

Male Dominance over the Female Body: A Study of Selina Hossain's *Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape Is*

Tuhin Shuvra Sen (Ph.D. Research Scholar in English Literature)

Abstract

Selina Hossain is one of the most accomplished and prolific contemporary Bangladeshi women writers who has bagged many prestigious literary awards and accolades. Though not an ardent feminist writer in the strictest sense, the central focus of her literary oeuvre has always been woman and her living experience. Through her imaginative adroitness and inherent empathy, she has manifested the plights and pains, fears and agonies, anger and frustrations, as well as struggles and resistance of woman in a religiously rigid and patriarchal socio-cultural background which ascribes certain specific roles and values to a woman's body, and the woman cannot help integrating them with her passive and objectified existence. In patriarchy, a woman is often reduced to her corporeal role as an agent of sex and procreation. Indeed, the ethos of women's body to be a commodity or object at the hands of the dominant male is a fundamental ideology of patriarchal structure. In her short story "Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape Is", Selina Hossain, imbued with the spirit of feminist concern and sensitivity, reveals Moirom's feeling of abject revulsion over her fate of turning into an object of sex and procreation under male ownership. This paper aims at exploring the gender politics of power and control over the female body as represented in Selina Hossain's "Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape Is".

Keywords: Selina Hossain, *Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape Is*, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Male Dominance, Female body, Ownership, Subordination.

In a patriarchal society, according to Feminist critic Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics*, the relationship between the sexes throughout history has always been "a relationship of dominance and subordinance. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females" (Millet 25). A patriarchal society never allows a woman to take control of her own life. This gender politics starts operating from the very childhood when a girl child is brought up with the social orientation of treating her whole person "as a marvelous doll" (Beauvoir 306), which is "an inert given object" (Beauvoir 306). Consequently, the girl child grows up with developing "the need to make herself admired, to live for others" (Beauvoir 306). While a boy grows up

asserting “his subjective freedom” (Beauvoir 307), a girl grows up developing the trait of passivity, “the essential characteristic of the ‘feminine’ woman” (Beauvoir 307). In contrast to the girl, a boy “is aware of his body as a means for dominating nature and as a weapon for fighting” (Beauvoir 307). Thus, a woman from her childhood starts living her life thinking herself as an object to be owned and controlled by the male. Likewise, patriarchal value system plunges a woman to a mire of self-effacement and self-abnegation by creating a feeling of burden in a woman about her own physical self.

As we live in a world dominated by the male, the ideals of female identity are also designed by the male. “The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs” (Millet 46). As Pramod K. Nayar says, “The woman is never her own subject. Her sexuality, desires or identity is determined by the social norms that have themselves been produced by men” (Nayar 99). In this circumstance, a woman is imposed with the ‘feminine’ categories of passivity, submissiveness, and incompetence while a man holds the ‘masculine’ attributes of virility, aggression and ability. These artificially constructed categories of femininity prohibit a woman to control her own sexuality and body and use her autonomy in making decisions for herself. As a result, the woman surrenders her body and mind under the power and control of the dominant male by internalizing the feelings of subservience and inferiority deep inside her essence. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, feminists in western societies have censured and challenged this sexual politics of male power and control over the subordinate female in an attempt to ensure sexual and reproductive rights for women. In “Moirom Doesn’t Know What Rape Is”, Selina Hossain through the rancorous experience of Moirom, the seventeen-year-old protagonist, upholds a woman’s muffled sense of anger and repugnance against male authority in a patriarchal system where women are eternally subordinated in their gendered bodies.

The story chronicles Moirom’s feeling of utter disgust over her fate of being bartered to seventy-year-old Nurali Howladar, a wealthy landowner having four wives, by her lover and would-be husband in return for a piece of land and a house. This oft-practiced notion of absolute ownership over a woman’s body by turning her into a commodity is one of the worst forms of gender violence. As the story opens, we see Moirom hatefully uttering “Oh hell!” (Hossain 128) thinking about her lover Jashim’s forced sex with her in the *dheki-shed*. The narrator says,

“It was over before even the slightest trace of pleasure had awoken within her. She had not enjoyed any of it. Instead, anger was born within. All she had understood was that Jashim was forcing her. But, after all, he could force her if he wanted to; Jashim was in love with her- that was how she consoled herself” (Hossain 128).

