

Room and Roots: A Transcultural Feminist Reading of Virginia

Woolf and Selina Hossain

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Abstract

This present study offers a transcultural feminist reading of Virginia Woolf and Selina Hossain, exploring how both the female authors articulate feminine subjectivity through the entwined concepts of space, identity and individuality beyond set patriarchal norms and women's preference in thwarting societal impediments. "Using "Écriture feminine", Selina Hossain critiques patriarchal "spider-web", and celebrates female solidarity as well as resilience in a male-dominated society highlighting the urgency for economic freedom, and inner-psychological strength. Her female characters exhibit various forms of agency as well as strong defiance against all kind of oppression. Virginia Woolf emphasizes women empowerment, women's self-actualization dismantling male-dominated patriarchal restrictions on female creativity. Hossain's feminism highlights postcolonial, subaltern realities while Virginia Woolf's feminism centers on intellectual and economic independence. Woolf belongs to First World Modernist era while Hossain's world is Third World, Postcolonial era. Nature of oppression is different in these two worlds. Hossain's women had to fight against social injustice, patriarchal oppressions, class conflict and gender oppression. Woolf's ladies had to fight for intellectual independence, financial freedom and creative opportunity. Selina Hossain through her writing, wanted to renew the tradition to

give voice to her marginalized female characters. Virginia Woolf aimed to build a new sentence, a new tradition for female writers that is totally different from patriarchal tradition: “The androgynous mind”. She proposed psychological and creative freedom of female authors. Female authors should avoid masculine narrative and create new female literary heritage and a new robust female lineage.

Keywords: Transcultural, Agency, Articulate, Subaltern, choice.

Introduction

The main focus of this paper is to draw a comparison between Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain’s novel “Hangor Nodi Grenade”(1976), translated into English as “River of My Blood”(2016); “Parul er Ma Howa”; “Ghumkature Ishwar”; “Bhalobasha Preetilota”; and Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” and “Three Guineas”, as these oeuvres advocate female rights in a male-dominated society. In “River of My Blood”, Selina Hossain challenges traditional gender roles by presenting women not as victims but as active participants of change and resilience. It tells us how female characters in rural Bangladesh participate as active members during 1971 Liberation War. Hossain manifests how women characters apply different forms of agency to express their subaltern voices, opposing political and social barriers. Through the portrayal of the protagonist Boori, her friend Nita, and daughter in law Ramija, Selina Hossain tried to pay tribute to the unsung war heroines of 1971. Boori rejects the traditional motherhood theory set by the patriarchal hegemony. The traditional idea is that a woman’s main duty is giving birth and raising children. She challenges the idea of reproduction and broadens the definition of womanhood. Hossain’s female characters try to defy social and political restrictions. They refuse traditional role playing. They transform themselves from ordinary rural damsels into victorious war heroines. Boori sacrifices her own son in order to save some freedom fighters of her village. This bold decision transforms her traditional mother figure role into a historical war heroine. This

elevation of her status from typical, traditional mother into a war heroine is really remarkable. Several works of Selina Hossain continue to expand the feminist themes of woman's autonomy, women's liberation, female agency, women's rights in a male-dominated society. The novel "Ghumkature Iswar" exhibits the theme of sisterhood. The two female characters of this novel, Ruposhi and Sarishafuli try to challenge the patriarchal system. Their collective action is somewhat relational, emotion and survival based. Their collectivity is subtle, fragmented and informal. They support each other emotionally. Their resistance is not an organized political resistance. Selina Hossain shifts it to everyday survival practices. Ruposhi and Sarishafuli form informal collectiveness of care, shared silence, shared labour, mutual endurance and shared marginalization. Their collectivism is formed by lived experience, not by political ideology.

In the short story "Parul er Ma Howa", Selina Hossain tells us about a lower-class, abandoned woman's struggle with motherhood, sexual autonomy and resistance against social conventions. Parul challenges the traditional concept of motherhood and establishes control over her own body and desires. When her husband Abbas Ali abandons her, she becomes pregnant through another man and ignores social condemnation and explores the self-realization of motherhood.

In her historical novel "Bhalobasha Preetilota", Selina Hossain explores the revolutionary life and martyrdom of the first female martyr of the Indian Sub-continent Preetilota Waddedar. Through this work, Selina Hossain glorifies women as active historical and political agents and challenges the traditional narrative where female figures and their contributions to national movements are always ignored. Selina Hossain, through her narratives tries to uphold the dignity of women who strive for self-reliance, dignity and a space of their own.

