



# Reflection of Gender Roles and Challenges: 20<sup>th</sup> century Women's Writings' in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

Women have used literature as a voice to secure their rights as women for many centuries. Twentieth century witnessed the most amazing change in women's writing. This century has authors like Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Purabi Basu, who portrait women's thinking, imaginations, culture, stories of male domination, women's struggle and history of breaking the age-old domineering chains to free women's souls as well as to release their spirit

This paper will explore the role of women writers' literature in the representation, dissemination and generation or construction of challenges of gender roles. Literature explores the relationship between values and literature. The main focus of this paper is focusing on women's writing, discovery of women's self-independence, women breaking the male defined limitations and the expedition towards autonomy and self-assertion through their writing. Women writers have spoken out against the gender inequity in their novels and autobiographies. Till today the pressure of challenges they face can be seen in the society. Throughout the history we saw that women writers expressed their inner thoughts, self discovery, identity, their value and roles in the society in the form of literature. It is very difficult for a woman to establish her values in a male dominated society.

**Key words:** Women, Gender, Challenges, Discrimination, English Literature, Bangladeshi Literature.

## Introduction:

History infrequently tells the story of ordinary men far less ordinary women. Women writers wrote their different experiences through fiction. There are a significant number of novels written by Bengali women in the twentieth century. Their writings were concerned portraying the social struggle, independence.

Throughout the history we saw that women writers expressed their inner thoughts, self discovery, identity, their value and roles in the society in the form of literature. It is very difficult for a woman to establish her values in a male dominated society. Women have used literature as a voice to defend their rights as women for many centuries. Twentieth century witnessed the most astonishing change in women's writing. This century has authors like Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Purabi Basu, who reviewed women's thinking, imaginations, culture, stories of male domination, women's struggle and history of breaking the age-old oppressive chains to liberate women's souls as well as to release their spirit.

Literature is the mirror image of the society. Literature observes the acuity and manners of the society. It portrays human life through characters, by their words and deeds convey messages for the purpose of giving instructions, moral values and to delight. In the history of literature witnessed the improvement of women through ages. From the past to present literature indicates the evolution of women writers and women empowerment. People were educated and were differently treated depending on gender throughout the history. Gender is the socially constructed difference of men and women. According to Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet "gender is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do- something we perform".<sup>1</sup> In the society we saw that women grew up believing that their only purpose was to become a wife and mother. Till these days in countries those are developing believe in that. This domestic focal point gave them limitation. According to Connell "bodily differences and social effects are often linked through the idea of character dichotomy".<sup>1</sup> Women's were always expected to implement a modest behavior and they should be morally pure, willing to sacrifice and stay away from strong desires and strong options, especially in opposition to men. Differences of gender always affecting women, to access the components like education, financial support, experience. In literature women can also contribute, participate as writers, readers, critics. "Men have had every advantage of telling us, their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree: the pen has been in their hands." (Austen, 1817).

The place of women in the literary world is always been an issue. We have seen that women's writings were ignored for a long period of time in the history of literature. They released their true self from the male constructed weakening images of women. They rejected a life of subservience and silence, and claimed their deserved life of as free women and as women writers. Women writers like Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath,

Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, Margaret Atwood, Mary Wollstonecraft, Kamla Bhasin, Kate Chopin who have successfully challenged male domination in literature. As the famous author Virginia Woolf said in her book *A Room of One's Own* "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Women writers are always vocal to the

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<sup>1</sup> Eckert, Penelope, Mc Connell Ginet (2003)*Language and Gender*, Cambridge University Press,

complexity of earlier centuries by taking the pen in their own hands from past three centuries. Women writers have been giving voice to women's experiences and concerns. Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer and gender theorist, in her classic feminist text, *The Second Sex*, has pointed out myths about women and stereotyping of women in literature. In her view, all through history women has been portrayed as 'Other' in the society and women have been treated as unusual, abnormal and as the second sex. She explained the bitter fact of women they accepted the roles assigned to them by men and unintentionally they have given assent to this commencement of their being taken as the 'Other'. "Gender issues have always been a topic in society as well as in literature, so naturally gender became a major focus of the modernist movement. Women, their intelligence and their judgment had been regarded with contempt by a male oriented society." (Marsden, 1911). According to Dr. Soma Bhowmick "Gender studies are an outshoot of history of women and that of her movement across the globe. Hence the focus from women on gender, scholars and historians of gender investigate how a society allocates roles and social connotations to the various biological attributes of males and females. The differences between men and women, they argue, are rooted in the mindsets of societies".<sup>2</sup>

