

## Can the Subaltern (as Woman) Speak? Inversing 'Male-chauvinism' in the Film *Rakkushi*

### Abstract

*Raising voices for 'Nari' or 'Women', writing against misogynistic ingrained prejudices to establish women's facilities, and dignities in the society by inversing the ideologies about women as the subaltern, orient, other, or inferior are noteworthy resistances of Bangladeshi national poet Qazi Nazrul Islam. He stands against prejudices about women in his "Rakkushi" ["Witch"]. This paper scrutinizes two female characters portrayed on the screen, based on Islam's short story, to bring out how women have been epitomized as empowered, strong, and resistant entities in Islam's writing as well as Rahman's 'anti-male-chauvinistic' intention to depict how to be emancipated from 'male-chauvinism' on the screen by referencing de Beauvoir and Spivak's theoretical framework to reach the final consequence on the agenda 'inversing male-chauvinism', and finally, justifies women as the subalterns who can speak in society.*

**Keywords:** *Prejudices, Rakkushi, Subaltern, Inverse, Screen*

### INTRODUCTION

'Rakkushi' is considered as one of the renowned short stories of Islam which advocates women's empowerment and dignity. Matin Rahman, one of the most prominent Bangladeshi directors has taken an audacious initiative by filming Islam's Rakushi for the screen in 2006. He has taken Ferdous Ahmed (Bhola) as male lead character, and Rozina (Bindi) and Purnima (Kunti) as female artists. According to the movie, Bindi is an active woman who primarily takes care of her old drunken father. In the early part of the film, she falls in love with Bhola and marries him a few days later. Everything goes well and they start living in an idyllic environment. As both Bindi and Bhola are arduous workers, they soon become solvent and soon a baby boy is born in their family. So far, everything has been well with them but in the climax, Bhola is embroiled in drug addiction and falls in love with Kunti who has been married thrice and has seduced almost all the rich and innocent men of the village. Bindi cannot accept her husband's illicit relationship with Kunti and kills her husband Bhola for exploiting and persecuting the family in various ways. Thus, a man is murdered by a woman in a patriarchally dominated society in the early Indian Hindu family (found in the story, as well in the film) which is highly unconventional and unexpected. However, as a feminist writer, Islam's intention was to show women as Devi or Hindu goddess because he shows in his writings that whatever has been done in this existing world, has been done by women too.

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Islam's inner thought has been portrayed on the screen conspicuously by Rahman where he illustrates that women can inverse their subverted subaltern conditions.

### **Problem Statement**

A scrutiny of the Bangladeshi national poet Qazi Nazrul Islam's writings and the behavior of his characters shows that Islam rejects 'male-chauvinism' towards women. I have been unable to find relevant articles on Islam and the relevant issues. The majority of the articles are based on Islam's rebellious voice and resistance against colonial domination or geographical independence but do not relate to the most important resistance which is 'Anti- male chauvinism' by which the subaltern women can be freed from all types of social stereotypes as well as exploitation. This study will help the subaltern, orient, other, or different women to conceive and take action against these discursive, hegemonic and 'male- chauvinistic' processes on women's brain, knowledge, and physics. This study will also attempt to decrease the gap between male and female prejudices to free them from the various kinds of patriarchal thinking.

### **Objectives of the Present Study**

The paper critically examines the reasons behind the decision of embroiling Bindi in the killing of her beloved husband Bhola and transforming herself into a Rakkushi (Witch) from an introverted yet lively young lady. It also scrutinizes the stereotypes and ingrained hegemonic 'male-chauvinistic' discourse on the subalterns, and especially women in society. One of the major functions of dealing with this study is to inverse subalterns in every level of society to be freed from male domination as well as to entrench women's dignity and rights. In my opinion, the film *Rakkushi* (2006) brings out the resistance against the ingrained male-dominated social prejudices which help subaltern (as women) readers to conceive the world differently at the same time assisting them to be conscious about concealed discourses. The core objective of conducting this research is to prepare the subaltern (as women) readers to understand the discursive construction of inferior others through ingrained misogynistic discourses in society as well as women's (as subaltern) psyche.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Based on the criticism of Islam's 'Rakkushi' (1925) portrayed on the screen by Matin Rahman (2006), varieties of books, and critical essays have been collected for the study. Different books and critical writings were compiled by many prominent feminist critics. Barry (2002) raises an important question of whether men and women are different in biology or, socially constructed others. Supporting him, Brison (2003) inverts that males are not born male but rather become one 'You are not born a male; you become one' (P.200). The most resounding feminist writer de Beauvoir (1997) stands by subordinated subalterns and emphasizes equal amenities and dignities where Islam (1999) strongly speculates about women's facilities, empowerment, equalities, and strength in his short story 'Rakkushi' as well as the poem 'Nari' while, prioritizing equal rights like Begum Rokeya. Both critics have been supported by Goldberg (2010) and William (1994). Bartens (2001) defines conspicuously who the subalterns are and how they are accounted for. Haque (2016) sees Islam's 'Birangona' or prostitutes as mothers where Tajuddin (2015) states that Prostitutes are also our mothers. He feels that a prostitute is 'one of the families/ of all our mothers and

