



Research article

## Exploring Domestic Violence and Maltreatment of Bangladeshi Women in Syed Manzoorul Islam's Selected Stories

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### ABSTRACT

Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* (2013) is an anthology portraying the vulnerability of Bangladeshi women. Many of the stories of the book expose the traumatic experiences and physical assaults faced by native women. In Bangladeshi society, the patriarchal mindset elevates men to supreme positions within the family, often absolving them of accountability for their misdeeds. This practice scapegoats women on behalf of their husbands. The existing social construction insinuates a belief among women that they are fated to be tolerant of the ill-treatments. In Islam's book, a reader can witness many women characters who are putting up with the tortures of husbands and in-laws just to save the marriage. In a patriarchal society, a woman's primary role is to bear a male heir for the family. Lois Tyson outlines how women are made unimportant in both family and society to support male dominance. Critical concepts like Traditional Gender Roles and Social Constructionism open a threshold for fresher interpretation of Syed Manzoorul Islam's selected stories. This paper is organized into three major sections: the first section introduces ideas of traditional gender roles and feminist consciousness, the second showcases domestic violence and child expectancy in rural Bangladesh, and the third demonstrates maltreatment and existential crisis of women in the educated society of Bangladesh.

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### Introduction

Syed Manzoorul Islam, a prominent Bangladeshi academic and writer, demonstrates ill-treatment and domestic violence faced by women in the patriarchal society prevailing in Bangladesh. In many of his stories from *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories*, Islam outlines the vulnerable lifestyle of both educated and uneducated women after marriage. He portrays the incidents of mental and physical abuses of the females inflicted by their husbands and in-laws so frequently in his stories that these seem to be the parts of women's daily life. This article aims to illustrate women facing domestic violence in four of Islam's stories titled "Malina's Night", "The Jackfruit Maiden", "She", and "Extramartial".

In the above mentioned selected stories, men are found to lead their life according to their will. They are often seen to stay out at nights for hanging out with friends to spend leisure time. On the other hand, women are seen to sacrifice their whole life and opportunities for the development of their family. They spend their leisure, which they scarcely get, crying or sighing. The rural female characters like Malina (from "Malina's Night") and

Lipi (from "She") are seen to find almost no time of their own after serving their in-laws. The character named Manashi from "The Jackfruit Maiden", a graduate of Dhaka University, sacrifices her career and ignores religious barriers to marry the person she loves. But she is tortured to death eventually by the person who claimed to love her. Some of the characters do not get any mercy from their husbands' and in-laws' torture even when they are pregnant. Additionally, they get harsh treatment by their family members for not being able to give birth to a male child. They are treated as if the sole motive of their lives is to give birth to a male inheritor of the family. This article problematizes these issues of maltreatment and domestic violence which would contribute to a better understanding of the selected stories in the light of the above mentioned issues.

### Literature Review

Most research on Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* focuses on eco-critical and postmodern perspectives. Scholars often explore Islam's use of language, humor, character development,

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postmodern techniques, major themes, and environmental awareness. Highlighting the power of Islam's storytelling, Bijoy Lal Basu writes in *The Daily Star*:

What we see is that both men and women, young and old, the rich and the poor, feature prominently in the variegated landscape of Islam's vast literary canvas. Professor Islam's narrative style in the stories is refreshingly innovative, which adds significantly to their charm. Reading this book is like being on a journey where the narrator is constantly interacting with his companion... (2014)

Basu praises Islam's excellence in characterization. He claims that the selection of characters "transcend the boundaries of time, place, race, and ethnicities" (2014). But in many of his stories, the writer portrays the helplessness of Bangladeshi women, both rural and urban, against maltreatment; one might complain that ignoring such an important point of view is not just. This paper opens a new insight for the readers to analyze the stories from the feminist perspective which is the point of departure for this research.

### Theoretical Framework

In discussions of traditional gender roles, the term "patriarchal woman" is often defined as a woman who conforms to established societal expectations and norms associated with traditional gender roles within a patriarchal society. These roles typically involve women being subservient, passive, nurturing, and compliant with the prevailing patriarchal order. While discussing traditional gender roles, Lois Tyson defines patriarchal woman as:

...a woman who has internalized the norms and values of *patriarchy*, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. (2006, p. 85)

Existing traditional gender roles are used as an excuse for not offering women equality in case of decision making. These inequities are always there in politics, academia, the corporate world, and even in the family. The idea of patriarchy portrays women as the inferior half of men. For women in Bangladesh, the situation is deteriorating. If they express any of their opinions about family matters or husband's behavior, they often face physical and verbal abuse.