## II. Women writers' independence and the expiation towards self assertion through their writing

Twentieth century was the time when women writers become more active and influential. The style, content was changed in their writings. They started to write more about self discovery and feminine images. Women authors started to focus on topics significant to women, bringing attention to the difficulties they faced and the importance of their identity in the changing world. They started to write about their independence. The significant outburst happened in the shape of a reformed literature; a literature that preserves women's history, their lives, their untold stories, imaginations and thoughts- constructing a new route towards the exploration of female identity that channels them into a journey of accomplishing independence, self-assertion and autonomy. The voyage of exploring one's own identity begins with the shift in themes in twentieth century women's literature from the Victorian era.

## III. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Women Writers in English Literature and Bangladeshi Literature

It was not easy for women writers to express their position in the society in the past, but they started to write autobiographies and biographies, plays and novels, and criticism. They also started to write literary criticism. Deprived of formal education, lack of financial independence, denied from the professional occupation women's were only confined with domestic sphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but many females wanted to gain knowledge of the world and the intellectual motivations and they frequently wanted themselves to read and write. When Virginia Woolf wrote her essay "*A Room of One's own*" in 1929 so many women writers were inspired by her writing. The beginning of twentieth century met the powerful question "Are there women, really? Woman is losing her way, woman is lost." (de Beauvoir, 2009). The 20th Century was an age where there was a spectacular raise in the size of female readers and the

<sup>2</sup> Bhowmick, Soma.(2019) "*Deliberating Issues Affecting Women Globally*", *Women Empowerment and Gender Issues*, ed. Central West Publishing.

number of female writers. In literary establishment women writers work was rarely welcomed. Virginia Woolf has raised some problems she faced in her book "*A Room of One's Own*". She states that women writers can be successful only if they are financially independent. Virginia Woolf's writings were mostly about the external difficulties and obstacles that women writers face and give importance to find their voices. In the late 1970s, three foremost studies on women writers were published which tried to recreate a female literary tradition in British and American literature and history: Ellen Moer's "Literary Women" (1976), Elaine Showalter's "A Literature of Their Own", (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic", (1979). These books were the leading studies on women writers. Twentieth century women's literature is an expression of women's lives, inner thoughts, feelings, imaginations as well as an agony against the age-old patriarchal domination and the audacious literature of this century paves a way towards female identity, independence, enlightenment, self-assertion and autonomy. The life and literary works of leading women authors of twentieth century importantly includes Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Isak gives a indication of the uniqueness of Modernist women's literature. As Gubar and Gilbert believe, "a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her."<sup>3</sup> Female writers throughout the world have always been vocal on gender roles. Bangladeshi female writers like Selina Hossain and Purabi Basu, put on a view strong sense of resistance to the strong supremacy of paterfamilias. They express their disappointment of the continuing masculine dominations over the structure of power as sexual difference signifies political difference, the difference between freedom and weakness through their writings. Niaz Zaman, a Professor in the Department of English, Dhaka University, a well known English writer in Bangladesh, some collection of short stories containing Bangladeshi writing (especially short stories by women) were published. These are: From the Delta: English Fiction from Bangladesh (2005), edited by Niaz Zaman, Galpa : Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh (2006), edited by Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman, Arshilata: Women's Fiction from India and Bangladesh (2007), edited by Niaz Zaman. These are the work of writers who are anxious about the status of women at home and society at large, this pulsating and inspiring collection of short stories is the representative of multiple issues that women from Bangladesh undertake in their writings. Women writers bring their stories to make awareness that questions the gender discriminations and deprivations that they face in the society and in their life.

Begum Rokeya is one of the most discussed and famous woman writers in Bangladesh. The more the women's liberation is getting relevance, breaking barriers the more the womankind are progressing to achieve their rights, the more Begum Rokeya's name is being uttered. Rokeya Shakawat Hossain's writings mostly concern on issues of women. Begum Rokeya always wrote about gender difference and its effects.

