

# **Resistance to Paterfamilias in Purabi Basu's two short stories: "Radha Will Not Cook Today" and "Saleha's Desire"**

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## **Abstract**

Female writers have always been vocal against the tyranny of the overwhelming demon of patriarchy. Some of the writings of contemporary Bangladeshi female writers like Selina Hossain and Purabi Basu, exhibit a strong sense of resistance to the overpowering hegemony of paterfamilias. The aim of this paper is to focus on the tendency of de-centering the masculine logocentricism as shown in two of the short stories of Purabi Basu, "Radha Will Not Cook Today" and "Saleha's Desire". In these texts, we will find two resistant female protagonists, Radha and Saleha, who stand in their own way against societal expectations and break away with the roles the society has imposed on them. Their weapons are either silence or indifference or even violence. Moreover, their resistance may not lead to any positive conclusion. Yet, they are to be celebrated because of their power to oppose the oppressive or suppressive power.

Female writers throughout the world have always been vocal against the unbreakable tyranny ( to borrow George Orwell's term ) of the overwhelming demon of patriarchy which has been marginalizing women as the weaker 'other' of the self/other binary where the first one is privileged and the second one is shunned. Some of the writings of contemporary Bangladeshi female writers like Selina Hossain and Purabi Basu, exhibit a strong sense of resistance to the overpowering hegemony of paterfamilias. They express their dissatisfaction with the continuing masculine dominations over the structure of power as sexual difference signifies political difference, the difference between freedom and subjection. One of the aims of these writings is to focus on the tendency of de-centering the masculine logocentricism as shown in two of the short stories of Purabi Basu: "Radha Will Not Cook Today" and "Saleha's Desire". These texts examine the extent to which the private sphere is in fact a primary site of power

relations and of gendered inequality. In these texts we find two resistant female protagonists Radha and Saleha, who stand in their own fashion against the age-old, androcentric cultural, constructs that stereotype women. Besides, there is an implication to break away with the roles society has imposed on them. Their weapons are either silence or voice or indifference or even violence or a combination of more than one of these strategies. Their resistance may not lead to any positive/visible conclusion as they are not pre-planned or organized like 'Sepoy-mutiny', but they are to be celebrated because of their spirit of tossing head against the wind or the strength to oppose the oppressive or suppressive power. The purpose of these resistances is not a radical shift in the patriarchal paradigm or a utopian role-reverse between the genders as happens in Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* but a strong attempt to self-assertion on the part of the resistant.

Before going to the textual discussion I want to explain a few key ideas repeatedly used in this study. The term 'Resistance' has been used in Foucauldian sense to indicate rebel, defiance, protest, counter-attack, refusal etc. In Foucault's power/resistance dichotomy, he states, "Wherever there is power, there is resistance" (92). The phrase 'Paterfamilias', in other words, 'power-structure' is taken with both of its possible meanings: institutional (state, religion, society, marriage) and individual (husband, father, brother, son, boss, lover etc). Power structures are set up by nature and reinforced by the 'Society'. It is a society that ensures the continuing masculine domination of structures of power. Pervasiveness of 'Power' is shown in the shape of the rape or forced, unwanted sexual intercourse which is a sexual assault. Rape is about power, not love and it uses female 'Body' as the site of its exercise which is possible because of the supposed natural (physical) superiority of men. Our cultural conditioning justifies the oppression of women by proclaiming the natural superiority of men and I can't resist my temptation to quote Jane Freedman's words from *Feminism* in this regard that "despite the huge social changes that have taken place in the past century, however, the concept of difference between men and women still prevails in society" (10). The structures of Logocentricism are organized through a series of binary oppositions: Man/Woman; Light/Dark; Dry/Wet (More simply: A/-A.), where the first term is desirable, the other shunned.

“No coward soul is mine  
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere”  
Emily Brontë. “No coward soul is mine” (Line- 1-3)

Writers like Purabi Basu trends to redefine and revise the male-defined canon. Basu’s writings take us to a world where “Female sexuality” in Luce Irigaray’s words, “has always been theorized within masculine parameters” (99) and the primary concern of patriarchy is to define and limit female sexuality. Her protagonists are, to quote Professor Rebbeca Haq on Webster’s protagonists, “placed within a powerful, threatening and hierarchical male world which controls the degree of social and political freedoms that are granted to women” (11). They move in a society which does not believe in sexual democracy, here general practice echoes Milton’s following remark made in *Paradise Lost* Book-IV :

Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;  
For contemplation he and Valor formed;  
Softness she and sweet attractive grace;  
He for God only, she for God in him” (Line 164-167)

