



DILARA CHOUDHURY

Fragmentation of the Sense of Self The Inner Beings of Bangladeshi Women

The subject matter of this writeup, I am afraid, would not be taken kindly by most Bangladeshi men and in most likelihood be considered as 'trivial' 'nonsensical' 'imaginative' viewpoints of radical feminists and many other terminologies that I am unaware of. The issue at stake is the pervasive and rampant violence against women in Bangladesh. I know, all eyebrows are raised. And kinds of questions are being asked. Has not the issue already been a part of national and international agenda? Aren't there barrages of legislation, at least, to stem the tide of acts of violence against women in the country? Isn't Bangladesh a signatory to the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women? Isn't media playing a positive role in this regard? Isn't there a keen awareness among the populace

about the issue? Interestingly the answers to all these questions are in the positive. Indeed there are now numerous legislation under which the perpetrators are liable to get even death sentences in case of extreme form of violence against women like acid throwing. Indeed the media is extremely helpful in raising the general consciousness. And indeed the issue is a part of international and national agenda.

However, despite such impressive achievements the grim fact remains: that most Bangladeshi women are subjected to physical assaults ranging from wife beating to dowry deaths and from rape to acid throwing. Women's vulnerability and status in our society become visibly graphic as one goes through the findings of Naripaksha conducted "Pilot Study on Violence Against Women," which points out that sixty percent of Bangladeshi women are assaulted by their husbands and that they occur well within the four walls of their homes. The report's authenticity is beyond doubt as it is based on interviews of 719 women living with their husbands in Dhaka and rural

areas and from the police, court and hospital records. And the saga goes on. Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) reports that in the year 2000 alone 772 women were killed in 1,100 recorded incidents of repression throughout Bangladesh. During this period, the Bureau of Human Rights of Bangladesh (BHRB) recorded 1,120 incidents of suicide, most being the repressed women. It's a nightmarish situation. But the good thing about it is that the government, institutions, media, civil society leaders are keenly aware about it and looking for ways and means to mitigate such occurrences. In particular, it is praiseworthy by the way domestic violence, which used to be viewed as private affairs, has been brought to public domain in the light of the clear conceptualization of women's personal liberty about her body and self. However, from the above scenario it is gauged that the present agenda on violence against women mostly revolve around domestic, community and state related violence.

It is to be seriously noted that violence against women does not stop here. There is another dimension to it that has remained like a well-kept secret from public attention till date. What has been kept hidden and felt like almost a taboo even to mention it is the form of violence that the working women confront occurrences like sexual assaults, coercion, and sexual harassment in mixed-gender environment. The fact that most Bangladeshi working women are subjected to sexual harassment by their male co-workers in their workplace has neither been raised nor considered as any kind of violence against women. This is an issue about which there is almost a total silence, deliberate attempts of denial on the part of the victims as well as the perpetrators as it does not exist. That is why I mentioned in the beginning that raising such an 'non-existent' issue is a high-risk matter. Because most men would simply not understand what women are talking about. They would term such 'accusations' (as mentioned earlier) as 'trivial,' 'nonsensical,' 'imaginative,' and 'view points of radical feminists' etc. Most would not even recognize that with increased participation of women in all spheres of public life they do face sexual harassment and experience it almost on daily basis. The relevant question is why do women accept such behaviour from the men in silence? It's a difficult question and consequently the answer is even harder. The following is an attempt to throw some light in that direction.

First, there is lack of conceptual-

ization of the term 'sexual harassment' at workplace in our culture and for that matter any culture that is dominated by patriarchy. Men's use of sexuality that is manifested in certain behavioural patterns in exerting power/control over women at home or at work have been in existence from time immemorial and been somewhat accepted as a norm. Those so-called norms, which got embedded in male psyche due to patriarchal beliefs, are visible in varying forms beginning from "sexist language and practices in the work places that women describe as degrading, demeaning, humiliating and sometimes infuriating" (Thomas and Kitzinger: 1997) to character assassination and physical actions like touching and grabbing. All along the display of such masculinities by men and silent acceptance by women in the workplace has been considered as a natural male-female behaviour

natory practices and it continues all throughout a woman's life in terms of nutrition, opportunities for education, dignity, and self-respect. She learns, as a little girl, that she is less valued than her male sibling is. She is not a "Whole" as she has been created from one of the cage bones of a man. She is told repeatedly in the religious sermons that her heaven lies at the feet of her husband (obviously coined by the so-called Ulemas). She is to serve her husband and her entire mission in life is to conform to male prescribed ways of life. And that she is fitna, living embodiment of disorders with her sexuality and it's disruptive potentials. Consequently she becomes keenly aware of her fitna characteristic and becomes convinced that her very presence is responsible for men's behaviour towards her. So whatever harassment comes in her way must be endured in silence lest she is misun-

physical contacts or acts and only deals with verbal or general teasing. As such Women's groups in India are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the problems of widespread sexual harassment in the workplace, especially in unorganized sectors, and calling for more comprehensive definition of even teasing in order to bring the incidents of physical harassment under its purview (Bagilhole: 1997). It should, however, be noted that though the government's response is somewhat negative, at least, women's groups in India have some kind of legal basis on which further development in the libel and law can be construed.