Sisters' (p.57). Besides, Yeasin (2013) finds a significant idea of recurrence in Islam's 'Nari' where he believes mother Durga will rise again to get back the country's power. Undoubtedly, mother Durga epitomizes women's empowerment and strength. However, the film *Rakkushi* (2006) is a rudimentary source of information to analyze data. In short, some literary websites also support the argument to reach a healthy, new, and prolific consequence on the issue of subaltern and 'Anti-male-chauvinism.'

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative and theoretical method to analyze and comment on the content and data from different sources. The research has referred to de Beauvoir (1997) and Spivak (1994) to justify feminist theories to resist male-chauvinistic attitudes towards women. The study also uses historical contexts to emphasize the theories. Rahman's film *Rakkushi* (2007) has also been used as a primary source to analyze available data.

## Rationale

It is commonly believed by critics that Bindi's metamorphosis into the audacious Rakkushi (witch) from a devoted and lovely young woman is nothing but the exposition of the transgression of societal rules and regulations. In contrast, it is also thought that Bindi and Kunti's transgressing attitudes in the stereotypical patriarchal society are a result of extreme repressive and suppressive wrath to make women (subalterns) free from all types of 'male-chauvinistic' prejudices. It is, therefore, the researcher's main concern to find out the real issues of their transformation into Rakkushi by applying feminist theories and criticism.

## Delimitation

This study is dependent on printed books and journals available in my country. A few books were accessed from Amazon while others were downloaded from the internet. The paper is delimited to an analysis of Bindi's transformation into Rakkushi in the male-dominated society.

## ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

### Can the Subaltern (as Women) Speak in History as well as in Islamic Writings?

The term Subaltern is difficult to explain in a single paragraph since it varies from situation to situation: a small group or community might be subaltern to the big ones, classless to the elite class, the East to the West, Orient to the Occident, subverted, and dominated women to phallogocentric men etc. However, the term has been explained in detail in Spivak's (1994) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' where she speculates how a Satti (a Hindu widow) sacrifices her life by casting herself on the funeral pyre, so as to be incinerated and reconciled with her husband in the afterlife. The researcher here tries to bring out the Subaltern's voices through history as well as in Islam's 'Rakkushi' (1925), aired on the film *Rakkushi* (2006) which has been directed by Rahman. History is a witness to how women have been subverted and persecuted in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia. History also speaks of how women have inversed themselves from subaltern to dominating powers, for example, Nusaybah bint Ka'ab from Saudi Arabia, Joan of Arc from Orleans in France, Zenobia the Queen of Syria, Boudica the Queen of Iceni tribe during Madman Nero, Artemisia the Queen of Halicarnassus of Turkey, Tamar, the Queen of Georgia, Tomoe Gozen the revolutionary

warrior during Genpei War in Japan, The Trung Sisters from Vietnam, Fu Hao from China, Joanna of Flanders during the Battle of Auray just before the hundred years war in England, and Lakshmibai the Rani of Jhansi have been life-changing women warriors in human history who saved the lives of millions of people by participating directly in the war, fought for the motherland as well as to ameliorate women's dignity in the well-constructed patriarchal society.

