

Female Voice against Patriarchal Oppression: A Study on *Tree without Roots*

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Abstract

Tree without Roots (1948) is a debut novel of Syed Waliullah, a Bangladeshi novelist, short-story writer and playwright. In the novel, he focuses on vital social factors, religious fundamentalism, superstitions, domination of patriarchal society and subject to the ravages of nature. This novel deals with misrepresentation of a religion and dominating a society by means of that religion. In this novel, Majeed, the protagonist and central character, represents oppressive patriarchy who dominates everything of Mahabbatpur village. He claims to be a religious and spiritual guide of the people and thus establishes his position in the village declaring an antique grave to be the grave of a saint named Mudasser Pir. Jamila plays a significant and dominant role in this novel as a female character. She epitomizes the most salient and rebellious voice who questions and refuses oppressive patriarchy. She holds a feminist voice which is quite loud in this text. There are other female characters including Rahima, Kulsum and wife of Khaleque Bepary who represent different features of women of the mid-20th century Bengali Muslim society. This paper analyzes how Jamila voices for the silent majority of the society and how she speaks against all suppression of Majeed and breaks the binary boundary created by Majeed. Noteworthy to mention is that feminism portrayed by Jamila indicates radical feminism, a perspective of feminism signifying the elimination of patriarchal order of the society created by them.

Keywords: radical feminism, patriarchy, authoritativeness.

Introduction

Feminism and voicing for women are a much-talked topic at present time. Feminism academically starts with the publication of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft and it is going on till date. With the passage of time, it changes, rather enhances and broadens its focus and objectives. There are three main waves of feminism that began with the rights of suffrage and now it deals with the elimination of patriarchal order that fetters women in every aspect and sphere of life. Women are not silent though sometimes they are intentionally unheard and technically marginalized. Women express themselves in many ways. In writings of female writers, women have come up with their own and original voices. Male writers also portrayed and still portraying women sometimes from their own perspectives, sometimes from an objective position. Thus women and their real condition are illustrated in literary texts.

Tree without Roots (1948) is a Bengali novel dealing with a mid-20th century Bengali society. Syed Waliullah exposes the real scenario of that society vividly. Women of that time were speechless and some of them tried to raise their voice and those women were technically avoided, if not they were excluded from the scenario or stopped forever. Jamila of *Tree without Roots* (1948) is a character of such type. This paper will divulge the miserable condition of the mid-twentieth century women and a strong female character who questions this authoritativeness of patriarchy embodied by Majeed. This paper will also examine how this voice questions the authority and how it was stopped forever. Another goal of this paper is to exhume the patriarchal oppression that dominates in its self-created patriarchal world.

Literature Review

In order to conduct this research, readers will face some terms and words that need special attention to explain. Here in this article, feminism and patriarchy are two prominent subjects and without a proper understanding of these, it is difficult to get the associated meanings of this paper. One more issue will be discussed here as the summary of the text titled *Tree without Roots* since this will be found as an unread text to many. So a synopsis of this novel will be added here.

Firstly, 'feminism' is a voice which perpetuates sexual inequality. The word derives from the French word 'feminisme' and according to *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, feminism "is the belief that woman should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state." According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, feminism deals with "the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sex" (Brunnel & Burkett). The word itself is used to describe a cultural, political or economic movement aiming for equal rights for both women and men. Feminism is concerned with 'conditioning' and 'socialization'- a cruel set of the distinction between the terms 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine'. Toril Moi expounds it the first 'a political position' the second 'a matter of biology' and third 'a culturally defined characteristics.' (Peter Berry 117) "Feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth... It does not abandon values or relationships but goes on to create new ones" (Jasbir Jain 2011). Nonetheless, feminism did not get popularity until 1970 even in the western countries.

There are different phases of feminism namely first phase, second phase and third phase of feminism. The first phase existed till 1920s. Mary Wollstonecraft, the grandmother of British feminism, published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) advocated the social and moral equality of the sexes. The first phase of feminism existed during the 19th century and early 20th century in the developed countries like UK, Canada, the Netherlands

and the USA. It focused on de jure inequalities and gaining suffrage. It was moderate and conservative than radical or revolutionary.

