

Femininity and Silence: Reading *Tree Without Roots*

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Abstract

Tree Without Roots, a novel by Syed Waliullah, sketches two main female characters — Rahima and Jamila. These two characters define the idea of femininity differently — Jamila becomes vocal or sometimes adopts silence of disapproval to protest anything unjust, while Rahima predominantly uses the weapon of silence for her survival. Focusing on these characters, the study argues that the concept of femininity here in Bengal incorporates silence as an essential element which, at times, symbolizes submission, while, at other times, turns out to be an instrument of protest. Certain methodological means — the instances of females in Bengali literature, theories about the construction of femininity, and the historical formation of womanhood in Bengal — have been applied here to reach the intended goal.

In response to the traditional understanding of silence as a symbol of non-existence or powerlessness, Maureen A. Mahoney reconceptualizes silence as a manifestation of power in her article “The problem of silence in feminist psychology” (1996). What Mahoney illustrates regarding the West’s imagination of femininity, becomes predominantly manifest in the East’s conception of being female as well. Being caught in the same traditional and revolutionized conceptions of voice and silence, that mainly revolves around a female’s life, the novel *Tree Without Roots* by Syed Waliullah demonstrates how the two female protagonists of it – namely Rahima and Jamila – instrument silence differently as a form of their existence that further facilitates to interpret and evaluate femininity from opposite perspectives existent in the same land. In order to reach the intended objective, the study, first and foremost, illustrates the traditional picture of femininity — in terms of voice and silence — in existing Bengali literature, then paves the way for a brief theoretical grounding, and finally, discusses the select novel in light of theory and commonplace understanding of female voice.

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At the outset of the present paper, certain selected stories and life events from the writings of eminent Bengali writers need to be cited to set the scene for a discussion of two of Waliullah's major female characters. It is always incomplete without the inclusion of Rabindranath Tagore's contributions of which one short story titled, "Haimanti", narrates the story of a young girl who confronts harsh realities of a women's life in her in-law's house. She is accustomed to telling the truth, but eventually experiencing the bitter consequences of telling the truth, she adopts the way of silence. Through the words of her husband, we get a reflection of the dying inner world that Haimanti constantly tries to hide from the world outside (Tagore 439-446).

On the other hand, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain describes certain incidents from the lives of a few women belonging to her contemporary space-time, who in order to maintain the status of femaleness give little attention to their life and comfort. For instance, one incident she tells of a girl from 10 to 11 years earlier of her time who belonged to Bihar and in accordance with the rituals of the locality got confined to a "maiakhana". In the abovementioned locality, a girl, soon to be married off, needed to remain in an imprisonment where she was not allowed to set her foot outside her confinement. It was her relatives who assisted in doing everyday activities. The girl in reference, therefore, stayed in such darkness for six months and on her release, it was found that her eyes were damaged for being closed for a prolonged period of time (Hossain 399, translation & paraphrase mine). In another instance, delineated by the same author, it happened that a daughter of a zamindar failed to accept her father's wish to get her married to one of her cousins as the cousin was reportedly drunk most of the time. It is to be mentioned here that it was seen as outrageous on the part of a girl to voice her decision. However, the adamant father almost by force, made her agree to go to the wedding stage, but couldn't make her utter the word of acceptance of the marriage. Right then one of the relatives pinched the girl which made her say "uhh", that got translated into "hu", that means, "yes". Only because of a voiceless existence of a female, her life decisions got controlled by others (Hossain 401-402, translation & paraphrase mine).

Mala, the wife of Kuber and one of the female protagonists in *Padma Nadir Majhi*, by Manik Bandopadhyaya, accepts everything that her husband commands due to her disability as well as helplessness. Even an illicit relationship between her husband and sister is often ignored as her voice will worsen the situation (86).