Virginia Woolf, in her famous essay, “A Room of One’s Own”, opines that, women, in the society are politically, economically, religiously belittled by the man-made patriarchy. She critiques this patriarchy that subjugated women and denied women access to educational and creative opportunities. Virginia Woolf emphasizes intellectual and economic independence for women. She believes that in order to achieve artistic capacity, a woman must have money and a room of her own.

In “Three Guineas”, Virginia Woolf tells us that the profession of a person determine his power in the society but the women of her society do not possess high power as they are not high professionals. She believes that women must establish themselves as high professionals, like doctors, lawyers, bankers so that they can get equal political, religious and social rights. It is the unequal status that obstructs their way, restricts their creativity. She firmly demands the state of balance between masculinity and femininity. She denounces man-made patriarchy and demands a restructured, balanced society where female authors can flourish their creative potentiality.

Methodology

This current study employs a comparative qualitative and content-analysis research design to examine how Virginia Woolf and Selina Hossain, regardless of varying social, historical, political, environmental and cultural backgrounds subvert patriarchal norms, validate female agency and challenge masculine hegemony. The primary data source includes the novels and short stories of Selina Hossain and two famous essays of Virginia Woolf. The famous novels “Hangor Nodi Grenade” (1976), translated into English as “River of My Blood” (2016); “Ghumkature Ishwar”; “Bhalobasha Preetilota”; will be read closely to observe how adroitly Selina Hossain advocates female agency through her writings. Virginia Woolf’s essays “A Room of One’s Own” and “Three Guineas” will be the major literary artifact from which passages that challenge masculine hegemony, will be read closely to

prove Woolf as an advocate of feminism that centers on intellectual and economic independence. Secondary sources like critical essays, articles written by renowned scholars, other theoretical works on feminism will be consulted to interpret Selina Hossain's Post-Colonial feminism, and Virginia Woolf's Western Modernist feminism.

Discussion

Selina Hossain's feminism mainly focusses on Bangladeshi women's fight against patriarchal society. Themes like motherhood, sexuality, survival are explored within historical contexts like partition and liberation war. She uses *écriture féminine* to advocate female strength, women's self-determination in challenging societal restrictions.

Selina Hossain's writing style reflects French feminist idea "Écriture Feminine". "Écriture Feminine" ('Women's Writing') was coined by French feminist Helene Cixous. In her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", she tried to establish a genre of literary writing that defies traditional masculine styles of writing. She opines that woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. (Jarrat, Susan 22). *Écriture Feminine* concept claims that woman must write to retrieve their bodies and yearning through a fluid, non-linear, and seditious style of writing that contravenes androcentric language.

A true versatile artist, Selina Hossain dedicated her life unwaveringly to the world of literature through her short stories, novels, children's literature, prose writings, essays and nonfiction. Selina Hossain's women are not portrayed as suffering women, rather, they are represented as active agents of history, resistance and transformation. She challenges patriarchy through her characters. In her famous novel "Hangor Nadi Grenade", she featured female character Boori who strongly defies social barriers and patriarchal norms. Boori rejects her traditional role of motherhood and the female body. According to Hafiza Nilofar Khan, "Hangor Nadi Grenade", "Showcased female oppression against structural dominance

both inside and outside the family environment” (Khan Nilofar 1145). Women are thus doubly marginalized, first as members of a colonized country where military power dominates the entire nation and as female figures in a patriarchal society where patriarchal norms suppress their voice. But, Selina Hossain’s female characters are not passive victims, they really possess the female agency amid tyrannical oppression.

According to Fahmida Haque (2023), the novel forms a kind of subaltern voice, alternate vision of motherhood and identity as a self-reliant individual. Selina Hossain’s Boori is revolutionary in nature. She refuses to play the role of a conventional mother. In order to save two freedom fighters, she sacrifices her disabled son, Rais: “their very lives were in her hands now. And theirs were precious lives, ones that must live on” (Hossain 186). This sacrifice transforms Boori from Rais’s “Maa, into “the mother of all Bangladeshis” (Hossain 188).