Jashim's self-forged chains of ownership over Moirom turning her into his property in the name of love makes Moirom irate and nauseate. This instance of coerced sex is not an unusual phenomenon within the sexual power struggle where women are simply considered as objects of sexual pleasure by the dominant male. However, women's willingness and ability to initiate sex and their enjoyment of sexual pleasure are always denied as they are thought of as inferior creatures whose sole obligation is to please men by yielding their bodies to the demands of men. Jashim's hardhearted declaration, "But I love you" (Hossain 128), is enough to silence Moirom. The narration goes:

"Her body felt revulsion- as if her skin had no pores, they were all squirming insects. Damn it, was that love? The whole thing about love had soured for her before she had barely begun to understand what it was . . . So, her mouth filled up with spittle. As she splattered the spit all around her, she felt that her body was no longer hers- it had become Jashim's" (Hossain 128).

Being in a state of intense dependence, she also feels, "her body was also like the tea: just like tea, Jashim had sipped it. While Jashim had been draining her, she had turned cold-just like tea" (Hossain 128). The entire opening part of Selina Hossain's story is a glaring illustration of a woman's powerlessness to resist the authority and demands of the male within a tradition-bound and religiously-rigid social structure.

Jashim, the owner of a ramshackle tea stall under the enormous banyan tree of the village, is a clever orphaned young man who "knows which side of his bread is buttered" (Hossain 129). He, along with Moirom's poor mother Sakhina, has decided to make Moirom agree to Nurali Howladar's outrageous offer of giving him a son in return for a piece of land. Nurali Howladar, carrying the discomfiture of not being able to father an heir, proposes Moirom saying: "I'll give you land. You'll give me a son" (Hossain 137). Nurali, overwhelmed with joy, visualizes begetting a son to prove his masculine power. He imagines throwing "that son of his on the faces of his four barren wives and say, Look, look at my power!" (Hossain 140). It is with his money that Nurali is purchasing Moirom's body to which her being has been reduced. It is noteworthy that economic dependence is another sign of a woman's bondage which allows the financially independent male to gain an easy mastery over the female body by turning her into a sexual object. Kate Millett in her *Sexual Politics* says about the devastating effect of such bondage on the woman's self-image,

"A tendency toward the reification of the female makes her more often a sexual object than a person. This is particularly so when she is denied human rights through chattel status. . . . The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the

approval of the males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her sexuality for support and status.” (Millet 54).

From then on, Jashim starts urging and forcing Moirom to say ‘yes’ to Nurali’s disgraceful proposal saying “Think about it. We’ll get land. A house. Think about it, you won’t have to live in the *dekhished* of someone else’s house anymore” (Hossain 136). But, Jashim also devices a plan of getting Moirom pregnant himself and marrying her as soon as Nurali officially completes the land deed thinking that the fetus within Moirom’s womb to be his own child. To get Moirom pregnant, Jashim himself swoops on her voluptuous body without asking for her consent as well as without telling her that it is an act of rape. After Moirom’s revulsive submission of herself to Jashim, she helplessly succumbs to Nurali’s lust to give him his crown prince, a son to add glory to his family line. Moirom has had a sense of suspicion and insecurity all along about her promised marriage with Jashim though she yields herself to him thinking that love has given Jashim the right over her to do whatever he wants. Under her incessant probes, Jashim tells her,

“Moiri, you’ll be mother to my child before marriage. Don’t worry about what people will say. Girls are getting raped all the time in this country. What difference does it make to anyone? Is there any justice in this land? Well? Is there? Say, I rape you, then I marry you. Then everything’s fine and dandy. Society cools down. And if I become father to a child that’s the fruit of rape, then society will hold me so dear. They’ll say, there’s not another boy like him. I’ve thought of everything. First we’ll have a child. Then land and a house.” (Hossain 138).