In all of these instances, drawn above, one thing that emerges as a common factor is the silence of the females in Bengal community. In Tagore, it is the failure of Haimanti to survive with dignity which makes her silent. In Hussain, on the other hand, it is the submission to patriarchal society that gets manifested in the form of silence. In Bandopadhyaya, silence comes as an instrument of survival. Therefore, it is this very silence that helps the aforementioned females preserve their femaleness or femininity in their contemporary society. Based on such literary

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observations, the study has aimed to investigate the female characters of *Tree Without Roots* by Syed Waliullah to look at how silence is a key formative factor in the construction of femininity. In the aforementioned novel, the silence of Rahima defines her as a female who the society appreciates while the voice of Jamila frightens her people that they fail to associate with the traditional definition of femininity.

It has been mentioned in “Negotiating Discourses of Femininity” by Sara Mills that the “male culture” perceives “femininity as a *condition* of being female” and female considers it “as an *addition* to one’s femaleness and a status to be achieved” (271). Hence, it becomes clear that femininity is the expression of one’s becoming female and a quality to long for. The society formulates certain standards based on which one’s female identity gets established and at the same time, it makes females internalize the established feminine codes of conduct in order to belong to the society. Therefore, the question arises: What qualities ensure for a female of the attainment of femininity? In the words of Sara Mills, the qualities that are ascribed to femininity include:

...politeness, concern with conversation going well, deference, not pushing yourself forward as a person; not wanting to succeed, being vulnerable, emotional, intuitive, incompetent, not being strong, being fragile, not swearing, self-denigrating, not posing yourself as serious; working on your beauty without wearing too much make up, being attractive, having neat and tidy hair, wearing clothes which are soft, flowing and delicate, being small, not taking up much space, caring for others, avoiding taboo subjects, sitting with your knees together, being modest, not aiming for scientific, factful statements, hedging your statements, displaying conformity (272).

The long list of rules for female behavior, disposition, and interest comprehensively suggests what femininity in a female looks like. However, together all these qualities indicate a sort of existence that is bereft of any kind of strong, intelligent, and active articulations. Therefore, in a word, making a female feminine is a campaign that stands firmly against voicing the likings, needs, and explorations.

Irrespective of time and place, the discourse of femininity emphasizes a kind of submission that gets upheld through the soft and emotional aspect of female character. In this context, it can be instanced how John Money describes “Nine Sex-Shared Threshold Dimorphisms” in “Propaedeutics of Diecious G-I/R: Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Dimorphic Gender-Identity/Role” of which “sixth” and “seventh” provisions respectively investigate “a provision of a nest or safe place for the delivery, care, suckling, and retrieving of the young” and “parentalism, exclusive of delivery and suckling” (21). Both provisions represent the female essentially according to the study that eventually discloses the affiliation of women with emotion and care. In other words, this observation relates to the attributes of femininity mentioned in the earlier quote that canonically define it. The quietness of female character eventually makes her succumb to the patriarchal domination and gives birth to the idea of femininity. Femininity, however, is discussed in an

interdisciplinary manner ranging from Psychobiology, Neuroscience, Evolutionary perspectives to Developmental, Psychosocial and Cultural perspectives. Despite such multidisciplinary presence of femininity, discussion of it in light of particular context can reveal a lot about the position of women and perception of femininity in a society. In particular, in the context of Bengali society, Margaret M. Urquhart elaborately discusses on the different aspects of women's life in Bengal in her book *Women of Bengal* – particularly the upbringing, the social and religious state of women, and the construction of womanhood through social and cultural constraints – that eventually reflects on how the concept of womanhood underwent a transformation from the emphasis on “passivity” and “submission” to a demand for “freedom” (144). The observations of Urquhart implicate how the women in Bengal had to spend a long period of time to realize their confinement and ask for an unrestrained mood of life. R. C. Majumdar, in *The History of Bengal* (Vol.1), documents the ancient constitution of femininity, depicted in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* — periodically during the Gauda era — as “soft and timid, sweet-speaking and graceful” (609). In another instance, in the context of an intersection of Hinduism and Islam in Bengali society in order to develop a unified character of womanhood, it has been brought to light how women are mostly constrained by patriarchal structure of the society regarding which, at one point, while discussing the situation of Bengali Muslim women, Santi Rozario mentions Smock comments: “Bengali Muslim women, besides being constrained by *parda*, are further affected by Hindu patriarchal culture, Bengali women are thus trapped in two patriarchal cultures...” (103).

