratives, by males talking to women, prescribe men's expectations of women's role in society as well as what is expected of a Bengali housewife.

Antionette Burton discusses how women's narratives were excluded in history because of their disassociation from the outside world. However, this systematic alienation of women from the public sphere has resulted from the social expectations of viewing married women in a certain way. And Padma, as a character, has internalized the socially prescribed image of the wife in her mind. When Keshav asks her, "Who are you, Padma?", she replies, "Your Wife."<sup>72</sup> This shows how her entire identity revolves around a specific identity marker, a pact of twenty-three years of their marriage. As a result, she felt like, "a sinkful of unwashed dishes the morning after a half-remembered party: the old house, the inevitability of solitude—and her face growing increasingly alien to her day by day."<sup>73</sup> Just like the dishes, Padma is used by her husband to meet his domestic requirements, and once the purpose is fulfilled, she is left desolate in a corner without proper attention. She is calculatedly reduced to a single identity of the wife that forbids her to even identify herself as an individual.

One of Keshav's memories in the basement—the incident where he played a prank with ketchup and tennis shoes—helps her to reclaim

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 160.

her individual identity. It was an experiment that Keshav decided to conduct in the class to make his students aware of the importance of brevity and the magic of the human mind to comprehend things just with a pair of tennis shoes and ketchup. After the prank Keshav said to Padma, “Do you realize how all our conclusions about the world are based on purely circumstantial evidence? What is real, and what is not real—all the universe gives us is raw data. We make realities out of words, Padma, words in our minds and on the page. Do you see?”<sup>74</sup> This memory made Padma come to terms with her own reality. She finally realized that playing the role of Keshav’s wife for so many years made her believe that he would always stay by her side. She could not gauge that she was staying in a bubble of dependency, and that the space she claimed to be her own for years did not belong to her, but rather was a *sarai*, “a temporary stop to another place.”<sup>75</sup> The memory stood as a metaphor that unleashed what Nietzsche might define as the “will to power” that awakened her state of being. She no longer imagines her home to be a safe refuge from the world. She wakes up to the realization that “she is the stranger looking into the lit windows of her own house.”<sup>76</sup> Keshav’s memory acts as a turning point that resurfaces the memories of her subjugations that were buried in her subconsciousness. Donna Haraway, in “A Manifesto of Cyborgs,” situates “women’s experiences” as “a fiction, and a fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression and so of possibility.”<sup>77</sup> The visual

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 169.



recapitulation of Keshav's prank in her mind (the content suppressed within the subconscious) renders/reawakens her present sense of being (conscious mind) that opens a new outlook on life. The author ends the story on a positive note, where she could image an entire new world ahead of her, where the path of "the silver thread of moonlight" was a sanctuary, a place of "cool air, the forest's breath and the lifeline of dreams" acting as a manifestation for a better future.<sup>78</sup>

To conclude, these stories are connected by the common theme of how women are expected to perform certain gender roles across geographies. Although we can find certain common roots of oppression, the experiences of women need to be analyzed individually to understand the ways they fight against the daily waves of oppression in their own individual manner. Such an approach would enable us to create an alternative feminist lens to look at their experiences that does not coincide with the theoretical male-centric perspective. It can help us to formulate specific literary epistemologies that are created to cater specifically to the needs of women.

### ***Note on the Author***

**Sneha Chakraborty** is pursuing her graduate studies in the Department of English at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion. Her research interests are postcolonial and feminist studies, and gender based hierarchical oppression especially in the underrepresented communities. She is interested in adaptations of Shakespearean plays into performances of dance and cinema. She has published a number of

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<sup>77</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 358.

<sup>78</sup> *Katha*, 169.

articles such as “The Moor of Venice: Critically Analyzing *Othello* Based on Race, Color, Gender as the Social Constructor and the Facilitator to kill Desdemona” in *Litinfinite: A Journal of Literature and Social Sciences*; and “Critically Commenting on the Process of Demythologization at Work in Fakir Mohan Senapati’s ‘Six Acres and a Third,’” in the *International Journal of English and Studies*. She is a classically trained dancer and likes to watch medical thrillers and sitcoms in her leisure time.

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