These words from Jashim mirror the society’s attitude to rape on women. This male-dominated society seeks to redress the odious act of rape on a woman by forcing the rape victim to marry the rapist. The most odious feature is the fact that the woman hardly has the right to voice her own opinion on the whole matter. Consequently, the victim is forced to carry the trauma of rape throughout her life. The day when Nurali crushes and squeezes Moirom in the hope of getting her pregnant with a son, she ponders in a state of utter resignation that “if she could just cross this *pulserat*, this bridge of destiny, there would be hell- a home like hellfire, a husband like the devil” (Hossain 139). Moirom’s sense of submission clearly represents the harsh reality of the commodification of women’s body in a patriarchal set-up. She yells as well in a state of defeated irritation, “Oh hell!” (Hossain 139), the same expression of abhorrence she uttered when Jashim did it with her. The narration goes, “Nurali laughed loudly. Moirom realized that this was Jashim’s laughter- it was identical- there was no difference between Nurali and Jashim” (Hossain 139). Just as Nurali wants a son of Moirom, so also Jashim wants land

from Moirom, the land that Nurali has promised her. They both want to fulfill their separate demands at the expense of defiling Moirom's honour. The aim of both Jashim and Nurali's rape on Moirom seems to signify the fact that they as men can do with her body anything they please. Caroline Zielinski in her column titled 'Why Women are Still the Property of Men' published in The Daily Telegraph writes:

"...violence against women is not about anger, it is about male abuse of power and control, in addition to men's sense of entitlement. In her eye-opening book *Unspeakable Things*, writer and activist Laurie Penny points the finger at traditional masculinity, which, like 'traditional femininity, is about control.'"

Towards the end of the story, though Jashim keeps his promise of marrying Moirom, she does not feel any joy in their being united. "Impassivity eclipsed her, as if living had lost its meaning" (Hossain 141). When Jashim says, "C'mon. I'll make you forget all your woes. Moiri sweetheart, we're now man and wife" (Hossain 141), she with a harsher voice retorts, "Hell!" (Hossain 141). Moirom, despite not knowing properly what rape is, has lost all flashes of happiness of her life as a result of her being a victim of rape, which is in actuality an odious act of ferocity, of defilement and of coercion by the superseding male. In Meena Kandasamy's novel, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, the unnamed wife after going through the ordeal of regular disciplinary rape by her overriding husband ponders:

"The shame of rape is the shame of the unspeakable. Women have found it easier to jump into fire, consume poison, blow themselves up as suicide bombers, than tell another soul about what happened. A rape is a fight you did not win. You could not win" (Kandasamy 169).

Thus, Selina Hossain in her acclaimed short story "Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape Is" denotes the marginalized status of female sexuality as insignificant and lacking due to the socially, culturally and psychologically sanctioned domination of men over the female body. Like a concerned feminist, Selina Hossain, through narrating Moirom's abject surrender and submission to the demands of Jashim and Nurali Howladar, seems to claim that women's call for autonomy over their own body and sexuality will remain a far cry until and "unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birthright is finally foregone" (Millet 21).

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Vintage, 1997.

Hossain, Selina. "Moirom Doesn't Know What Rape is." *Writing Feminism: South Asian Voices*, edited by Selina Hossain and Radha Chakravarty, translated by Shabnam Nadiya, The University Press Limited, 2010, pp. 128-141.

Kandasamy, Meena. *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. Juggernaut Books, 2018.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, 2010.

Zielnski, Caroline. "Why Women are Still the Property of Men." The Daily Telegraph, 15 September 2015, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/rendeview/why-women-are-still-the-property-of-men/news-story/b18f0a4d456db6967e7c05f4f309604f>. Accessed on 19 December 2018.



Tuhin Shuvra Sen
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Chittagong
Chittagong-4331, Bangladesh
tuhinshuvrasen@gmail.com, tuhinshuvra@cu.ac.bd

Mailing Address:

Tuhin Shuvra Sen
Room No: B-79, Basheer Men's Hostel
The English and Foreign Languages University
Hyderabad-500007
Telangana, India