This historical characterization of womanhood gives us an idea about the root of female inferiority compared to the male counterparts of the society. Because the women of Bengal are constrained by certain social restrictions that eventually compel them to internalize certain characteristics specific to the place. In *Tree Without Roots*, therefore, we come across two central female characters: Rahima and Jamila. These two characters stand on two opposite poles as for Rahima Majeed's words draw the limit while Jamila cannot withstand the lifestyle of Majeed. It is important to mention here that Majeed comes to Mahabbatpur for survival and a fake graveyard of a falsified pir Saint Shah Sadeque becomes the cornerstone of his survival. The common people of the village accept his words and help him construct a *mazar* in the village. Majeed, therefore, starts solidifying his existence there adopting a wife and entering family life. Rahima, a widow-young-childless woman, becomes his mistress. Majeed describes Rahima as “a gentle, yielding, understanding personality” who never shows anger (Waliullah 21). Although Majeed believes that Rahima has developed “a deep respect” for him which is “mingled with fear”, he can realize that the overwhelming presence of the *mazar* empowers him more (21). Whether it is Majeed or the *mazar* or the correlating relationship between them, Rahima surrenders herself intimidating her voice. In the course of the story, in one instance, during harvesting time, Rahima is busy working throughout the night when Majeed calls Rahima: “His voice was not loud, but it had a note of

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finality. It was not to be disobeyed; as though there were no one greater or mightier than the man from whom it came” (46). It is relevant to see how the course of action proceeds in the novel where Majeed asks Rahima to massage his legs; almost everyday, she does serve her husband this way irrespective of her willingness or exhaustion after day-long works. However, on that particular day, Rahima is pre-occupied with so many things to accomplish within a time-frame that she tries to refuse the demand of her husband. Despite Rahima’s passivity and lack of immediate positive response, Majeed’s stubbornness just strips Rahima of her voice:

Spoken gently, these words were nonetheless a command, a command from the man who owned the paddy that was boiling and owned the woman who boiled it. It was also the command of a man strangely charged with happiness, yet imprisoned by the intensity of the present instant when time had ceased to flow (46).

The entire conversation between Rahima and Majeed, and Majeed’s subsequent monologue manifest the powerfulness of his existence. He owns everything from the land to his wife. On the contrary, Rahima’s life depends entirely on the will of Majeed. Therefore, she cannot disobey Majeed’s command, although here she tries to convince Majeed much softly, but in vain. It is the voice of Majeed that silences Rahima and it is the silence of Rahima that gives him an inexplicable pleasure. The submissiveness, fragility, and voicelessness define Rahima as a female. This is what makes Majeed and other like-minded people happy and satisfied. Eventually the silence that erupts from her voicelessness becomes an inseparable part of her femininity.

In another instance, Majeed informs Rahima of his desire to marry again so that he can have a child. During night, when Rahima massages Majeed’s feet, she can understand something unusual in him, but remains silent “as it was not for her to speak first” (89). The story, therefore, proceeds in a non-linear way, for instance, in reply to Majeed’s desire to have a child in the house, Rahima remains silent for few months, but later she suggests, “I would like very much to adopt Hasuni. He’s such a fat and healthy little child” (89). However, Majeed finds her willingness to adopt a child completely unreasonable and strives for a child of his “own flesh and blood” (89). Rahima, due to her simple-mindedness and naivety, cannot decipher the implications of Majeed’s words; Majeed, on the other hand, initially feels quite uncomfortable to utter his mind. After lots of dramatizations, Majeed finally becomes capable of voicing the words he has so wholeheartedly intended to convey, “Bibi, our home is a home without happiness. It is a house filled with sadness. We are like two strangers on a boat which drifts along and reaches nowhere” (89-90). Majeed, therefore, goes on providing with a number of reasons to justify his demand; Rahima, on the other hand, remains silent throughout the entire conversation. Her silence, however, does not remain confined to a mere silence; instead, “a strange and powerful fear took hold of her” resulting in her silence (90). Next morning, Majeed’s direct proposal to remarry raises a non-affective emotion in her that in the writer’s description appears to be a “no anger, no fear, no apprehension” feeling

(90). The strange fear that overwhelms her the night before gets transformed into a senseless, affectless numbness that holds onto her forever.