It is unfortunate that in Bangladesh we have not yet any such Act. At least our Indian counterparts have some locus standi on which sexual harassment cases can be addressed. At least it is recognized that there is sexual harass-

mentally, however, both the officials were temporarily suspended under 1985 Government Official Discipline and Order Act (Jugantor, May 31st 2000). And that also was due to the fact that there were already a number of complaints by others against those officials. It was not specifically due to Ms. Rahman's complaint that the 'punishment' was meted out. The second incident involved a female teacher of Jahangirnagar University. Dr. Nasim Akhter Hossain of Government and Politics Department recently has become a victim of malicious and widespread character assassination campaign allegedly by a couple of male teachers of the same Department

women that they fail to perceive themselves as autonomous and independent and consider their very existence depend on male approval. If they cannot live upto those expectations and operate within those male dominated norms then it is their fault. And lastly, working women, especially in the unorganized sectors hang on to their jobs despite physical and verbal abuse due to their dire economic necessities.

In conclusion it can be stated that though the women in Bangladesh have made a lot of strides in various fields, especially raising their voice against the rampant violence against women, there has not been any kind of awareness about the sexual harassment of women at work place. There is an urgent need for its definition, codes of conduct and established legal procedures so that the perpetrators can be taken to task. Otherwise the erosion of the self is bound to affect women adversely both psychologically

PANORAMA

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pattern. In this context who can forget the famous dictum (coined by men) that 'the boys would be boys' when some men act in certain manner that enhance their control over women. As a result the society at large view most leniently such male behaviour and expect women to tolerate and internalize the whole process simply as everyday experience, which they do.

Second, in Bangladesh there exists a culture of discrimination a product of lethal combination of patriarchy and misinterpreted religious strictures. In such a culture there is an on going hidden but devastating process that erodes and fragments "women's sense of self" (Cairns: 1997). The most prominent feature of this process is that a woman is never perceived as 'Whole' but as 'Other' because she lacks male qualities. Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... He is the Subject, he is the Absoluteshe is the Other (De Beauvoir: 1952). In Bangladesh, this process of fragmentation of the sense of self is most acute and a woman starts experiencing it (the process) from the very childhood. She knows that a boy is more welcomed than a girl is. Akkika, the name giving ceremony is characterized by discrimination

in the work place. In our country, we are "blissfully" unaware of its existence. And there is a tendency to bury our heads and pretend that it is simply not there. As a result, this vital arena where hundreds of women are the victims of violence has not been brought to the fore. In the absence of a clear-cut definition and absence of legislative protection a few women who have the courage to bring up specific incidents of sexual harassment are not getting any justice. Two very recent occurrences are cases in point. For the sake of documentation these deserve our attention.

In May last year Prothom Alo, a vernacular daily, carried a report on a sexual harassment incident involving Najma Rahman of Jatiyo Population Research and Training Institute (NIPOT). According to the report the lady was verbally abused and endured near physical assaults by two senior officials of the said

Institute for making a query about some official decisions. Ms. Rahman's complaints of sexual harassment at work place could not be dealt with due to the absence of its definition and the fact that such behaviour of men was not considered as violation of women's rights and consequently was illegal. Ms. Rahman was effectively denied her constitutional rights that prohibited sex discrimination in clear terms.

have submitted a memorandum for a proper inquiry of the incident and demanded sexual harassment policy to be incorporated into University Ordinance. As per today, as in the case of Najma Rahman, the University authority is grappling in the dark as how to even approach/ address such an occurrence. In the absence of any specific definition of sexual harassment, codes of conduct and legal procedures it would perhaps be difficult for the University Administration to deal with even such blatant demonstration of male power over the females.

The sexual harassment at work place such as the above are only the tip of the iceberg. It is happening at an alarming rate in the work place as more and more women make their entry into different economic spheres, especially in the unorganized sectors. Why the silence? In a nutshell, first, women feel that as such acts of violence against women are yet to be recognized there is no point in complaining. On the contrary, without societal awareness and absence of legislative protection reporting of harassment incidents construe negative response from the authority and only cause further harassment, trauma and humiliation. Second, the fragmentation of the sense of self is so acute in Bangladesh



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Commonly asked questions?