In “Saleha’s Desire”, power is represented by Sobhan’s forceful act of raping Saleha who realizes that rape is about power, not sex, as a rapist uses actual force or violence. Sobhan’s act of raping Saleha is unquestionably, a demonstration of physical force or violence. So, Saleha’s act of resistance is a consequence of Sobhan’s exercise of power, or it can be said that, power, here paves the way for resistance. Here one may argue that, Saleha could have hurt him other way, why to cut that particular organ? Is it mere Penis envy (in Freudian term)? To my thinking it is something deeper than our eyes meet. That special organ of male body represents pervasiveness of power. Saleha knows that the society she belongs to valorizes that very logo of manliness. If the rape means the loss of dignity for women (as their physical purity or chastity is what is estimated according to social norm), so the loss of that male logo should, cause humiliations to the loser. It is not for causing injury or physical pain that she did so, rather to wipe the source of power, or the medium

of coercion/display of power. She reacts to male censure by reacting to Sobhan's abusive treatment of her body as a site of oppression. In an atmosphere where it was impossible for women to be honest, open and healthy about sex, Saleha plays a dare-devil role by being the authority of her body, i.e. sexuality. Here, resistance emerges as a potential challenge to power. Resistance's capability to limit power is seen and felt when Saleha keeps her mouth shut as well as when she opens her mouth. She makes the jury and the audiences of the trial feel uncomfortable through her obstinacy and straight forwardness. In a society where women are not expected to indulge or nourish their sexual desire, she not only enjoys her life by choosing Sobhan as her partner in their secret play but also acknowledges its presence in front of a crowd of powerful men.

Saleha's resistance can be seen, felt and understood through the study of three of her strategies, violence, silence and indifference. Her act of cutting Sobhan's reproductive organ is undoubtedly a violent one. If the rape is a violence-it is also an act of violence. As rape is all about power-her particular act is also a show of power. So, she has exercised violence against violence, power for power. This gives her feeling of supremacy, satisfies her injured ego. If we remember Frantz Fanon's words in *the Wretched of the Earth* (2001): "Let us start fighting; and if we have no other arms, the waiting knife's enough" (11), we understand how through Saleha, the author is encouraging women to fight for themselves. Saleha scandalizes the men around her by going unrepentant of her strong defiance of everything that is expected of her.

Saleha's other two strategies, silence and indifference along with 'Voice' are applied in the trial period and afterwards. During the whole trial period she either answers straight forward which means she voices her mind in public showing an astonishing indifference to the public response or societal expectation. For example: when the Imam (representative of the totalitarian authority) asked, "When Sobhan used to touch you? Did you dislike it very much?" (53).

Her answer was: "No, I didn't dislike it, I quite liked it. Most of the time, I liked it very much" (53). And the public response was 'Astagferullah'. Besides voicing her bold statements she maintains silence when she felt like doing so. "Thoughtful

and purposeful silence”, says Meenakshi Paul in “Voice-less Discourse: Silence as Strategy in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” “are the turning point where the process of meaningfulness and proaction begins. It forms the interface between the heavy and mute silence of the marginalized and its articulation of protest” (242).

Though she knows it very well that her silence is as explosive as her voice and will earn no less criticism from the audience, Saleha keeps her mouth shut on several occasions of the trial. For instance:

Imam: Why did you do such a thing?

Saleha: (silence)

Imam: Did he force himself on you always?

Saleha: No.

Imam: Then?

Saleha: (silence) (52)

Finally, unlike most women of her time Saleha refuses to be put down by society’s gender-based constraints and voices the so long unvoiced/ hushed truth. She reveals that though she has been sleeping with Sobhan for the last three years, the last two incidents were different. The last-but-one incident between the two was a rape, and the final scene was an attempt to rape on Sobhan’s part and an unfailing act of *résistance* on Sahela’s part. Even after the trial, which decided to flog/ beat her, in response to her mother’s curse that she should have died after all this humiliation, Saleha declared: “I desire to live on” (58). She has overcome shame and fear- the traits that split up one’s character and make her inmost self fall to pieces. Her ‘desire to live on’ is beyond the societal expectation or just the opposite. It is her means of self assertion as Fanon has said “we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us” (15).

“Yes, injured woman! Rise, assert thy right

Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest;”

Anna Laetitia Barbauld. “The Rights of Woman” (Line 1-2)

Shulamith Firestone observes in *Dialectic of Sex* that women's oppression is an "oppression that goes back beyond history to the animal kingdom itself" (12). Much of what society has often deemed inherently female are culturally and socially constructed. Overt and excessive patriarchal domination intrudes into the personal and private sphere and disrupts or destroys women's lives. But Edward Said declares, "In human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter, how deeply they saturate society and this is obviously what makes change possible . . ." (216). That is resistance. The role Basu's women play reminds us of Iago's cynical comment on the role of women: "To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer" (Shakespeare, *Othello* 2.1 Line 159).