Toril Moi offers a thought-provoking insight into patriarchal binary thought, asserting, "In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor" (2002, p. 103). Moi's statement highlights the pervasive gender dynamics in patriarchal systems, where masculinity is associated with agency, power, and dominance, and femininity is linked to submissiveness and passivity. Her observation shows that society's ingrained norms support male privilege. Therefore, she underscores the need to critically examine and change traditional gender roles and expectations. Sandra Lee Bartky, however, considered

consciousness of victimization as the primary consciousness of feminism. She claims, "Many women do not develop a consciousness divided in this way at all: they see themselves, to be sure, as victims of an unjust system of social power, but they remain blind to the extent to which they themselves are implicated in the victimization of others (Bartky, 1990, p.16). Bartky addresses a complex phenomenon where women recognize themselves as victims of social power injustices but often fail to acknowledge their role in victimizing others. This issue invites us to delve into the intricacies of consciousness within social dynamics, particularly in understanding gender roles and social structures.

### Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study involves qualitative analysis, focusing on a selection of stories from Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories*. These stories are subjected to close reading and textual analysis, with a particular emphasis on identifying instances of domestic violence, traditional gender roles, child expectancy, and patriarchal attitudes. The analysis is conducted within the framework of feminist theories and concepts, providing insights into the experiences of Bangladeshi women in different societal contexts. Ethical considerations are given utmost importance because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

### Discussion

The analysis of Syed Manzoorul Islam's selected stories from *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* brings to light the pervasive issues of domestic violence and maltreatment of Bangladeshi women. These stories provide a potent perspective for examining the patriarchal society prevailing in Bangladesh and its impact on both educated and uneducated women. The narratives shed light on the vulnerability and resilience of women who, within this societal construct, often endure physical and psychological abuse silently. This section explores the nuanced portrayal of these themes within the selected stories, encompassing the realms of rural and urban Bangladesh. It also explores the complexities of gender roles, societal expectations, and the deep-rooted patriarchal norms that perpetuate such maltreatment.

### Exploring Domestic Violence and Child Expectancy in Rural Bangladesh

Syed Manzoorul Islam portrays a genuine picture of Bangladeshi rural-patriarchal society at the beginning of the story "Malina's Night". Malina's husband Raisuddin is a strong man who works for rich households in his village. He is seen spending his leisure time staying out with friends at night, playing cards, drinking tea and rice-wine. On the contrary, Malina too works hard and stays busy all day doing her household chores. But she is not allowed to enjoy such pleasures as Raisuddin does. Moreover, she is physically tortured by her husband when she gently questions Raisuddin about his night activities: "A month into their marriage, when Malina first ever murmured her protest about his nightly absence, Raisuddin slapped her across the face, and told her to mind her own business. Malina had been doing so ever since" (Islam, 2013, p. 101). Leaving the husband alone, she is even tortured

mentally by her mother-in-law who blames Malina for Raisuddin's night outings: "She told Malina to think about a way to keep her husband home. 'Get a child, for God's sake,' she remonstrated, 'a child is what ties a father to his family'" (Islam, 2013, p. 101). So it is seen that a mother is not supposed to question her son when he is a grown up and starts earning for the family. Even if he is wrong, his wife is supposed to be held responsible for his misdeeds. Tyson addressed this mentality, "... the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced" (2006, p. 86). These behaviors have been normalized in society for decades, Tyson defines it as "*social constructionism*" (2006, p. 86). Raisuddin blames Malina for not having a child and she gradually starts to believe that she is barren (without any scientific proof or test). Raisuddin had a previous wife with whom he had two daughters. The previous wife could not survive in the family because Raisuddin's father wanted a male inheritor who would bear his family name.