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<sup>3</sup> Gubar, Susan. (1981) "*The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity*". Critical Inquiry, Vol. 8, No.2, Writing and Sexual Difference: 243-263.  
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/bio>  
<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstr>  
<https://www.academia.edu/1114205/Weapon>  
<http://www.scribd.com>

Women writers explore the conditions which construct women's lives. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the famous English author, is often considered to be the first writer and also an early pioneer of women's rights. In the twentieth century there were some celebrated women writers like Virginia Woolf (1882- 1941), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006). Rokeya Shakawat Hossain (1880-1932), like them, was a strong voice of women rights in the history of Bangladeshi literature. She passionately asked for women's equal position in society and also for their rights and privileges.

According to Kamla Bhasin According to Kamla Bhasin "Just having male or female bodies doesn't necessarily have to determine our characteristics, roles or destinies." <sup>4</sup> Bengali writer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote an allegory "Sultana's Dream" in 1905 when women were comfortable to follow the customary roles assigned to them. In this extraordinary work, which was written a hundred years ago, she dreamt of a world where women will be the ruler and man will follow. The moderate quest for women's equality and capability to prove their worth by action is clearly described in the literary pieces of *Sultana's Dream* and *Padmarag*. This change in the movement shows that seeds of uprising were present inside the women but it found an expression in the writings of women over a period of time. Women writers have struggled with the issues such as sexuality, servility, subjugation and the place of women in society.

#### **IV. The depth of women's literature and their views towards gender roles:**

It was not easy for women to establish their values in the society. They were dominated by the patriarchal system. In the literary world women writers are still facing the challenge for being unaccepted, they have to prove the worth and significance of their works. Such struggles not only reside in women writers in English literature but also in Bangladesh, where the literary art still remains a male practice. Women writers are struggling from past to still now.

Women writers in Bangladesh are coming forth courageously even though the boiling patriarchal traditions that have long silenced the female voice. Bangladeshi women writers have passionately maintained its unique linguistic identity and the narration of nation, but very few are known internationally. Most of their writings investigated the nature of struggle in the lives of women in Bangladesh. Prof. Gitiara Nasreen (2003) conducted a research on "Women in Bangladesh media" and concluded as follows: "Attitudes in society still stand against gender equality. Very often female are not aware of their rights, even when they are, female who depend on male protection are convinced that it's not in their best interests to claim those rights."

Women writers express her awareness of the subordinate status of woman in her times and her reproof of woman's cultural isolation and artistic alienation. The very act of writing itself is an act of revolution that challenged the women writers. Women writers gave voice to the emerging female self and employed a language that was implicitly revolutionary. The act of writing had always been considered as a man's

<sup>4</sup> Bhasin, Kamla, (2000), *Understanding Gender*, Kali for Women Unlimited

privilege. Women were either trapped in the male texts as mute objects of art or suppressed with male-inscribed ideologies of idealized womanhood and false femininity like self-denial, passivity or domesticity.

In Bangladesh many women writers have been doing significant work over the last decade but a portion of Bangladesh still doesn't want to try to understand women can carry out and execute her responsibilities as equally as a man in the society. Bangladesh's culture is conservative, especially in its approach towards the role of women in the home and society but still brave women-writers have been taking risks and demonstrating courage in order to inspire other women to be empowered. The images of women reflected by women writers and their exact attitude regarding Bangladeshi women and the conservative society of Bangladesh can be understood by their novels.