Boori, her friend Nita and her step-daughter-in-law Ramija supports each other in bad times. Their sisterhood and solidarity help them against patriarchal domination, societal barriers and conventional power dynamics. Their collective strength helped them to fight back against patriarchal hegemony. Boori’s friend Nita, the “Baul Minstrel” epitomizes independence and emancipation as she live a Bohemian life. Women were not allowed to have dreams, aspirations of moving out of the village, Haldi. So, Boori had to fit in with the patriarchal values and forsake her elusive dreams. She “blended into village life like an insect camouflaged against bark on foliage - she wants so many things, but they were beyond her reach - her dreams faded like the mail train into a faraway land” (Hossain 5). Nita always reminded Boori of her childhood friend Jalil who was a free man too. Boori’s recusant mind finds rapport to Nita. Together, they share a sense of solidarity and kinship and they collectively face the hardships, anguishes and afflictions of their lives.

Boori's fostering unity with Ramija, her daughter-in-law develops as Ramija becomes her consociate as soon as she arrives in Haldi after her marriage with Salim. Boori couldn't stop her son Salim's domestic violence against his wife Ramija because she does not want to interfere in their personal life. When Salim joins the liberation war to fight for the country, Boori sends Ramija to her father's home in order to protect her from the Pakistani Military soldiers who were raping young women.

In her famous novel, "Bhalobasha Preetilota" (1992), Selina Hossain tells us about the heroic endeavours of Preetilota Waddedar, who erased the stigma of Bengali women who were always called "weak" in nature. She was a symbol of the revolutionary stream of India's independence movement. Preetilota joined Indian Republican Army under Surya Sen as a devoted soldier. Masterda Surya Sen tried to convince her not to be so zealous for martyrdom but to organize women. Yet she stood firm in her decision. On 24 September 1932, she led fifteen armed revolutionaries in an attack on the Pahartali European Club. One died on the spot and few were injured and most of the revolutionaries were arrested. They attacked the British colonizers who were enjoying a party in the club. Fifty three Britishers were injured in that attack. A bullet struck Preetilota in her chest. She helped her comrades to run away from the spot. She handed over her firearm to Kalikinkar and asked him to give her cyanide. She swallowed potassium cyanide and embraced death. When Police found her, there was a letter in her pocket entitled, "Long Live Revolution". She wrote in that letter: 'I wonder why there should be any difference between men and women in the struggle for independence. If brothers can die for the motherland and join the fight, why not sisters?'

Preetilota's uncompromising war against colonial regime and gender inequality will inspire every Bengali female revolutionaries. Her sacrifice symbolized strong resistance against oppression and injustice. Through her sacrifice she ensured her name would remain forever in the history of the independence movement. She will be always remembered as the

“Daughter of Fire”. “Women are not symbol of gentleness but they are the symbol of bravery, leadership and patriotism”- Preetilota proved this through her epic journey, through her heroic existence like a heroic poem in which each line sings the song of courage and independence. Selina Hossain portrays Preetilota as a real revolutionary character who challenges the traditional patriarchal norms and contributes directly to national movements.

The short story “Parul er Ma Howa” tells us the story of Parul and the story is somewhat different. Her husband abandoned her and ran away without telling her the reason. Parul couldn't understand why her “socially accepted husband” would do this. She keeps her asking why her husband's need for her ended. She has a body to offer - so what might be the reason behind his leaving her even without letting her know the actual reason. She couldn't tolerate the humiliation. When she gets to know that her husband has remarried, she laughs and says: “Good for him.” She lets it go and tries to find her own happiness. She becomes pregnant without thinking about society and others. She feels that she would now become a complete human being. When Tara's mother asks her about the father of the upcoming child, she replies boldly: “I didn't need a husband to conceive.” She denies to reveal the father's identity: “Why would I need a father? I am the father, I am the mother.” She wants to raise the child alone. She asserts her freedom of choice and redefines motherhood defying the rigid, male-dominated patriarchy: “I will raise the child myself. I will feed it, clothe it, - what will a father do? That so-called husband of mine ran away after enjoying himself twice. So what? Will a child die without a father? Don't children without fathers grow up to be human?” Parul refused to submit to the patriarchal society, its sharp words, because she is economically solvent. She is not dependent on others, she can easily raise her child. At last, the society is forced to acquiesce to her obstinacy, her credence. Men, who used to visit her at night asked her: “Am I the father of the child?”, but she refused to reveal the truth to any one of them. She believes: “I do not trade my body. I ask no one for money – this is not my

business. I take pleasure for my own joy, with whomever I wish, whenever I wish ... who are they to demand authority over my child I bear – only me, only I am God.”