Interestingly, Islam as a feminist writer spoke on behalf of subverted women's condition in the 'male-chauvinist patriarchal society'. As Islam (1925) states in the poem, 'Nari'

I sing the song of equality;  
 In my view, the gender difference is essentially a triviality.  
 Everything great in the world,  
 All the works, beneficial and good,  
 Half must be credited to woman,  
 And to a man half only we should. (lines 1-6)

He strongly demands women's liberty by standing against the disparity between men and women. Islam believes that good has been done not only by the men but women also have played their part in the great work in the history of the world. In 'Birangona' or 'Prostitute', he addresses the prostitutes as 'mother' (Haque, 2016 p.57). He thinks that the prostitute has also been suckled by someone who is as chaste as Seeta and the son of an unchaste father is as illegitimate as the son of a prostitute. In the same way, Taijuddin (2015) feels that a prostitute is 'one of the families/ of all our mothers and sisters' (p.57). Islam and Islam (2012) in 'Emancipation of Women through Education and Economic Freedom: A Feminist Study of Begum Rokeya's Utopias' notes that Nazrul Islam, like Begum Rokeya, persists on the equal rights of men and women in his poem 'Nari'. In *Nazruler Jibanbodh OChintadhara*, Taha Yasin (2013) emphasizes the Durga goddess of the Hindu religion who Islam thinks will rise again to get back the country's power. Islam also speculates in the same poem,

All the great victory of the world  
 And all the grand voyages,  
 Gained grandeur and nobility from sacrifice of  
 Mothers, sisters, and wives throughout the ages. (Lines 44-48)

showing that Islam believes in the power along with the freedom of women as individuals because almost all the greatest wins in history have been achieved by the active participation of women.

Islam has also depicted women characters in his short story 'Rakkushi'(1926) as the embodiment of the women power which has been vividly pictured in the film *Rakkushi* (2006), starred in by Ferdous, as Bholi, Rojina as Binti and Purnima as Kunti. Binti is considered as Rakkushi (Witch) for killing her beloved husband who is abusive to her. Killing a man in the male-chauvinist patriarchal society, as well as Kunti's sexual transgressing and crossing the boundary of the restricted male-dominated society, are nothing but the inverting subaltern (as women) in the society. Islam's Binti and Kunti can speak as

subaltern since Islam inverse the whole system of patriarchy following the example of the dominant women figures in world history.

### Referencing Beauvoir and Spivak: Anti-Male Chauvinist Criticism

Practices like sati, child marriage, restriction on widow remarriage, dowry, domestic violence and trafficking are not only cohesive to Indian women in Islam's time but have existed in world history. St. Thomas Aquinas represents women in the famous text *Summa Contra Gentiles* 'Adam was formed first...and woman second like an imperfect/incomplete thing that takes its origin from what is perfect/complete' (Summa I.92.1), or contemporary Bangladeshi YouTube viral singer Arman Alif's song 'Maiya O Maiya Re Tui Oporadhi Re' (line 16) are the basic grounds of discursive subjugation of women rooted in 'male-chauvinist' attitudes, or misogynistic gaze towards women in the society. Bangladeshi national poet Islam, following the tradition of Beauvoir and Spivak raises his voice through his writings, where Virginia Woolf (1979) also elucidates 'Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer' (60) to be freed from these ingrained stereotypical hegemonic discursive ideologies. Like Islam, the Indian writer Bharati Ray believes in the empowerment of women and explains in her book *Early Feminists of Colonial India* (2002) that 'The new woman was to be an educated and brave wife as an appropriate partner of an English-educated nationalist man, able to run an 'efficient' and 'orderly home' like her Western counterpart, be high-minded and spiritual like the women of the 'golden age' (41). However, both in world history as well as in the Indian situation, women were stigmatized for years. Islam's initiative started the revolution towards women's emancipation which will continue until the destruction of the world; this is the message which has been portrayed on the screen by Rahman in the film *Rakkushi*.

Feminism as a critical theory focuses on symmetrical righteousness between men and women. Peter Barry's (2002) *Beginning Theory* marks that the core functions of the feminist writers being to raise the question of whether men and women are different because of biology or are socially constructed as different, other, or subaltern. 20th-century French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1986) in her (1949) feminist masterpiece *The Second Sex* (Trans.1997) points out that women are not being given any rights in society. She asserts 'one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman' (p. 296) de Beauvoir sheds light on the circumstances of married women who could not speak in family affairs and decisions. Women are always the *Other* as man is the master and the wife is the slave. The first guardian of a woman is her father and after marriage, her husband becomes her guardian. She becomes his half since she is subordinate, secondary, and labeled as a parasite after her marriage. This leads to asymmetry where man is subject and women is object, dolls or just existential beings like 'being-in-itself'. Michelle Goldberg (2010) the reviewer of *Women as Other* states that women develop deformed psyches and being an existentialist, de Beauvoir feels that women become 'Other' as they lack freedom. Women should keep their caring nature of giving time and intelligence to others and men should learn to acquire it. She comments 'You are not born a male; you become one' (Brison, 2009, P.200). According to her 'Woman is a human being with a / certain physiology, but that physiology in no way makes her inferior, nor does it justify her exploitation' (pp. 202-3). Therefore, we can see that she raises a voice about women's empowerment and rights.