The way Majeed makes Rahima feel unable to give him happiness and joy is disgraceful. However, such disrespectful behavior and Majeed's decision to marry again cannot make her speak her mind. She accepts her husband as the ultimate authority of her life. His decision means the command to her. And her silence is the triumph of Majeed. Majeed expects the silence of Rahima to lead his life the way he wants. Therefore, it is Rahima's silence that makes her female in the eye of Majeed.

Contrary to Rahima, Jamila is vocal and spontaneous. From the very beginning, Majeed notices Jamila's voice and tries relentlessly to control her unrestricted behavior: "Before long Jamila became a source of ever-increasing worry for Majeed. The girl was strange. He could not grasp how her mind worked. Sometimes it seemed covered by dark clouds; at other times it was radiant like a clear bright sky. Her character was strangely erratic" (96).

Majeed for the first time can understand the absence of an obedient silence in Jamila when he hears a loud laughter coming from the inner house (93). The moment he hears it, he realizes the untamable difference that exists between Rahima and Jamila, because Majeed remembers that he has never heard Rahima laughing so loudly, nor any visitors to the mazar dares do it (93).

Jamila's laughter symbolizes her robust existence which is far distanced from the kind of femininity Rahima has. As a female Jamila has certain biological and psychological characteristics, but silence or accepting everything is not included in it which Rahima predominantly inheres.

At times, Jamila also remains silent, but this silence is an example of disobedience which she makes everyone understand through her activities. During one incident, when Majeed angrily asks Jamila about her prayer, she remains silent: "Finally she realized that there was no danger, no earthquake, no armed robbers, nothing but Majeed standing before her, looking down at her angrily. Next to him stood Rahima, quiet as a shadow, Jamila slowly lowered her face but did not move. Majeed asked her about her prayers, but she said not a word. She remained there frozen, silent" (101).

This silence that expresses Jamila's disagreement does not match Majeed's conception of femininity. Majeed always conceives of femininity as a way to act according to the man's orders. There should not be any refusal of or protest against his orders and desires. However, Jamila cannot match Majeed's expectations regarding femininity. She is more engaged in her world where her likes and dislikes matter more than Majeed's. Majeed is scared of Jamila's version of femininity which he is not much acquainted with.

Rahima and Jamila belong to the same sociocultural time, but they are different in their thoughts. Through their differences what gets manifested is the expectation of the males from their

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female counterparts. Jamila's strangeness scares Majeed; he cannot understand how to make her obey his command. He gets more fearful as he can sense that such strangeness can destroy his castle of falsifications and lies. Rahima, on the other hand, means stability to Majeed as he knows that she does not have the courage to go beyond his words. He gets assured of this fact because Rahima does not have a voice of her own. She abides by everything her husband recommends or demands. Rahima, therefore, embodies silence that is integral to the concept of traditional femininity. A female who has a voice has to undergo a lot of troubles the way Jamila encounters. On the other hand, silence ensures a female's acceptability in her society. Therefore, it is the silence that is one of the core elements in the concept of Bengal femininity.

Until a female gets silent, the society cannot rest in peace. Some females develop an unbreakable silence in them for the sake of survival, while others are silenced to belong to the society. The attributes such as weakness, softness, emotionality that a female essentially possesses, silence also becomes a part of them to adjust to a male-dominated society. The examples given at the beginning of the study show how women take hold of silence for surviving in the society. Rahima, in *Tree Without Roots*, portrays one of such characters whose silence makes Majeed happy. In her silent world, there is no place for voicing her wishes and likes. Jamila, on the contrary, is not confined to a silent world. She voices her likings and uses silence as an instrument only to inform the society of her disagreement. Therefore, it can be summarized that in the construction of femininity in this part of the world, silence is an unavoidable particle.

Note

Mazar is a sacred place in the context of Bangladesh where a graveyard of a religious person is worshipped and treasured.

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