In her famous novel “Ghumkature Ishwar”, Selina Hossain portrays female characters who, with the help of sisterhood dismantle the patriarchal norms. Hossain’s concept of sisterhood is not only based on emotional closeness, but also based on political and noetic contiguity. Merriam-Webster defines sisterhood as the “Solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns.” Selina Hossain’s ladies and their sisterhood is the outcome of shared marginalization, lived experience and mutual recognition. Her female characters shift from isolated suffering to collective awareness, showcasing how shared marginalization becomes the basis of resistance. The relationship between Ruposi and Sarishafuli showcases how sisterhood can defy class-oriented barriers among women. Mistress-servant relationship is transformed into cross-class friendship. Sukhjan’s relationship and her connection with the village women highlights political form of sisterhood. Under her leadership, the women of her village transform their personal grief into collective protest. Their domestic silence become public resistance which resonates with the famous slogan of the Second-Wave feminist theorist Carol Hanisch: “the personal is political”. The unity of these women ultimately destabilizes the patriarchal dominance showcasing the idea of Kate Millett that patriarchy is sustained through institutional power and therefore must be challenged collectively rather than individually.

While Selina Hossain’s feminism revolves round the conflict for survival and basic human self-respect among women confronting heterogeneous alienation, Virginia Woolf’s feminism predominantly emphasizes on intellectual freedom, economic emancipation as well as creative opportunity of women. In her famous essay, “A Room of One’s Own”, she opines: “A woman must have must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Virginia Woolf believes that women writers will be successful if they are

economically independent. Her writings were based on the difficulties and hindrances that female writers face and give importance to find their voices. In “A Room of One’s Own”, she speaks of the social context and history of women’s literary condition. She adds that women are inferior to men, and therefore, they cannot write as skillfully as men. Their social condition is inferior to that of men. This is the reason that women’s writings are ignored by male authors and publishers. Women, in the society, are financially, politically, religiously, and physically belittled by their male counterparts. Hence, their creativity is underrated and unappreciated. Woolf reckons that financial independence and a space of her own are the two essential conditions for women authors if they want to be achieve name and fame as successful writers. A writer must enjoy these two luxuries if she is to write fiction. Jane Goldman, citing Peggy Kamuf (1882, 17), declares: “Woolf’s room metaphor not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private, public, but the intrusion of women into spaces previously considered the sphere of men.” (Goldman 71).

In “A Room of One’s Own”, she argues that patriarchal society follows some fixed norms and values and never accept a female author’s talent. So, female writers had to use pseudonyms like: “Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victim of inner strife as their writings prove, sought effectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man” (Woolf, 57). Patriarchal hegemony believes that no one will desire or bear a female writers publicity. Men of patriarchal society deny to recognize the hidden talent of the female writers. Christina Hawells, in her notable essay, “Derrida, Deconstruction from Phenomenology” asserts: “The center always tries to reject ... In patriarchal society, man is, always, at the center and woman is, always out of the periphery” (Hawells, 71-71).

Virginia Woolf creates a fictional sister figure of William Shakespeare, Judith Shakespeare, to prove that unequal treatment forces women writers to produce less impressive oeuvre than those of male counterparts. Despite of having the same talent, Judith

would have failed to prove her genius. Societal confinement might have forced her to end her life in disgrace by committing suicide. If she tried to pursue her career through writing, she would have to face a lot of obstacles like domestic duties, pressured marriage. She would likely to face laughter, punishment that would have led her to failure not because she is dull, dumb, but because of societal restrictions. Judith Butler is a symbol of silenced female talent. She is the representative of all suppressed and silenced talented female genius who remained unknown, and unsung to the world. Woolf opines that creativity needs material aid. Simone de Beauvoir, the eminent French writer and gender theorist argues in her classic feminist text, "The Second Sex", that one is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman. (Shelden 127). She believes that women are shaped by historical and social limitations rather than nature. She further adds that women always have been portrayed as "other" in the patriarchal society and women have been frequently treated as unusual, abnormal and as the second sex.

Kate Millet, another prominent writer argues in her "Sexual politics" that women have been depicted by male writers from a masculine point of view. She argued that patriarchy is solely a political institution and a system where "half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male". Virginia Woolf uses the room metaphor that symbolizes female privacy, leisure time, and economic freedom. The key idea of the essay is that if men-women inequality is not abolished, women will always remain subjugated, weak, unknown and silenced. She believes that women writers can only be successful if they are financially independent.

