



THIRD FEMINISM: AN ALTERNATE PARADIGM FOR DEVELOPMENT

In a context in which the fundamental struggle for both men and women is at the basic needs level — for food, shelter and education — any attempt to emancipate women must address the issue of poverty. It is necessary for Third World women to articulate their struggle at the basic needs level. It is clear that the subordination of women emerges out of a dialectical relationship between culture, economy and politics. Because of this fundamental reality, we cannot separate feminism from development. Thus not only must we make feminism more development oriented, it is critical to render development more feminist.

What we need is not just the addition of women — the add women and stir approach — but the empowerment of women. This is one of the most important concepts that Western feminist theory has to give us. The idea of empowerment is important not just to women but to the development process itself. For a movement to free women is not just about women in a Third World context. As we have mentioned before challenging women's present situation implies challenging long-established ideas about the various divisions in society as well as male-female relations. In other words, feminism cannot be simply about women, it has to be about society as whole. I would like to stress once more that to articulate a feminist movement in Third World countries, it must be rooted in the material conditions of living. But instead of sporadic activity from decentralised sources, we need concerted, large-scale institutionalised change. We need coordination and cooperation between the government, NGO's and activist groups. It is important to have consciousness-raising among planners, policy makers and donors, as well as empowering the mass of the rural poor women who make up half our population.

Unlike the developed world, Third World countries tend to be for various reasons, less democratic. Only a few people, mostly men and a small number of often non-feminist women usually decide how the citizens of these countries will live. The tradi-

tional male dominated planning mechanism keeps women out of the decision making process.

Another point that must be emphasized is that most Third World countries depend to great extent on international finance in order to realize

By Najma Siddiqui

usually have little in common with the goals of feminism. Their view of problems of development rarely consider the different position and needs of women. Usually, the focus on women has to do with



their development plans. Most development projects have to be approved by such international agencies as the World Bank, the IMF and the ADB. These institutions generally have a large male bias. Although they walk about improving the plight of poverty stricken women, their agenda

women's roles as mothers, rather than as individuals in society. As a result, the projects which are designated end up reinforcing rather than removing patriarchy. For instance, most foreign aid earmarked for women is channelled into family planning. The aim is simply to find a

simple solution to population growth, not to improve women's status.

Any sustainable development must include programmes which will have an influence both at the grassroots and higher levels. For this, institutional and organizational changes will be necessary. Women need to acquire the ability to change the current development strategies which create conditions that breed gender inequality.

It is clear that the subordination of women emerges out of a dialectical relationship between culture, economy, and politics. Because of this fundamental reality we cannot separate feminism from development or vice versa. Thus it is critical to render development more feminist.

One of the main strategies related to this 'alternative' paradigm of development is the conscientisation and empowerment of women. Through consciousness raising and educational programmes, women must be made aware of the kinds of discrimination they are subjected to as well as their potential ability to change their condition. As suggested by Devaki Jain, this paradigm 'would link the women's movement with the development process. Thus, as class consciousness is considered to be a necessary condition of class struggle, Feminist consciousness would be a necessary condition for female emancipation. And the building of this consciousness has to be part of the development process.'

Women must be mobilised by familiarising them with an indigenous feminist philosophy and ideology as well as by the creation of educational and employment opportunities. Although it must be stressed that empowerment on an individual level is not enough.

It is also important to note that the goals and methods of empowerment will differ depending on the group of women with whom we are dealing. Empowerment methods for a particular group must be conducive to resolving critical issues relating to that group. For example, as suggested by Devaki Jain, the critical issues relating to the poorest strata of women might be an immediate need for fu-

(This is the concluding part of a two part article)

trition or minimum fair wage etc. In another class, the priority issue may be the right to file for divorce, while for the very affluent equal opportunities at high level jobs may be at issue.

An extension of empowerment strategy is to place highly committed feminists in high bureaucratic and parliamentary positions. These women should be able to influence the state machinery at the policy and administrative level. Since one of the most important ways to empower and conscientise women is through education, we should push for more feminists in the position of teachers, administrators and professionals. This will help to modify the current educational curricula which reinforces ideas about patriarchy and male domination.

At this point, we can go back and evaluate the usefulness of the feminist theories described at the beginning of the paper. First, if we want development oriented feminism, we cannot support the separatism advocated by the Radical Feminists. An examination of the other theories shows that they all have partial answers. The legal reforms supported by the Liberal Feminists are necessary but not enough. To talk only of class struggle, as the Marxist Feminists do, is to be in danger of forgetting about the gender issue. The most acceptable are the Social Feminists, who believe that both economy and culture are important in determining women's conditions. Thus, if we want to build up our kind of feminism, we can use parts of Western feminist theory. Instead of completely rejecting it or accepting the whole package.

