

A TRIBUTE TO SELINA HOSSAIN ON HER BIRTHDAY

Endangered Femininity and the Theme of Motherhood in Selina Hossain’s Short Stories

Selina Hossain, a prolific fiction writer from Bangladesh, is known at home and abroad for her mastery over real life stories. Her writing exhibits her awareness regarding Bangladeshi feminism as she offers a realistic picture of the lifelong struggles with motherhood and sexuality. Her narration of women’s experiences can be called what French feminist Helen Cixous would term as “écriture feminine,” or women’s writing. Many of Selina Hossain’s short stories dig deep into female psyche and critically explore the problems of motherhood.

BY JARIN TASNEEM SHOILEE

“I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete.”
- Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

“Akali Station er Jibon” (“Akali’s life at the Station”) depicts the struggling life of a working- class woman called Akali, who earns her livelihood by prostitution at Kamalapur Rail Station. While pondering over her fate, Akali starts to reflect on her past when her virginity was forcefully taken by a man. Being too young to understand what rape means, she wondered why streams of blood came down her legs. Later, she became pregnant by the house owner’s son while working as a housemaid in Dhaka. Seeing Akali’s growing baby bump, the lady of the house insulted her and threw her out. Akali took shelter in her Nishi aunt’s place at a slum. When Nishi accuses her of being a whore, Akali protests and says that she had equally enjoyed the physical intimacy with the boy, therefore, she is not a whore. Selina Hossain shows how a pregnant woman’s endangered motherhood can also be a source of mental strength and accomplishment for her. Akali claims boldly, “Amar kunu sorbonash hoy nai” (My life has not been ruined). Akali tells Nishi that her child needs no father. She gives birth to a beautiful daughter, but unfortunately, she dies when a train runs over her body. Since then, being traumatized, Akali chose prostitution as a profession without any regret. She learns the method of avoiding pregnancy during sexual contact. Akali’s story shows how the “marked” female body of a mother can still survive even after so much damage and loss.

“Parul er Ma Howa” (“Parul Becoming a Mother”) is another of Selina Hossain’s intriguing stories where the author celebrates the sexual freedom and motherhood of a lower classed woman Parul. Parul’s husband Abbas Ali leaves her although she had everything to offer as a woman. Parul criticizes the socially-prescribed codes of being a mother. Her battle between social obligation and personal preference intensifies when she looks at other mothers of her surroundings. She enjoys physical intimacy with multiple men as and eventually becomes pregnant by an anonymous man. Selina Hossain describes Parul’s feeling, “Ma hoyeche shudhu ei bodh oke somponno manush kore dey” (Only the feeling of being a



mother makes her a complete human being). Parul endures harsh comments from society due to her pregnancy, but the joy of motherhood endows her with newfound strength. She courageously asks the other women, “Jeguner bap nai hegun manush hoy na?” (The children who do not have their fathers, don’t they grow up?). Parul disregards the necessity of identifying the father of her child. She dismisses every man who wants to claim the fatherhood of her child. Selina Hossain, thus, boldly celebrates a libertine Bangladeshi woman’s personal desire as she consciously chooses to embrace motherhood.

In another story “Jasmine er Ichhapuron” (Jasmine’s Wish Fulfillment), Hossain narrates a 26-year old housemaid Jasmine’s trauma of being a young mother. Here, motherhood is portrayed as a dangerous predicament for a working class woman. Jasmine suffers from ovarian infection after the birth of her first son. While having an unassisted home delivery, her ovary gets accidentally overturned. The doctors report that Jasmine’s ovary has to be cut down

in order to save her life, and she will not be able to be a mother again. Desperate to avoid any more pregnancy in the future, Jasmine agrees instantly. The mistress of Jasmine’s house is surprised at her determination for the upcoming operation; she cannot decide if that is sheer stubbornness or an act of rebellion for Jasmine. After the operation, Jasmine feels relieved, “Aj theke ami swadhin... Amar ar ma howar bhoi nai.” (From this day on I am free... I have no fear of becoming a mother). Through fulfilling Jasmine’s wish, Selina Hossain poses an attack on the patriarchal social system that is neglectful towards maternity and women’s healthcare.

Selina Hossain’s stories, thus, poignantly narrate Bangladeshi working- class women’s experiences. She has taken women’s fiction in Bangladesh to another level. Her stories remind the readers of her power as a female writer who can address women’s issues, both artistically and realistically.

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PADMA BRIDGE

(On the Eve of its Historic Inauguration)

YASIF AHMAD FAYSAL

Come June 25
And a new leaf we will turn
A new leaf;
Through mists and waves,
Hail and rain,
Sudden blasts from south,
Through high tides and low
We shall prevail
Come June 25
The waiting will be over
And a resounding No we will say
To our aggregated pain,
Because home and heart
Will remain parted no more
No more no more
The sick will go unattended
Stranded on the furthest shore
No more no more
Farmer's golden yield will go
unrewarded
No more no more
Youths over future dim and dark
Will sigh broken-hearted.
Come June 25
We shall prevail.
Uniting the dreamer and the dream
Bringing zillion sparks of hope
to those in darkness steeped
Stands gleaming proud and tall
The Bridge.
Come June 25
We shall prevail
The one who holds together
The mettle and frame of our land
our seamless loyalty must strengthen
Her hand

Yasif Ahmad Faysal teaches English at the University of Barisal.