Then there begins the second phase of feminism in the 1920s. This wave includes radical feminists that emphasized on the superiority of women over men. It demanded the intuitive, supportive and sisterly atmosphere whereas men are rational, competitive and patronizing. It gave a political shake-up of the society. They considered sexist subordination of women as the fundamental form of oppression. The family is at the center of oppression through sexual slavery and forced motherhood. This phase of feminism retained women's control over their body and brought protest against domestic violence. Thus essential femaleness sought to reclaim beyond the structure of the patriarchal family.

Finally, the third phase is considered to begin after the 1950s. Diverse strains of feminism are noticed at this phase which was a response to the second phase. It quizzed the initiatives and failures during the second phase. It raised the voice against the colours, ethnicities, religions and cultural discriminations. It was not a single feminist idea. The third wave usually incorporates elements of queer theory; individualist feminism; new feminist theory, transgender politics, and a rejection of the gender binary.

In radical feminism, man is the source of all oppression. Culture is male-dominated. Patriarchy separates women's culture with a separate set of values, which are different from that of men. Radical feminists tend to be more rebellious in their advancement than other feminists. The purpose of the radical feminists is to dismantle patriarchy rather than making advancement through legal changes. They oppose patriarchy rather than men. The root of the radical feminism was in the wider radical contemporary movement. Radical feminism is incorporated in *Tree without Roots* (1948) in which Jamila epitomizes the voice of radical feminism while Majeed embodies patriarchal order.

Another term used in this paper is patriarchal oppression. The term 'patriarchy' comes from Latin word "pater" referring to father and "arch" referring to rule. Therefore patriarchy indicates rule of the father. Father or father-figures hold the authority in a patriarchy. Patriarchy is "a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it" (English Oxford Living Dictionary). A doctrine aims at the power structures in the family, male domination, social practices and social institutions which are medium of mechanism of marginalizing the position of women. Subjugation of women is the core fact of it. It is connected with authority, order, repression, and control over the female society in conscious and unconscious mind.

Finally, the synopsis of *Tree without Roots* (1948) is essential here before to elaborate the ideas of feminism and feminist voice against patriarchal oppression. *Tree without Roots* (1948) is about a nice picture of a Bangladeshi village from a very artistic point of view. The protagonist of this novel Majeed comes from a remote village, a devotee Muslim background. He declared an old grave as a mausoleum, covered it with a red cloth and began ritualistic activities. Then he played a psychological game based on religious points of view of the uneducated villagers. Then the people believed that he had some divine power and the Mazar is the source of the power. They came to Majeed and devoted lots of valuable things for the Mazar. In this way he opened an illegal business and played a dominating role in society. His first wife is Rahima who always feared her husband. She is an image of typical women of Bengali society. Majeed remarries a teenager named Jamila. She represents a strong voice who for the first time questions the authoritativeness of Majeed and refuses to follow him blindly, though not explicitly but by her actions. Majeed tried to control her behaviour and to do so he tied her up in the Mazar and consequently she died there. During her death, her leg touched the Mazar and her dress was in disorder. Before death, she spat in the face of Majeed. This novel ends with a climactic disaster.

Findings

Feminism, by definition, is “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men” (Hornby 565). Though primarily feminism deals with the equal rights of women, it is concerned with some other broad issues. Radical feminism voices for the elimination of patriarchal order. Patriarchy indicates "a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men" (Hornby 565). Radical feminism is against such type of patriarchal order that is dominating them for years, for generations and for ages.

Tree without Roots (1948) is a mid-twentieth century novel revealing the ins and outs of Bengali Muslim society. This novel slightly but vividly portrays the real circumstances of women of that society. “Majeed represents the patriarchal power of the Bengali Muslim society of the 20th century” (Literary Articles 2015). This paper also states, “Jamila also refuses to conform to patriarchal norms set for women. Her spontaneous outburst into the terrain of maleness, i.e. speech and loud laughter, disturbs the neatly crafted silence of Majeed’s household near his ‘invented shrine.’” Thus Majeed and Jamila both represent two classes of people of the society.