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis ("TB") is still quite a common disease. It usually affects the lungs, but it may occur elsewhere in the body. It is caused by germs which are breathed into the lungs. These germs are coughed into the air by people who are ill with tuberculosis. The people most likely to catch it are those living in the same house. It is found in all countries and in all age groups.

How will the doctor know if I have TB?

He will ask you if you have cough, sputum (phlegm), fever, sweating and loss of weight and appetite. If TB is present in other organs, you may have lumps in the neck or pain and swelling in one of the joints or in the back, or frequency of passing water. If the disease is very slight, it may be found only when you have an X-ray of your chest. The doctor will also ask you to have a 'skin test' which is of no trouble at all. You will also be asked to produce some sputum (phlegm) for testing.

Can tuberculosis be cured? How?

The answer is YES. Modern drugs cure almost every patient. TB germs can be killed if you take the drugs prescribed for you regularly, and for the length of time necessary. You may not even have to stop work. If you have to, it will be for a very short time. Very very few people need to be admitted to hospital for treatment. You can live a normal life.

Tomorrow: Always children first

As Clinton leaves office, America experiences withdrawal syndrom

TASHFEEN HUSSAIN

For last eight years, White House was the place where he slept at the end of the day, the west wing was the venue from where he spoke most of the time to Americans and to the rest of the world, and his home. It has been every small town, every state, every inch of U.S.A. For about a decade, he has had the opportunity to serve the American people, and did hold an office and an honour, which is second to none. The eight years were not always a Cinderella story. Although two land-slide election victories and tremendous job endorsement, which can only be compared to that of F.D.R can speak of his ability and acceptance, he had to see his party loosing the control of both Congress and Senate to the Republicans, and had to go through tremendous mental agony throughout the gloomy days of "Monica Scandal" and "White Water Mess" that almost torn apart his family life and his political career. Critics would argue that he has disgraced the honour and integrity of his office. However, even the staunch connoisseur would also admit that America smiled throughout his Presidency. And, as William Jefferson Clinton said his final goodbye to the American people and to the rest of the world, the mood of that of American citizens is a little more than depression a depression that can be characterized in simple two words: "Withdrawal Syndrome".

Once known as the next door kid of Hope, Arkansas, this great democracy had taken him to the triumph of anyone's political fantasy. As he left office on the day George

Bush got inaugurated, Americans feel blue. The bleak frame of mind can be well comprehended with Wall Street yet to react positively to the new President, and can be felt in heart as Americans were much more eager to listen to Billy's last words before he left office than to see the gorgeous inauguration of their new leader. Never in the history of U.S.A a President had such a positive job approval rate and exciting image even though he was about to be impeached because of his sexual misconduct, or lying to American people under oath. Other scandals often haunted both the President and the first lady. Why is then people are not relieved that his terms are over? Rather, if they could have their way, they would like to extend him another term. A close analysis of his eight years of Presidency would reveal three main reasons behind this intriguing scenario: the success of his economic plan, his prudence in choosing people who could do the best job for him, and his tenacity of reaching out.

When Clinton assumed his Presidency back in 1992, U.S. was not upbeat regarding its economic prospect. While his predecessor President George Bush fought the recession that he trapped himself into (credit should go to President Reagan as well), Clinton started not only to repair the damage but also to give a new direction to the economy. His economic plan, which was often taunted by conservatives as nothing but a hoax, proved almost an immediate success in taking the economy out of recession. From then on, America experienced an economic growth and prosperity that was almost unparalleled in American

history. His economic team produced the highest consecutive growth since the end of World War II.

The neo-classicals argue that 6 per cent unemployment rate should be considered as the natural unemployment rate. If it moves below that point, the economy will feel the inflationary pressure, and the prices will tend to rise. Clinton ridiculed the conservative neo-classicals, as Clintonomics dictated that unemployment rate could consistently lie between 4 per cent-5 per cent, and inflation could be well checked. If economy is what matters the most, President Clinton has a superb resume that has been written in flattering words for last eight years, and, in reality, economy is indeed what matters most. Of course, critics can belittle Clinton's success in economic arena by pointing out that it has been Fed Chairperson Alan Greenspan and Clinton's economic team, who were solely responsible for this enormous economic boom. That is of course partly true, which brings us to the second point that I have mentioned in the beginning of the article Clinton's prudence in choosing right person in the right place for the right reason.

Clinton possessed a superb ability of reaching out to all Americans. Just like as the Governor of Arkansas, as the President of the great democracy, he showed a natural inclination of reaching out to everyone starting from the tycoons of Wall Street to the middle class Americans of quiet suburbs of Mid West to the unfortunate citizens of the poverty stricken neighbourhoods of Washington D.C. Everyone, regardless of col-

The Death in Congo

ASM NURUNNABI

The circumstances surrounding the death of the Congolese President Laurent Kabila looked far from dramatic. Kabila, while engaged in the daily routine of running his dictatorship, had begun in the early afternoon on January 16 a series of meetings with top officials. Kabila first met with his Finance Minister, then with a top official of Congolese television and finally with a deputy cabinet director in charge of economic policy. According to another cabinet official, Kabila had no reason to think he was in imminent danger.