Islam marks the pettiness of being a woman in Bangladeshi rural family. Malina is beautiful and her father-in-law chooses her at his first sight. But the charm does not last for long as she fails to provide a male inheritor for the family:

The prettiest wife in these villages, who fails to bring a male inheritor in the world has a shelf life of a couple of years, at best. After that, she is shown the way to her parents' house. And if the door of the parents' house is closed on her for some reason, she is left no option but to take the plunge into uncertainty. (Islam, 2013, p. 102)

The situation shown in the extract is not the case of one particular family. The rural women living on the both sides of Bishkhali River cannot survive at the in-laws' houses if they fail to give birth to a son. Some of these women flee to Dhaka to work in the garments factories or in households as maids.

Malina's vulnerability appears before the readers once again when Raisuddin returns from one of his night outings and asks Malina to heat up food for him. Waking up from her sleep, Malina becomes panicked as there is no food left. She requests her husband to give her half an hour so that she can cook something for him. But Raisuddin becomes impatient and angry; he gets Malina by her hair and throws her out of the room. Malina is kept out all night; yet seeing the first light of the day, she goes to the nearby Biswas house to ask for some rice, potatoes and two clay pots. Malina returns home with those and makes Raisuddin's favorite mashed-potatoes. She does all these just to revive Raisuddin's mood. In return, she gets a kick and an ultimatum that after returning from the river if he sees her, he will kill her. Malina then leaves for her father's house in fear of getting beaten again. She is even not welcomed in her own father's house. Her brother does not like an extra mouth to feed with his low income. Her mother tells her that she can stay until his brother's return. So she does not belong either in her in-laws' house or in her father's house. The paper examines the problem of belonging and the existential crisis of Bangladeshi married women in Islam's fiction.

In "Extramarital", Islam tells the story of an aristocratic and rich household. The narrator of the story describes the tale in such a way that he is having a chat

with her grandmother Hasiba. But the name of the narrator's grandfather is not mentioned in the story. The story starts with the chat about the love and married life of the narrator's grandfather and grandmother. They seem to be happily married and very much in love with each other. The grandfather is an opium eater. The tragedy occurs at their marriage anniversary. Hasiba cooks her husband's favorite dish *pabda aadajamir*, spinach paneer, stuffed okra in curds, and *potato-patal dalna* along with some regular Bengali dishes. But the narrator's grandfather only takes some rice and a bit of spinach paneer, and goes to the *tungi ghar* where he takes opium and reads *Nistarnama*, a book about the life of mystic mathematician Golam Massoud Nistar. Rahbar, the manservant, goes to the storeroom to light the lamp but accidentally breaks the chimney. Grandfather comes running and starts beating the boy with a thick stick. Hearing his scream, Hasiba comes to the storeroom and tries to stop the grandfather. Rahbar escapes after the arrival of the grandmother and then the grandfather starts beating her with the stick:

Grandmother could hardly believe what was happening. She first thought her husband had hit her by mistake. Maybe he had thought she was someone else, after all it was dark, and there was no moon in sight. So she shouted a couple of times, 'It's me, it's me,' but the third whack had landed on her back, and her voice sank. Her knees buckled and she fell to the ground. A burst of yellow light played in front of her eyes. (Islam, 2013, pp. 225-226)

Islam illustrates that ill-treatment towards women is not only the scenario in poor families of Bangladesh but also it exists in the rich and aristocrat families. The tragedy does not stop in physical abuse. When the grandfather divorces Hasiba, Hasiba's father marries her off to a very old person because her father is indebted to the old person. Hasiba suspects that the old Hakim is older than her father. This research demonstrates that women are used as objects for paying loans taken by their family members.

The issues like child marriage and child expectancy are addressed at the beginning of the story "She". Lipi, the protagonist of the story, becomes pregnant in her early twenties. Yet Renubala, the village midwife, asks Lipi to consider herself lucky as she is too old to conceive a child. In her in-laws' house, only Gafur, her husband, supports and loves her. She does not receive kind treatment from her in-laws. The loving husband's reaction after hearing the news of pregnancy is "... Gafur had told her that the child better be a boy. If it were a girl, he wouldn't be able to support Lipi anymore" (Islam, 2013, p. 181). Giving birth to a son is shown as the sole motive of women's life. Gafur repeats his parents and tells Lipi that a married woman is nothing without a child. So according to Lipi's family members a woman's existence depends on her child, the child must be a male one, of course: "Ever since their marriage Gafur's father, Dulal Mia, had been obsessed with the thought of becoming a grandfather. 'All I want is a boy who will carry the torch of my family,' he had told Gafur over and over again" (Islam, 2013, p. 182).