In *Abarodbashini*, Rokeya portrays the situation of her society where women were not treated as human beings but as emotionless objects. We can see the dreadful effect of purdah examining women in that piece of writing. She discloses the absurdities of the society in *Abarodbashini* and in *Sultana's Dream* she enlightens the role of a woman to show the society what women are capable of if given the chance. Through the ladies of the ladyland in *Sultana's Dream*, she expresses that if the women were educated in the true sense then no one could put a stop to them from succeeding. They have the ability to shine as men in restoring harmony in the society. In *Padmarag*, the women got the courage to change their life by becoming economically independent and educated. The sisters of Tarini Bhaban before their arrival they were burden to their families. But in Tarini Bhaban, they modernize themselves to be the independent citizens of the society. Being educated, they were no more burdens on anyone. Siddika's brother rightly says to her: "Get ready for the awaiting life- struggle! With proper education I will prepare you so that you need not depend on any mischievous men for mere food stuffs." (p- 92) Siddika's different statements in the novel show how she becomes conscious for her rights. She gets the confidence to fight against the customary norms of the society and achieve economic liberty. She refuses to go back to her husband as she was abandoned by her in-laws and her sense of self-respect keeps her from doing this. Moreover thinks that if she returns to her husband society would succeed and she will turn her into a puppet again. Through Siddika, Begum Rokeya sends a message to women to educate themselves for their rights and privileges. Siddika who fights for the rights of women and against patriarchy is the picture of Begum Rokeya herself. Working for the betterment of the troubled women as well as of the society was her main concern. The Daily Star noted, "Begum Rokeya believed that men and women were created differently, but equally... the subjugated position of women was not due to Allah's will, but due to men's immorality."

Women writers' portrait the transformation and renovation of traditional thematic approaches is a significant trait in twentieth century women's literature which eventually allows women to assert their self-identity breaking the border of old feminine circle in literature. In this century, women's literature circles around the themes of search for one's own identity and self discovery.

Writers like Purabi Basu portraits women's value with a simple thing like cooking in her writing "Radha Will Not Cook Today". Radha the character of the story chose cooking to show her revolt by not cooking for a day for the family. Purabi Basu wrote a lot about the condition of women in Bangladesh. Appropriating a folk narrative technique to present contemporary themes and issues related to the life of the rural society.

Radha, the protagonist of the story who makes up her mind not to cook that day for the family, instead she spends a day in the relaxing, refusing to be the ideal wife, mother and obedient daughter in law. Radha's silent protest against her marital family may appear like a common domestic tiff but her response to the inequality in the domestic setting with a seemingly harmless but powerful sign of silence as a bold step against societal convention. Author has foregrounded silence as a weapon to counteract and unsettle the patriarchal assumptions about woman. The strategy of silence in this story acquires epistemological implications as it calls attention to the situation of women who are obliged to remain silent and suffer without protest. It also emphasizes the lack of voice of the marginal beings to highlight sexual, socioeconomic and political inequalities. The reiteration of 'Radha will not cook today' gets charged with a sense of defiance of role playing that women seldom seem to be able to escape and gets transformed itself into a text of feminist discourse.

### Literature Review

Virginia Woolf's "*A Room of One's Own*" (1929) can be taken as a beginning which questioned or asserted a kind of free thinking for women. The beginning of twentieth century asked the overwhelming question "Are there women, really? Woman is losing her way, woman is lost."<sup>5</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was an age where there was a dramatic increase in the size of female readers and the number of female writers. Women's hard work were rarely received by the literary establishment. Virginia Woolf's "*A Room of One's Own*" deals with some of the problems women faced, especially in the context of self assertion. The book can be taken as a seminal writing on women's autonomy. She states that women writers can only be successful if they are financially independent. Much of Woolf's writing at this point was concerned with the external difficulties and obstacles of women writers, an emphasis connected to her own struggle to find a voice. Prominent female writer Kate Millet, in her "*Sexual Politics*"<sup>6</sup> analyses that women have been sketches in the history and literature portrays by male writers. Women have been depicted by male writes from a masculine point of view. In the late 1970s, three foremost studies on women writers were published which tried to reconstruct a female literary tradition in British and American literature and history: Ellen Moer's "*Literary Women*" (1976), Elaine Showalter's "*A Literature of Their Own*", (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "*The Madwoman in the Attic*", (1979). These books were major studies on women writers. Twentieth century women's literature consequently became rebellious against the old patriarchal domination. Such literature became bold in expressing and paving the female identity of self assertion and autonomy, with reference to living and dead writers. Twentieth century includes Jean /Rhys, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Isak etc. whose life and literary works gives an indication of the individuality of Modernist women's literature. As Gubar and Gilbert believe, "a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have

<sup>5</sup> de Beauvoir, Simone. (2009). *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. London, United Kingdom: Jonathan Cape.