Before discussing concepts and idea of the mid-20th century Bengali society employed in *Tree without Roots* (1948), it is necessary to notice the real scenario of that time. Bengali Muslim society follows the purdah system, an Islamic way that covers women in decent clothes. But this was misinterpreted according to the patriarchal laws. In ‘The Role of Bengali Muslim Women in the 19th and 20th Century,’ Shahanara Hossain (1985) writes that “observation of purdah restricts the mobility of women. It also restricts women’s contact with men” (24). In the same article, Hossain (1985) adds, “Islam sanctions purdah for modesty, but it has been misinterpreted according to existing social circumstances” (24). In *Tree without Roots* (1948), Rahima and Jamila are asked to walk slowly and obviously without

making any sound and they are also suggested to talk in such a way that does not reach the ears of other males. Jamila is accused of laughing loudly. All these are not Islamic rules but misinterpreted by Majeed, a perfect epitome of the patriarchal order. He did it not that he abides by Islamic rules but not to question his authority and therefore to make a permanent authoritative position in the society. He not only tries to dominate his wives but also convinces Khaleque Bepary by addressing him by a friend though he did not get a satisfactory response from that person.

Noteworthy to mention is that in Bengali society, there was hardly any option for education for women and they could only read the Quran, though without understanding its meaning. They were separated from other part of society. *Tree without Roots* (1948) represents such a society where women lead a life but not of their own. The society claims that women will basically be subservient to male. "Obedience to male guardians was expected from a woman according to male interpretation and she was to play the role of a docile daughter, a compliant wife and a dependent mother" (Hossain 25). In *Tree without Roots* (1948), the society represents such type of society. Rahima was a wife who was subservient to Majeed, her husband. She respected and feared him and thus she is a typical Bengali Muslim wife.

On the contrary, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a pioneer to voice for the rights of women. She very tactfully depicted the real situation of Bengali women in her writings. She writes *Sultana's Dream* that reveals a hidden desire of women to lead the nation. Shahanara Hossain writes in 'Feminist Ideas in Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*' that "She [Rokeya] writes about a far-off lady land, where ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the Murdana to mind babies to cook and to do all sorts domestic work" (77). Rokeya thus represents the society in her writings. Jamila of *Tree without Roots* (1948) was neither afraid of her husband nor

followed the rules imposed by her husband. She was a breaker of the established order. She plays the role of Sultana of *Sultana's Dream* in *Tree without Roots* and pushes the oppressive order of patriarchy, though she stopped forever with her unexpected and immature death.

A prime concern of this paper is to discover how Syed Waliullah represents the mid-20th century Bengali Muslim society in his *Tree without Roots* (1948). The uneducated women or rather women who did not get the opportunity of education are the leading characters of this novel.

First finding of this research is a patriarchal presentation with the character of Majeed. Majeed is considered to be an epitome of patriarchy. This patriarchy is obviously oppressive. In *Tree without Roots*, that Majeed came to Mahabbatpur in order to survive and followed a trick of befooling the countrymen by means of a shrine of a saint but when he read the soft mind of the people for religion and they are blind supporters of religion, Majeed utilizes this opportunity. He came here with nothing but makes houses, wives, lands and wealth. He did everything to strengthen his position. Akkas, a representative of the postcolonial society endowed with modern education, tries to find an English medium school in the village. It is well-acknowledged that schools impart modern education. But Majeed gets frightened with this attempt and stops this by saying that schools preach education of the non-believer while madrasas and mosques are for Islamic education. Though this was his argument, the thinking hidden in him is that if people come to know of the hollowness of the Mazar, his authority will be questioned, even might be broken. So to make his position safe, he stopped to found a school. And he suppressed his wife in the disguise of managing them. Patriarchal authoritativeness of Majeed thus invades all across the novel.

Secondly, Jamila is a strong female character who protests against Majeed's oppression. Jamila is a very simple young village teenager who got married to Majeed, an aged man. Early marriage of girls and polygamy of males are very common in that society.