Radha, a typical housewife, 'decides' one fine morning that she will not cook that day-that is-play the everyday role imposed on her by the age-old cultural construct which creates a chaos of domesticity. Normally, it is understood, that she is a dedicated daughter-in-law who serves her mother-in-law her first meal just after she completes her morning devotion; she is an equally responsible sister-in-law who provides her school-going sister-in-law her breakfast as regularly as she performs the ritual rites; a regular wife, whose unconditional servitude toward the hearth and husband, has gone unquestioned all these years. She is 'The Angel in the House' (in Victorian term) - the ideal of woman. Here it must be mentioned that since Virginia Woolf, the phrase 'The Angel in the House' has been used to characterize a patronizing Victorian sentimentality towards women, with the implication that, if the woman is the angel in the house, her husband is its Lord. Woolf calls women to kill it so that they could be just themselves breaking the ideal. So Radha's refusal to cook is a 'no' to demonstrate her housewife's puppet-show. What's wrong with this traditionally devoted machine, why is it not working today, what is the drive behind this irregularity-are some questions this part of my paper is concerned with.

Though institutional power takes control and deploys itself almost everywhere in "disciplinary" society, it is not irresistible. In this story the author shows what happens if a woman refuses to conform to the 'conventionalized figure' (again borrowing from Orwell) of a woman. It was a fine autumn morning when Radha suddenly "decides that she will not cook today" (163), so she keeps on yawning

and lingering on her bed, even late at morning. It creates "a commotion in the whole house" (164) and "mother-in-law, sister-in-law, husband are all amazed" (164). They wonder "will everyone starve today?" (164). Instead of reacting to those curious wonderings Radha leaves her bed slowly and moves leisurely towards the pond from where she is supposed to bring water.

Here her tool of resistance is an air of indifference to the reactionary surroundings and a decisive silence. The reverberating power of silence is unquestionable here. Meenakshi Paul's words can be mentioned here "Meaningful silence is a cauldron where resilience and rebellion often seethe" (240). Her voicelessness was not due to an absence of words but because there were too many. Silence makes spaces for deep and forceful articulation and is a powerful weapon of change. Looking at the following textual reference it can be realized how she has preferred maintaining silence to the "frequent quarrels with husband, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law" (163). Besides, she shows a calm indifference to the continuing anger, perplex, and surprise of the people around her. The loud wails of the mother-in-law, succeeds in gathering people around her but fails in moving Radha from her stand. When "Radha finds her husband shaking her by the shoulder" (165), she remains unmoved making others uncomfortable, and to some extent vulnerable. As Hasan Al Zayed writes in "Foucault on Resistance: Some Clarifications": "Foucault himself contends that power is as vulnerable as the force it is contending with" (81).

One may argue, does cooking have anything to do with power-structure and is the decision of not cooking related with resistance? The present study finds the answer of this question in the positive. Marriage has determined Radha's role as a cook. She must ensure three times meal of the family always. It doesn't matter whether she likes it or not. Even occasional denial can be considered as defying her marginality and subversion. Here 'Cooking' is a symbolic act which represents hearth and all the duties and responsibilities regarding it. The fate of the women like Radha, for whom marriage is a Hobson's choice, is predetermined by the social order and cultural constructs which seem as immovable or unchangeable as the law of Nature. So if she wishes to bring any change in the paradigm, the whole universe

will be disturbed. If Radha desires a slight change in her daily routine Nature has to change Her course first. Yet she dares to disturb the universe.

A visible use of magic realism is there in the text. Basu has used the device to reinforce the fact that Radha moves in a society where power is exercised through social norms and conventions. Since it privileges men over women, sexual democracy is nowhere. Radha lives in a reality from which there is no escape, and if Radha is to deviate an inch she needs to escape into the world of magic realism. From the very beginning a strange bond between Radha and Nature is strongly felt. She asks for Her help in prolonging the morning. Afterwards, Radha and Nature are found acting and reacting upon each other like two intermingling and inseparable entities. They are seen conversing in an intimate manner. For example: "Radha calls the sun and says, 'Do not rise yet. Today I will stay at bed for a long time.'" And "The sun listens to Radha. For a long time he does not appear in the sky." Magic realism is visible when Radha's dried-up breasts are full of milk.

Resistance is the dominant contribution in the power/resistance dichotomy. "In power relations," declared Foucault in an interview taken in 1984, "there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance, there would be no power at all" (qtd. in Zayed). Basu challenges assumption and stereotype about women in both literature and society which nurtures the feudal or monarchical thought and ensured the continuing symbolic representation of political power as masculine. She believes: History does not get made without work, intention, resistance, effort or conflict (Edward Said qtd. in Zayed). Resistance emerges as a potential challenge to power. Resistance's capability to limit power is seen and felt when Radha keeps her mouth shut as well as when Saleha keeps her mouth open. Radha's silence to her mother in law's inquiry irritated her and made her demand, "I'm asking you, where you learned to be so high and mighty?" Here, not replying to the husband's mother is treated as a sort of misbehavior and erroneous rearing on the part of a wife. Similarly, Saleha's obstinacy and straightforwardness made the juries and the audiences of the trial feel uncomfortable as she was not maintaining the text of discourse imposed by the society on her. Thus, in both the cases, by challenging the imposed societal roles, the protagonists are posing resistance against the age-old established Logos.



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