<sup>6</sup> Millett, Kate. (1970). *Sexual Politics*. New York City, United States: Rupert Hart-Davis.

generated for her."<sup>7</sup> Modernist women literature thus became more intense in a struggle to assert women's rights and subvert male diplomacy in the 20th century. According to Dr. Soma Bhowmick "Gender studies are an outshoot history of women and that of her movement across the globe. Hence the focus from women on gender, scholars and historians of gender investigate how a society allocates roles and social connotations to the various biological attributes of males and females. The differences between men women, they argue, are rooted in the mindsets of societies".<sup>8</sup> According to Kamla Bhasin "Just having male or female bodies doesn't necessarily have to determine our characteristics, roles or destinies".**Error! Bookmark not defined.** This marked shift of thinking was the clear indication of the seeds of renovation in women's writing. In the literary pieces '*Sultana's Drea*' and '*Padmarag*' by Begum Rokeya explored and represented the moderate quest for women's equality and capability to prove their significance. Women writers have written about complex issues such as sexuality, submissiveness, suppression and the place of women in society and have shown their protagonists as evolving into mature, confident and strong women.

### **Objective:**

This paper examines 20th century literature in Bangladesh, which aims to redefine and restate the status of women in an orthodox society; to ascertain points between earlier women writers in the rest of the world and the Bangladeshi women writers through a process to identify independence and self establishment. This study will help to investigate and collect knowledge about women writers in Bangladesh and their views on challenge of gender roles and discrimination in their significant writings. The purpose of the study is to discover the obstruction women face regarding role difference, as also to study the social policy and programs and issues that directly have an effect on equal rights. The main objective of the study will explore the work behavior, views of gender discrimination according to the women writers in Bangladesh who have attempted to break stereotypes of women.

### **Methodology**

The author has written this paper with the help of secondary sources. The author has gone through different books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and reports in Bangladesh and abroad. Data is also collected from various web sites.

### **Findings**

Gender discrimination is a constant serious issue. In Bangladesh socio-cultural factors play a fundamental role in proceeding or delaying women's access. Although Bangladeshi constitution assures equal rights to women but in practical there is a deviation in theory and practice. Prof. Gitiara Nasreen (2003) conducted a research on "Women in Bangladesh media" and concluded as follows: "Attitudes in society still stand

<sup>7</sup> Gubar, Susan. (1981), "*The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity*". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No.2, Writing and Sexual Difference: 243-263.

<sup>8</sup> Bhowmick, Soma,( 2019),*Deliberating Issues Affecting Women Globally, Women Empowerment and Gender Issues*, ed. Central West Publishing



against gender equality. Very often female are not aware of their rights, even when they are, female who depend on male protection are convinced that it's not in their best interests to claim those rights". In Bangladesh many women writers have been writing remarkably over the last decade. A portion of Bangladesh still doesn't want to try to understand whether women can undertake and perform their responsibilities as equally as a man in the society. The culture of Bangladesh is conservative, particularly to its approach towards the role of women in the home and society. Marriages are customarily arranged, and wives are anticipated to stay at home and look after the family, and when women want to work, parents consistently play a big influential role in their career choices. The manner in our society has been that women need to perform their dedication to their family first, so Bangladeshi women have felt obligated to stay home. The situation is now more changed in Bangladeshi women; they have begun to think about their career and attempt to break the stereotype.

### **Conclusion**

Literature mirrors society and societal values. Literature consequently has the future to reconstruct and reform the role of women. The woman who follows the crowd usually cannot go beyond the crowd. Albert Einstein said 'The woman who walks alone is likely to find herself in places no one has ever been before'. Literature has witnessed the roles of women developing all the way through ages. Since the time of the first explorers to the present, women's roles and interpretation in literature expresses the changes taking place historically for women. As women gained equal opportunity, the heroine continued to change. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only do the characters represent the female individuality, but also the heroines convert into the new figures that women desire to be. Women writers' writings enlighten the depth of definitions for women's literature will also create a path for their descendents which will definitely influence later women writers to establish their own autonomous selves through literature. This will also help gather knowledge and to understand the values of women through their writings about women of Bangladesh and their views on challenge of gender roles.

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