In conclusion I would like to join Kamala Bhasin and Night Said Khan who say 'we find feminism to be not only necessary for our society but also very exciting for all those who are participating in the process of defining, articulating, shaping and living with it. We believe it has the potential to prove us with a direction which other 'isms' have failed to provide; most of them ignored or did not actively involve one half of humanity.' Our task has just begun and we have a long way to go.

A Hush Hush Issue!

It is difficult but not impossible to identify the indigenous practitioners of abortion in rural areas of Bangladesh. The existing female health net-work personnel, if tapped properly, can be a good source of information in identifying the induced abortion practitioners. This is especially true if these personnel are local residents of the concerned village themselves. Once the existing health personnel understand the purpose and are convinced of the importance of the issue of the indigenous abortion and the related health hazards to women, they can not only help in locating the potential practitioners of abortion in the area, but can be a rich source of confidence builder among them if they are confident of the legality of the issues involved.

The first abortion help that Rasheda Begum provided was for her close relative, Zakia who lived in the same compound as hers. She was a school girl, about 13, and became pregnant by her close family friend. When Rasheda Begum was approached by the mother of the girl, she took it as the violation of 'ijjat' (honour of the family) in her own 'bongsho' (lineage). Since it occurred in her own family, she took it as a prestige issue for herself because, according to her own perception, she was a renowned woman on whom at least the people of the bongsho could fully rely.