Dulal Mia despises Lipi because of her beauty. Her "pretty face, long hair and shiny cheeks" makes Dulal think that she is a "fallen woman" (Islam, 2013, p. 182). He holds Lipi responsible for his son's migrant life; he

comments that Lipi forced Dulal to go abroad for pursuing a migrant worker's life. Lutfa Begum, her mother-in-law, is found to create new chores for her pregnant daughter-in-law to make her suffer:

Let the woman work herself to death, Lutfa Begum thought, with undisguised glee. One never knew—a sudden pain in the underbelly, a sudden spasm stabbing heart, and the child would be flushed out like a lump of a stale flesh. If that happened, she swore, she wouldn't be the one to mourn. (Islam, 2013, p. 187)

Dulal Mia clarifies his intention saying if Lipi gives birth to a girl, both she and the newborn have to leave the house. When Lutfa Begum and Dulal Mia touch Lipi's belly to feel the child's movement, it kicks on their hands. Lutfa Begum suspecting that the child might be a boy, starts torturing Lipi by giving unfinishable chores. Lutfa Begum doubts, if Lipi mothers a son, Lutfa Begum's importance in the family will decrease.

### **Maltreatment and Existential Crisis of Women in the Educated Society**

"The Jackfruit Maiden" narrates the story of two Dhaka University graduates Afsar and Manashi. Despite many differences, they fall in love with each other and get married. Manashi, a Hindu girl, receives her first shock from her husband when he asks to change her name. Afsar thinks Manashi is a Hindu name and his father will not like it. But the name is a gift of Manashi from her father. When she refuses to change it, Afsar does not like it. Afsar fell in love knowing her name and identity yet after marriage he demands to change her identity. It is actually conventional male psychology in Bangladesh that women should make the sacrifice. The vibrant nature of Manashi becomes irritating to Afsar gradually. He compares her to the duchess of Browning's poem because she smiles at everyone. He does not like Manashi meeting her friends, especially in his absence. Manashi reluctantly visits her father-in-law because Afsar believes that their marriage lacks completeness without his father's blessing. Despite Manashi's efforts to maintain their relationship and endure Afsar's behavior; the emotional torment intensifies, eventually escalating to physical abuse:

This temper of mine, Sir, is a contribution of my forefathers, implanted in my genes. What can I do about it, Sir? Night after night, I shouted at Manashi, banged on the wall, broke things, and yes Sir, once in a while slapped her or pulled her

by her hair. The first time I laid my hand on her she gave a look of horror, of utter disbelief, as if she couldn't make out what was happening. (Islam, 2013, p. 119)

Afsar justifies his misbehavior with an excuse of his inherited temper. The silent reaction of women is also responsible for the continuation of these ill-treatments: "But she didn't cry, didn't say a word" (Islam, 2013, p. 119). This research aims to expose the silence of both educated and rural, illiterate women while facing any kind of torture from their husbands or in-laws. Most of the Bangladeshi women still think that it is their responsibility or fate to put up with the assaults. Manashi becomes pregnant but Afsar's beating does not stop. She tries to calm Afsar down when he starts behaving aggressively. The reason for not leaving Afsar may be—she does not want to break their marriage before the birth of their child. Tragically, both Manashi and her unborn child perish due to their inability to endure Afsar's torment.

### **Conclusion**

Syed Manzoorul Islam's women characters illustrate the vulnerability of Bangladeshi women in society and family. Not only the poor and uneducated class of women fall victim to the misbehavior and ill-treatment but also a university graduate is seen to tolerate tortures silently till death. Patriarchal society injects the silent mindset even in educated women. In many of the stories from *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories*, Islam depicts this contemporary patriarchal mentality prevailing in the societies of Bangladesh.

This paper challenges the prevailing portrayal of men's dominance and women's silence. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of Syed Manzoorul Islam's stories. The discoveries open new avenues for interpreting Islam's narratives and serve as inspiration for future research in this field.

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### **Competing Interest**

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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