Kabila scarcely glanced up when a guard named Rashidi entered the room from an adjacent courtyard that connects to Kabila's personal residence. Rashidi was a native Congolese in his late twenties; he had been a member of the small presidential guard unit for more than two years. He walked over to Kabila as if to whisper something in his ear. The dictator inclined his head towards the guard, who quietly pulled out his service revolver. The first bullet struck behind Kabila's left ear and exited the right side of his chest. The president fell to his right and the killer fired twice more, hitting Kabila in his ribs.

The killer then dashed for the door that opened back into Kabila's private residence, while a deputy cabinet director named Moti who was present and saw everything, followed the killer, shouting, "He has fired at the president." Other guards intercepted the killer and cut him down in a volley of machine gun fire that was heard throughout the neighbourhood, throwing Kinshasa into worried confusion that lasted two days. Finally, the government announced that Kabila had been assassinated, and that his 32-year-old son Joseph, a major-general who commanded the army, would succeed him.

When Kabila came to power in 1997, some diplomats and journalists thought his successful rebellion against Mobutu might herald an African dawn. He was seen as one of a new generation of African leaders who were supposed to be broad-minded and ready to cooperate for the common good and less tribal and corrupt than many of their predecessors of the independence era. No less a figure than Madeleine Albright called him a "beacon of hope." Six months after Kabila took power, Albright declared that he had "made a strong start towards a 'commitment to open markets, honest government and the rule of law.'

The remark reflected Washington's hopes more than the facts on the ground. Others of this new "generation" later fought terrible wars against each other. Ethiopia battled Eritrea in a World war-I style conflict that cost thousands of lives. And Kabila's early African backers Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda went to war against him. When Kabila received military help from Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, US and other officials fretted about Africa's "first world war." Now several other neighbouring armies are feasting on Congo's natural resources, including diamonds.

Kabila's passing away could conceivably help resolve the conflict. He routinely obstructed the 1999 Lusaka Accord, which called for a ceasefire in

Congo, withdrawal of foreign forces and political dialogue. In particular, Kabila impeded deployment of about 5,000 UN peacekeeping troops. The junior Kabila, by contrast, "Wants new relations with foreign countries," said a top Congo official. A western official who was following developments closely, was very mildly hopeful. "The son isn't a player in his own right, so there's a chance he will be more malleable."

According to analysts, the government's immediate aim in the wake of the assassination would be to ward off chaos. The chief of the armed forces quickly issued a proclamation forbidding the discharge of weapons, and government officials began a series of crisis meetings. "We could not wait for panic could have seized the population," said the cabinet source. "We talked with the military high command. We asked ourselves: who is the personality who could be accepted both by the military and by the political sector, and who could keep the country in the same political line? The constitution did not provide for a succession, so the officials settled on Joseph Kabila, who was 150 kilometres away at the time."

At 32, the junior has a tenuous claim to legitimacy. Born and educated in Tanzania, he is more comfortable speaking English and Swahili than French or any of the indigenous Congolese languages. The most politically appealing part of his resume is his long participation in the anti-Mobutu struggle.

"He can always claim he has been in this war since the beginning, which few other can say," said a leading Congolese businessman. His chief challenge, according to this source, will be to maintain consensus among army commanders and the Angolans and Zimbabweans who have bolstered the Kabila government against rebel advances.

Upon assuming office, the junior Kabila immediately made good on back wages of soldiers and civil servants, who had gone unpaid for several months. That, in turn, led to speculation the killer named Rashidi killed the president because he was disgruntled about delinquent paychecks. Another theory had it that the killing was the result of a dispute with generals over military strategy; the government suffered losses late last year in Katanga province, the heart of the country's copper belt and Kabila's home region.

The shooting had none of the marks of a coup nobody intervened to help Rashidi escape, and not a single other incident of violence was reported in the capital or outside it. But a foreign source who provided details of the assassination said that some people were being held for questioning. "There are several paths that are beginning to open" in the investigation, the official said "It's too early now." He also suggested that Rashidi had personal problems.

Nobody was ready to pronounce a new dawn. But ordinary people and government officials alike did note one point of progress: the immediate crisis was handled peacefully. The lack of civil unrest was a marked change from the past. "The Congolese have grown up, said one source. "Before, when they had crises, they went wild. That is something to celebrate."

Garfield ®



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by Jim Davis