All other girls tolerate this type of incidents silently. Jamila was also silent but expresses her curiosity making fun of her marriage with aged Majeed. When her marriage took place, she thought, "he's [Majeed] the bridegroom's father" (Waliullah 95). Thus she satirizes the marriage of an aged man with a very young girl. The age difference is so high that the girl thought her would-be husband to be her father in law.

Another protest against the order of Majeed is that she refuses to follow the law of Majeed. Majeed declared that women should not laugh loudly but Jamila laughed loudly. Syed Waliullah (1948) writes, "For no apparent reason Jamila burst into laughter." (94) Waliullah adds, "Jamila went on laughing as if some devil had taken possession of her. Her laughter this time was not like the tinkling of golden bangles, but rather like a warm bright sunburst piercing the clouds, utterly fearless and irresistible." (94) Thus she silently revolts against the established order of the patriarchy of Majeed.

Thirdly, Jamila, a woman who cannot be confined within boundaries of oppression or of order, loves to talk what she knows or thinks. This urge or desire to talk indicates the desire for expression and emancipation. "She loved to talk and had so many things to talk about" (93). Here the statement states utterly that Jamila is born to speak, not to be silent and not to tolerate everything. Though literally, Jamila loves to talk normal issues, connotatively it indicates her desire to speak the truth and raise her voice against all issues. In contrast, "Rahima never laughed at all" (93). Rahima silently tolerates everything and believes Majeed blindly. So she follows what is to be asked to follow by Majeed. Thus Jamila is utterly different from Rahima, a meek, silent, docile wife of Majeed.

Jamila never tolerates oppression and she has the courage to protest, if not, tries to protest. When her husband Majeed tries to tie her with a rope in the Mazar, she does not surrender easily. Rather she tries to free herself. She could not free herself from the hand of Majeed but she tried the best. Though "he was too strong for her," he did not forget to

protest. What she did is that “coming up close to him, she spat in his face” (Waliullah 117). This spitting is nothing but an explicit protest. This can be compared with the closing of doors of Nora Helmer destructively in front of Torvald. In *A Doll's House* (1879), Nora did the same thing as Jamila did in *Tree without Roots* (1948). Nora tried to make Torvald understand her situation but he blames her for all the problems. Finally, she left the house by shutting the door. She left her children and found her own way of life. In the stage direction, Henrik Ibsen (1879) writes, “She goes out by the hall door” (176). He again writes, “From below is heard the reverberation of a heavy door closing” (176). The introduction of *A Dolls' House* exposes, “Nora is an example of how society restricts the experience and choices available to women” (Tuhin Mukherjee 16). Similarly, Jamila is an example of how a patriarchal order restricts the freedom of women and women come out of this chain with the maximum attempt.

Gilbert and Gubar write in ‘The Madwoman in the Attic’ (1980) that first wife of Edward Rochester was addressed to be mad and was confined in a room by her husband. Gilbert and Gubar tried to define that first wife of Rochester was defined as mad, confined in a room and controlled by the patriarchal order. The term ‘mad’ used for her was imposed by patriarchy (819). If she follows the conventional rules and norms of the society and if she never questions the authority, she was not termed as mad. In the same way in *Tree without Roots*, Jamila is addressed to be infected with Satan. Majeed says, "An evil spirit has found its way into you. It can do harm to you and to all of us. You are now sitting by the side of the Mazar, in the presence of the saint" (119). Even he forces her to stay there by tying with a rope. Waliullah writes, “He soon returned with a rope” (119). Majeed says, “I’ll tie you up here so that you can’t run away. With the evil spirit prompting you, who knows what you might do” (119). “Jamila was pale, her mouth agape. She said not a word. He tied her hands together, but she still remained quiet” (199). Again it proves that due to her protest against

patriarchy and because of her voice, she was stopped and tried to rest forever. This attempt indicates the attempt of Rochester. In *Tree without Roots*, while she was tied, it was justified with a comment by Majeed that "It is my duty because you're my wife" (119). Thus with the excuse of wife, women are downtrodden and therefore made a subaltern of the patriarchy. If women are subalterns, the authority is the patriarchy. These subalterns cannot speak (Spivak) or intentionally unheard. The concepts of us and them are also relevant here. (Said) Women are the 'other' referring to them while patriarchy is the 'us'. Thus women are victims of patriarchy.