A Walk through the City of Dreams

SHEJUTI PASHA

The wide alleys and cobbled streets in the sultry air of the Mumbai city did not present a scenic panorama with foliage and greenery. Nor was it a serene view that calms the soul and mind. In reality, it was an amalgamation of the present and past, a chunk of contemporary culture nestled in beautiful Gothic and Victorian architecture.

As I stood in front of the Gateway of India and realized how cosmic it was, my heart was filled with awe. Termed as the Taj Mahal of Mumbai, the colossal monument was built during the beginning of the 20th century to commemorate the arrival of King George V and Queen Mary. As crowds thronged the place and waited for their turn to embark on the boats that would carry them to Elephanta Island, I continued looking at the colossal architecture in front of me and imagined it was the early 1900s.

The Taj Mahal Palace stood a little away overlooking the Arabian Sea and standing in front of it made me feel like I was in a famous Bollywood movie. Pigeons flocked the stone streets in front of the hotel and I couldn’t help admiring the magnificent Indo-Saracenic architecture.

Eventually, my stomach growled, so I started looking for a place to eat. As I filled my tummy with mouth-watering ‘Creamy Chicken Nachos’ and ‘Jalapeno Cheese Poppers,’ I lost myself in the savoury delicacy. “Where to?” asked one of my friends. “Colaba Causeway,” I answered while taking a sip from the colourful flavoured soda I had just ordered.

The ultimate shopper’s paradise, Colaba



Causeway consists of a long stretch of shops and street vendors that sell anything and everything from clothes to antiques. These streets also house some of the most famous and oldest cafes of Mumbai. Sadly, I managed to visit only one. I was indulging myself in the colourful spectacle of heirlooms and jewellery and had lost track of my friends when suddenly I discovered one of them digging into a scrumptious chocolate cake.

“Hey! How come you are eating without me?” I asked in indignation.

“I didn’t think you would ever take your eyes off the shops, so I decided to go alone,” she mumbled while chewing on her food.

Well, I couldn’t really blame her. Being one of the oldest and finest cafes in Colaba, Leopold Café is immensely popular among tourists. Since its inception in 1871, the café has gained prominence for its authentic

delicacies and also stands as a memoir of the 2008 attacks in the city.

The South Mumbai visit will be incomplete without looking at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. Formerly known as the Victoria Terminus Station, the edifice is a remarkable example of Victorian Gothic architecture. Designed by the British architect F.W. Stevens, it has been termed a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and is a marvel one cannot miss.

As the warm afternoon slowly crawled towards a cooler evening, I turned toward the Marine Drive. The sun’s rays were slackening and it was a long and arduous walk from the Chhatrapati Terminus, but the reward was amazing. The spectacular promenade offered views of the endless sea and the tall buildings in the distance looked like miniatures jutting out of an architect’s scale model.

I sat in silence in front of the sea,

watching the world coming to a standstill. I gazed in wonder at the large orange ball slowly dipping itself in the endless expanse of water. Images from *Wake Up Sid* flashed before my eyes. Shot extensively in Mumbai, the motion picture has a lot of seascapes in it and I chuckled at the thought that perhaps I was sitting in one of the spots where the movie was shot. Nonetheless, light was dimming around the horizon and as darkness fell, I dragged my exhausted body towards the nearby taxi stand and returned to the hotel.

I woke up to a hearty breakfast of Indian and Continental dishes the next day and ate to my heart’s content before heading out to my next destination, Bandra. Sad to say, I did not run into any Bollywood celebrities.

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A combination of Portuguese and British architecture, Bandra houses splendid structures and alluring churches, the most famous of them being Mount Mary’s Church and St.Andrews. It also comes with a refreshing view of the sea with its shores lined with black basalt rocks.

A number of alluring bookstores lined the cobbled streets and I paused there for a while. I decided to keep things simple and picked a store that combined two of my heart’s desires in one, books and coffee. I treated myself to a cup of delicious latte and proudly walked out of the store with my new copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* although I had read it a thousand times already!

After my short trip to ‘Title Waves’ I went on a shopping spree in Hill Road and Linking Road. The shopkeepers there seemed quite unhappy with my bargaining and I vaguely remember one of them yelling, “We don’t want such haggling customers here.”

The late afternoon saw me taking an auto-rickshaw towards Bandra Fort to catch the gorgeous sunset. I stood there and breathed in the salty evening air and let the breeze play with my hair. The massive Bandra-Worli Sea Link was standing erect on the water and it was a beautiful sight to behold, with the sun setting in the distance and foamy waves splashing down below.

As the sky turned from orange-red to lilac, I decided to leave Bandra and return to the other side of the city. I stayed indoors and lounged beside the hotel pool thinking of the City of Dreams as some call it. I knew I would be home in a day or two and on my way back, I would carry memories of the warm sea breeze, the winding stone streets, the buzzing life and a pervasive essence of Mumbai.

Shejuti Pasha is a newly minted English graduate from ULAB. Her interest lies in different genres of creative writing.