In another feminist essay, "Three Guineas", eminent feminist Virginia Woolf tells us about various professionals and their power. She argues that it is the profession of an individual that determines his power in the society. Women do not hold supreme power because they are not high-level professionals in any field. Only men are influential and accomplished in their respective fields. She argues that beside men, women should become

experts, specialists, masters, veterans in the high-prestige fields like: medicine, law, banking etc. These are some carrier paths characterized by handsome earning potential, scholastic challenges, and daunting conundrum. Virginia Woolf argues that gender discrimination is man-made. It is the patriarchal society that imposed gender inequality on women. She suggests that society should be overhauled. She argues that women in this patriarchal society, are always marginalized and restricted to the domestic sphere. They are bound to the hearth, limited to household chores. Though they are allowed to work outside home, but all the jobs are not available to them: “both the Army and the Navy are closed to our sex . . . nor again are we allowed to be members of the Stock Exchange . . . we cannot preach sermons or negotiate treaties”(Woolf 791). Virginia Woolf criticizes the structure of education and profession in her time. She has found out that the attitudes of men welcome “fascism” both at home and abroad. She replies to an imaginary letter sent to her from an “educated gentleman” asking her to join his endeavours to prevent war. She decide to respond after three years. She replies that in order to stop war, society must remove inequality. She clearly says that there is a huge difference between men and women in this patriarchal hegemony: “Behind us lies the patriarchal system: the private house, with its nullity; its immortality, its hypocrisy . . . Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy” (837). She tells us about how women actually are excluded from education, profession, and power. Although women are allowed to work outside home, they are not well paid. There is a clear gender pay gap that indicates the sexes’ inequality to fascism. Woolf says that the patriarchal structures of fascism are inherent in a smaller sphere everywhere and it should not only be fought in other countries but in the smaller and everyday spheres at home, too. She argues that fascism begins with everyday male domination. She tries to prove that the values that dominate women also produce militarism and fascism. Society tells the ladies: “You shall not learn; you shall not earn; you shall not

own” (859). She denies to join hands with male-dominated society; “it seems both wrong for us” (859). She will give them money, but she will not join their society: “Since we are different, our help must be different” (861). Men always get involved in war and they proudly declare that they are fighting to protect their motherland from their enemies. According to Woolf, it is patriarchy that is the root of military violence and fascism. War never comes suddenly, it is not accidental, it comes from the patriarchal structures, patriarchal institutions. But the narrator of “Three Guineas” boldly declares: “As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (861). As women were always been treated differently, they will now form a new society where there will be no war. Women will build an “Outsider’s Society”, that will encourage intellectual freedom and peace. Woolf in this essay wants to prove that without gender equality, no one can ensure peace. Woolf asks women to strive hard and establish a society where both genders enjoy equal rights and privileges. The narrator in “Three Guineas”, declares: “The Professions are the only way in which we can earn money. Money is the only means by which we can achieve objects that are immensely desirable” (Woolf 832).

Conclusion: Throughout her entire carrier, Virginia Woolf explored the gendered relationship, subjectivity, patriarchy and militarism in her works. Most of her works are centered round feminist theory and she is undoubtedly one of the finest feminist of western modernism. In her essay “A Room of One’s Own”, she demands equal treatment of both male and female and aspires that the day will come when women will get everything they truly deserve. In “Three Guineas”, she demands justice, equality and liberty for all men and women. Woolf urges women to exert themselves for an equal society. Woolf’s feminism asks for economic freedom, educational equality, and personal creative space highlighting three basic need – material, social and economic freedom, to attain intellectual emancipation. Women have to “Kill the angel in the house”, the ideal that subjugated and marginalized

women telling them to be always yielding and selfless. Her ladies belong to middle and upper class society. Selina Hossain is also an iconic feminist of her time. Her focus is on grassroots struggle of the South-Asian, post-colonial women. Her female characters are working class, rural, subaltern women. Her women try to find strength through “Sisterhood” to fight back with patriarchal hegemony. Virginia Woolf applied “Stream of Consciousness” technique, interior monologue in her writing. She is high priestess of modernist theory. Selina Hossain on the other hand used “Realism” and her oeuvres are mainly historical narratives. She wanted to renew the tradition. She wanted to give voice to her oppressed female characters. Virginia Woolf aimed to find a new sentence, a new tradition for the female writers that is totally different from the so called patriarchal hegemony: “The androgynous mind”. She asked for the psychological and creative freedom of female writers. She argues that female authors should avoid masculine narrative and try to create a new female literary heritage and a new and stronger female lineage for the future generation.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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