In the mid-20th century, women were considered nothing but an object that can meet physical pleasure. Women were valued with their physical charms. Before marrying Rahima, Majeed "had been noticing for brief moments a tall, heavily-built woman who was a widow, but young and childless. Her massive figure possessed a beauty that was fleshy and easy to sense even from a distance... she aroused desire in frail-bodied Majeed. Quietly, secretly, this desire burned within him while he weighed marrying her, considered it and then reconsidered it until one day he brought her home as his wife" (20-21). Physical appearances of Rahima are given as follows: "Rahima was tall and broad, with large breasts and wide hips" (21). This attitude for the physical charm of women is found again even while punishing Jamila, second wife of Majeed. "Her body was as light as straw, yet warm and soft. Like a burst of flame, the desire suddenly rose within him to press her close to his heart, so long ravaged by loneliness." Though this desire got vanished due to her excessive patriarchal and dominating characteristics, he could not manage to hide his emotion. Another example can be given. When the sky was black with clouds and it was thundering loudly, Majeed came to untie Jamila from the Mazar, though he came as a result of the request of Rahima. She was lying senselessly. Even when Majeed looked at her, he firstly looked at her boy-like breast. Waliullah writes, "Her breasts seemed as flat as those of a boy" (124). Though this is narrated

from a third person point of view, it expresses the subconscious mind of Majeed. Thus women are characterized as tools that can be seen or voyeurised. Laura Mulvey writes, due to the male gaze, people love to look at the secret organs of the female. Here in the novel, Majeed, despite his claim of being a religious guide, cannot free him from this sort of look. Rather his subconscious lust is expressed. And this is utterly patriarchy. Radical feminism tries to break; more specifically eliminate this social order and structure created by a male, created by patriarchy.

Finally, the death of Jamila also refuses the patriarchal order established by Majeed. The incident of Jamila's death is unexpected as she was punished to be corrected. But storms and thunderbolt started but she was not untied. As a request of Rahima, Majeed came to the Mazar and "he found Jamila stretched out on the floor, her eyes shut. Her sari was in disorder, and her bosom was bare" (124). "One of her feet, which were painted with heena, touched the grave" (124). Here Jamila's sari was in disorder though Majeed ordered her to be polite, decent and covered with dress. But she violates his order throughout her life at the house of Majeed, even at the time of death so does she.

Another noteworthy issue is that her leg touched the grave, the grave where a saint was lying. Though there is saint in the grave literally and it was a claim of Majeed. This grave was the source of Majeed's all power. When Jamila touches the grave with legs, though after death, it connotes her last and ultimate protest against the oppressive patriarchal order founded by Majeed.

Conclusion

Tree without Roots (1948) is a splendid modern novel written in Bangla portraying the real condition of women of the mid-20th century Bengali Muslim society. Majeed is presented as a symbol of the patriarchal order. In contrast, Jamila is portrayed as an epitome of radical

feminist who tries to eliminate the patriarchal order established by Majeed. Apparently, she was not successful as she unexpectedly dies being a victim of Majeed's oppression. But in a deeper sense, she was the only character of *Tree without Root* who questions Majeed's authority and utterly refuses him. Her spitting at the face of Majeed is the ultimate protest and then kicks the hollow Mazar that is the centre and source of Majeed's all hypocrisy and power. Her kicking off the Mazar symbolizes that this is hollow and nothing to fear as Majeed created this only to ensure his future, his authoritativeness and in the broader sense patriarchy. Syed Waliullah successfully depicts the characters of Majeed, Rahima and Jamila. All of them play a significant role portraying the real condition of the mid-20th century Bengali Muslim society. To sum up, Jamila is the remarkable feminist voice who protests against the patriarchal oppression of Majeed.

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