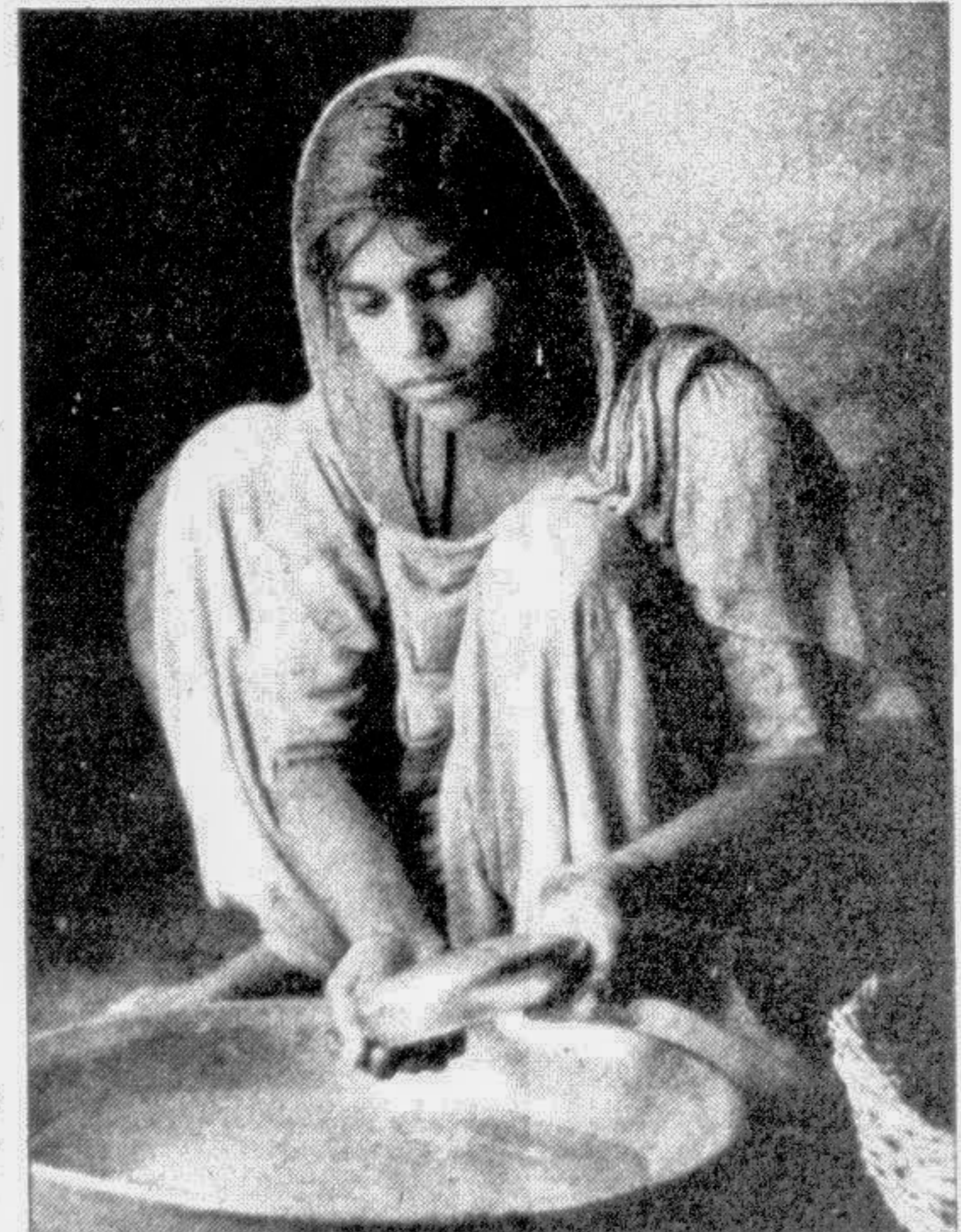
By Rahat Fahmida

plant called 'Guta bhabla.' Usually, about 2-3 inches of this root was needed for insertion into women's uterus. It takes one full day for aborting the foetus in this way. Usually, she used to apply the root in the client's uterus at around dusk time. It is fully effective by noon time (around 12 o'clock) the next day.

She claimed that in her career, she helped in aborting approximately one thousand cases but in none of these

details of any incidence or the relevant data about the client. But she admitted later that complications arose in many cases. As a result of her practising experience, she knows that is usually the case for clients with longer duration of their pregnancies who usually become prey to high fever and excessive abdominal pains.

Rasheda Begum admitted, she refrains from performing abortion, as it is a common belief — 'to kill a life is a great



cases was there any real complications. She confessed that many of these clients experienced excessive bleeding but she could not remember

sin. Even then she has to do some, thinking, for the Muslims' (now believed amongst people of all religion in that village, as in most vil-

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

The children are all back in school after a two weeks holiday much to the relief of working mothers. But all mothers are not so amused at the prospect. I am talking about working mothers who are teachers to these children. One major complaint they have after a holiday is that children forget everything they have learnt and it is really a tough job bringing them back into line. I always thought that this was a gross exaggeration. Just two days before school reopened I asked my daughter to bring her pencil and exercise book to write her a b c's which she is such an expert at. Lo and behold, the genius daughter of mine had forgotten most of her alphabet and instead was drawing flowers and huts! My sympathies to the teachers. Not only do they have to re-educate our children, they have to do the same for their kids who must have forgotten their lessons too. Bringing up children is a tough job isn't it?

Talking about bringing up kids, I was appalled to hear from a friend who swears that she will not have them because they are too much trouble. Who said that I asked, 'You did' was the prompt answer. I listened in shock that some women are being put off having children

because of what I write. She of course said this a said was of course in a light vein and is not to be taken seriously. But there is no denying that bringing up children and pursuing a challenging career is not an easy job in our society, for that matter in any society.

There is a tremendous lack of sensitivity towards working mothers which cuts across cultures and countries. Women have made a lot of headway in terms of equal job opportunities and equal pay. Somewhere along the line the special needs of the working mothers have not been given the consideration it deserved. The support working mothers get from the extended family is all very well and is much appreciated. With the erosion of the extended family system, which is bound to happen with industrialization our society will have to think of other systems which will help and support working mothers. Already in many families we see that they either have to take the painful decision of leaving their children with the ayah whom she hardly knows or take drastic measures such as putting a young child in a hostel. A recent play on television underscored the problems faced by a

young working mother who tries all kinds of options without success and ultimately had to admit her 6-year old in a boarding school. Another important point to remember is the changing role of women in our society which has been going on for the past two decades. It is now not uncommon to see our mothers or mother-in-laws as professionals who do not have the time to look after our children. Over time this problem will grow as our generation of women become grandmothers. They will still be young enough to be working and will certainly not savour the idea of being tied down to the house all over again just because their daughters or daughter-in-laws want to pursue a career.

That women are a productive force is no longer debated. Both the government and the private sector are trying to integrate more and more women into the labour force. Integration of women in development both as participants and as beneficiaries is the popular theme of today. What is now needed is more sensitivity to the special needs of working women. This is an interesting issue and can be further discussed, perhaps next week.

It is very difficult to pay tribute to a woman of whom the world knows very little, without ushering in the emotional rhetoric.