In the same way, Bertens (2001) in *Literary Theory: The Basics* defines subaltern as the category of those who are lower in position or who, in the military terms are always lower in rank. 21st-century Indian postcolonial writer Spivak in her interview with Leon De Kock in 1992 states that everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for the oppressed, for others. She studies the *Sati* pratha or ritual where the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it (93). This helpless widow cannot fight against the injustice of this ritual and so she becomes the powerless subaltern who was not allowed to speak. If she speaks, even she herself cannot hear what she speaks, which means the women are always being subverted and dominated to the superior ones like male or patriarchal society. Thus the woman is a victim, a secondary other who has no position in her society. She accepts this inferior role and submits to it. In short, Beauvoir (1997) and Spivak (1994) are the figures in feminist studies who have some symmetrical attitudes with Islam because as a feminist writer he also believes that women have all the qualities of men, and asserts in his poem 'Nari' 'Half must be credited to woman, And to a man half only we should' (lines 4-6) meaning that whatever has been done in this world, almost half of the tasks have been done by women but they are not being praised for their contributions. These ideological understandings of the male-dominated societies might assist feminist readers to be freed from 'male-chauvinism' or hegemonic discourses entombed in society.

### **Islam's "Rakkushi" on the Screen: A Feminist Interpretation**

One of the most resounding films in Bangla cinema based on Islam's writing was released in 2006 and starred Rozina, Ferdous, and Purnima in prominent roles where *Rakkushi* or the Monster revolves around Bindi (Rozina) who kills her husband Bhola (Ferdous) for having an illicit relationship with Kunti (Purnima) in the traditional, stereotypical patriarchal Hindu society of India for which Bindi is called *Rakkushi*. In the portrayal of both Bindi and Kunti, Islam has portrayed women as powerful, dominating, and strong beings. This depiction of women during his time proves that his writing and ideas are connected with the 20th and 21st century theory of Feminism. The researcher has described the movie from a feminist perspective where females have been shown with unparalleled strength and annihilative forces against misogynistic and patriarchal tendencies.

Bindi has been chosen as the protagonist of the movie *Rakkushi*. (2006) She presents herself as a powerful woman in the agricultural and patriarchal society of India. She loves her husband Bhola but considers him a subservient man who rarely knows anything about dishonesty and conspiracy. All of these shed light on her powerful role in this marital relationship where she is not a subaltern; neither is her husband dominating and persecuting. In other words, she can easily share her opinions with her husband.

In the movie, Bindi beats her husband with a broom when she becomes aware of his infidelity and angrily asserts 'I have killed my husband, not only killed but also cut him into pieces' (*Rakkushi* 02:14:18-02:14:23). She is not ready to accept the illicit relationship of her husband Bhola and refuses to be a parasite after her marriage in a society where women are usually considered as others or orientals. Although she compares Bhola with the Hindu god Shiva, she decides to kill him as he might go to the Inferno because of committing untenable sins with a prostitute. As a wife, it is her moral responsibility to bring her husband back from

the path of vice. If she lets him follow the path of evil, she will also be a sinner and doomed to diabolic conditions in the afterlife. She decides to sacrifice her husband to God as she wants God to take away all his sins. Spivak describes in her essay that 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' (p.33) showing the subdued situation of women in society; this has been inversed in Islam's writings because he shows how an early 20<sup>th</sup> century woman can kill her husband. Despite being considered as the second sex in society, she dismantles her husband and proves women's strength against all the ingrained subjugations. Here, the killing is not of a Sati woman, instead, a woman who prefers to be a widow in a society where husbands are acknowledged as the head of a family (so-called gods) and masters of their wives. However, in delineating Bindi, Islam has depicted Bindi as empowered woman in the established patriarchal society because Bindi once says to her drunken father 'Today, I will kill you, and after killing, I will be hanged' (*Rakkushi* 02:14:18-02:14:23).