I grew up in a predominantly Western environment where too many things beyond my comprehension and control were always happening. As a result conflicts often arose from within my traditional Eastern upbringing. As I passed through the crooked alleyways of life, I would stumble upon broken homes, unwanted pregnancies, single-parent families and the agonies it caused my peers, AIDS, alcoholism, drug abuse and the level of violence on the streets. To help me put some of the pieces of life together I would

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across to veranda to see my little brother being cradled in my mother's arms. Mother would coax him to drink his bottle of milk which he would refuse. When all attempts failed, grandma would fill his little ears with stories of the Liberation War. Without understanding it, my brother would drink the milk. It must have been the way grandma told the stories that made all the difference in the world!

When I began attending elementary school, sometimes my parents needed to leave us with grandma who religiously looked after us making sure that my brother drank the milk and egg concoction and I, a spoonful of the much dreaded Sevences Cod-liver oil. When I refused, she would disguise it with my glass of milk and sugar. She said it would give me the extra energy needed to survive through the late night exam preparations. The exams always went well.

Grandma would often visit us on weekends. Before grandfather got the chance to open her side of the navy-blue Morris-Minor door, I would eagerly run down the flight of steps to greet her because the visits were always accompanied by a basket of mangoes in the summer or oranges in the winter. To impress her with my newly acquiring domestic talents, I would inquire 'do you want a cup of tea, may I get you a glass of sherbet?' She would just smile and take me on her lap and ask about school. To her I was still too young for performing the monumental task of preparing tea.

I longed for school holidays. It would take me to grandma's house, away from studies, fairy tales, poems and specially prepared coconut and jaggery covered puffed rice balls without being constantly reminded that it would spoil my teeth. Eid was the greatest time of my life. Sets of new clothes, shoes and 'salam' money. Repeatedly I bent over grandmother's feet and she rewarded me over and over again with a crisp one taka note. To a six-year old ten taka was worth 'sat-rajardhon'.

Many years later my brother and I returned from America to live with grandma for two wonderful years. One fateful day the postman brought a telegram to the doorstep — about a tragic road accident which eventually killed her son and his family. I was too young to understand but in due time I learnt of the world's heaviest burden — the death of a child. Accidentally I had discovered uncle's last letter to my grandma. He wished to eat fried Hilsha on the day of his homecoming. He returned home but to be laid to rest forever and grandma never touched the fish for the remaining years of her life.

I remember grandma sitting in a chair starting out at the 'Bokul' tree on the road across the balcony. After years of pestering she eventually told

me that the tree was the only witness to all the events of her life, happy or otherwise. It was under this tree that she bid her beloved son farewell for the last time.

Through the successive years I began growing more cynical as I watched my greatest idols fall from grace. I watched politics adulterate religion, in the name of God helpless women and children butchered, compassion raped and the very fabric of society burnt. Seeking shelter and guidance I turned to God with every breath and spirit of my soul. I could not find the answers that I was looking for. Grandma sat and explained one by one the stories of her life. She told me that she was only sixteen years old and pregnant with her first child when her father passed away. Her in-laws fearing for her and the baby's health never informed her until three months later. She had to wait until grandfather's arrival from Calcutta to visit her family. With each unfolding of her life, grandma transcended into the symbol of Bengali womanhood for me. She was not alone, her plight was shared by many many more across the country. The only difference was that she learnt her lessons of reality well and tried to prepare her children for the future.

At seventy-five years of age, she stood witness to the fall of British rule, birth of two nations and sons and daughters sacrificed in the name of liberty. But she stood firm, never giving up and always anticipating a better tomorrow. Although I am still to find all the answers, she has taught me to be more at peace with myself.

I think grandma knew that she was dying. She would often narrate stories of her youth, sub-consciously making sure that with her departure my ties to the past were not severed.

With her death I have become very lonely. I have become a traveler without a compass on some desolate terrain, a lost ship on a stormy night. I wonder what happens to people when they die. If grandma were here I could have turned to her like I did in the past. I could have asked her if she could smell the sweat and the pungent air. Can she see the trains pull up on the high platforms? Does she see the desperate people attempting to catch the train as soon as it comes? Does she want to tell them to slow down so that they do not hurt themselves? Is she frightened by the ocean of people as far as the eyes can see?

Across these miles I wish you well, may nothing haunt your heart but sleep. May you not sense what I don't tell. May you not dream, or doubt, or weep. May what my pen this peaceless day write on this page not reach your view, till its deferred prints lets you say, it speaks to someone else than you.

May you never know darkness to be a good acquaintance or a very mean friend. May you always rest in peace Grandma.

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