It is noteworthy that Bindi could have tolerated the forbidden relationship of her husband with Kunti, but she refuses to remain silent. She protests for her marital rights and states that men will despise her as men have always killed women but for the first time a wife has killed her husband in their society. She thinks that other women would never have retaliated if Bhola had killed her for her adultery. Only because she is a woman, she is accused of murder to such a great extent. Her inverse or opposite of subaltern attitude makes the traditional Hindu society condemn her as a monster or *Rakkushi*. The word monster signals the societal discrimination of women. However, Bindi surpasses all the prejudices through ameliorating her inner spirit and conscious psyche as well as opening a new path for the up-coming dominated women in the hand of patriarchy.

The title vividly sheds light on her aggressive killing and also on the idea that no one expects women to kill their godlike husbands. Whoever does such a heinous thing is an abnormal being. The same society will never despise husbands who kill wives. No one tries to conceive her tribulation though she suffers while killing Bhola. Her life becomes a graveyard when Bhola commits infidelity. Widow marriage was not allowed in her society, so Bindi would have to live alone after killing Bhola. The killing is a fearless act and she will be executed for her crime. Bindi knows it but, still, she decides to end the vice of her husband. Ironically, no women support Bindi and they run when they see her. Still, she acts as her supporter. Instead of committing suicide, she decides to live her own life because she understands that if a man can survive, she will survive as well. She believes that she has all the qualities of her husband while Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, physical, or economic destiny defines the figure that human females take on in society' (p. 293). As civilization or society makes women as women, Bindi wants to inverse these hegemonic social ideologies and stays in the society as man does. The brave attitude of Bindi towards life unveils that Islam is a proponent of women empowerment just like Beauvoir and Spivak.

Reversing to the character Kunti as exhibited in the film, it is conspicuously identifiable that she also has a dominant and transgressing personality. She chooses to develop a physical relationship with not only the Saheb for acquiring power and money but also a married man

Bhola. Not afraid to roam around the village at night, she is a widow and has been married thrice in the movie. The whole Battipara village is bewitched by her enchanting beauty. She loves to draw the attention of each and every man and also is not concerned about her defamation in the male-dominated societal norms and systems of the village. She is not afraid to sacrifice her body to Bhola. After the destruction of Bindi and Bhola's marriage, we find that she still loves Bhola, despite everything.

In the film there are many differences from the short story (1925). For instance, Islam has not given any serious depiction of Kunti in the story but Rahman has done it because this character is the creation of the director who has divulged the pure love of Kunti for Bhola. Along with this, Bindi has a very small son in the film but in the story, she has two daughters and one son. Interestingly, there are no disputations or altercations between Bindi and Kunti, and two couples like Kunti and Bhola are displayed in the movie. These scenes have been added to make the film more emotionally appealing to the audiences because the readers are a particular group of people who can read but a film is seen by all types of people, mostly for entertainment. The most significant part of the film is that the relationship between Bindi and her father and her killing of the landlord who wanted to marry Bindi are not part of the original story. These incidents are added to create psychological pathos within the spectators. Overall, a movie needs spice and twists and turns to captivate the audiences on whose verdict, it will either be successful at the box office or a flop film. It is a marketing strategy that includes songs and love scenes. Still, it is praiseworthy that Kunti and Bindi are manifested as women who have their individual flaws but both are in love with Bhola in the movie.

## CONCLUSION

Women as subaltern, orient; other, or different to men have been idealized since the inception of human civilization. These ideas have been injected by the dominant group (patriarchy) into women's brains through a discursive hegemonic process. However, women's inversion against these ideologies has seldom been found in history. The resistance has reached the extreme level both in practice and praxis over the last two centuries. Simon de Beauvoir in her resounding text *The Second Sex* (1949) speculates about women's dignity and power at the same time raising voice for disparities in terms of getting fundamental amenities. Along with de Beauvoir, post-colonial writer Spivak also comments on women's equality and empowerment in her famous text *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1983). However, in referencing both of them, women are not any more subaltern or puppet of patriarchal society rather they are adroit, half of the men, able in praxis, prolific in studies, and finally, able in inverting themselves from patriarchy, hegemonic, and in short, 'male-chauvinistic' stereotypical societies. However, Islam's Bindi and Kunti speak as women are speaking, and will speak in the years to come against all sorts of 'male-chauvinistic' prejudices as both Beauvoir and Spivak dreamed.

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