Passivity of Expression and Patriarchal Portrait of Female: A Study on Ukil Munshi's Selected *Baul* Songs

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Abstract

Male dominance over women is very common in Bangladeshi society. Dominance exposed through expression is considered as hegemony of language. In patriarchal society, females are portrayed by males and therefore they meet the demand of male. Women from their birth learn to think themselves as weak, passive and dominatable. They express physical and intellectual passiveness through language. In folk literature of Bangladesh, *baul* songs occupy a very strong position. *A Baul song is* an oral form of folk literature, though collected and written in later times. This type of songs exposes women's real subordinate position in the society and therefore describes hegemony of language and inequality of gender. Subordination expressed in female language exposes intellectual passivity of women which is accurately depicted in *baul* songs of Ukil Munshi. He sang many of his songs from female point of view where almost all female characters are controlled by male both directly and indirectly. It can be said that these women are described and depicted from patriarchal perspectives.

In Munshi's *baul* songs, the pitiful longing of women's heart is described such as, women staring at boats for the arrival of lovers and best friend, crying for no return of lover, dying of youth and beauty as well as begging for love. Even women, in Munshi's songs, wait for someone coming from parents' house to take them to their parental houses. This sense of passivity and powerlessness and experience of limited self-esteem and self-confidence contribute to subordination of women. These women, portrayed from patriarchal perspectives which are quite true in case of Bangladesh, represent passivity in their thinking and expression. This paper examines selected *baul* songs of Ukil Munshi to discuss hegemony of language in terms of gender role; passivity of female's expression and women's depiction in patriarchal society by patriarchy.

Keywords: *baul, hegemony, patriarchy, feminism, passivity and gender*

I

Bangladesh is a heaven for folk literature. *Baul* songs are the most significant of them. Ukil Munshi (1885-1978) is an eminent *Baul* devotee who was born and grew up in Netrokona of Bangladesh. He wrote and sang many *baul* songs. He wrote songs in the format of *bhatialy*, a form of folk music and a river song, sung by boatmen. *Bhatialy* format in the surface level but if readers dive in the depth of thinking, they find a wonderful touch of spirituality which is the prime target of *Baul* devotees like Ukil Munshi. Baul songs, like other forms of folk literature, describe vividly human's individual and social life. Bauls portray the local language and expression used by people.

It is known that society attributes some characteristics for men, some quite opposite only for women. This social attribution identifies gender. Women's expression is almost passive, as it is womanly and this is how patriarchy portrays them. Women behave in womanly manner where men manly format. Passivity, dependence, weakness, crying, urging and lack of self-esteem and self-confidence are womanish characteristics. Even when a man behaves like them, they are called womanish or unmanly. This inequal social categorization is exposed through language, which reveals male dominance over women and it is termed as hegemony of language. Where there are dominance and superiority, the inferior entity is womanliness. Though Ukil Munshi has used female voice in his

songs as a ladder to reach the supreme entity, which represents God in broader sense, the voice also embodies an inferior entity. Munshi deals with a patriarchal society and hence to convince the highest being, he uses womanly language. In short, this research examines selected *baul* songs of Ukil Munshi in the light of hegemony and focuses on women's social status as well as how they are treated in the society dominated by men. This paper questions the stereotype portrait of women and womanly attributes that are imposed on them by patriarchy.

II

Terms, such as, *baul*, patriarchy and hegemony of language, which are used in the paper, demand prior explanation at the beginning. First comes the term *baul*, which refers to a syncretic religious sect and a musical tradition. Miah (2018:350) writes in 'Status of women in Baul *Sadhana*: A Social Aspect' that bauls seem to be known as floating people who led their lives by singing here and there as street-singers, homeless renouncer but at present many of them have their families and other social involvements. Another researcher comments about the role of bauls that "A baul worships man. He praises the Individual Soul and the Infinite power inside him. This inherent Infinite power is none but the Supreme Soul. The ultimate goal of a Baul in his spiritual journey is to find out and to unite with this Supreme Soul" (Sengupta 2018:647). So, bauls worship souls and their medium is mainly nature and human body.

There are two streams of bauls in Bangladesh. Sarker writes (2018:48) that if bauls of Kushtia, Nadia, Jashore and nearby areas are compared with those of Netrokona, or East Mymensingh region, a difference will be found there. Bauls like Lalon and Siraj were leading the life of wanders. By denouncing the family or taking *sadhan-sangi*, companion for austere perseverance, they were dedicated to *baul* disciline. "Women were indispensable companions in their sadhana" (Miah 2018: 353). But no bauls of Netrokona or of this region left their family (Akbar 2017: 104). Many of them married more than one woman and had children. One more thing is that *bauls* like Lalon received *guru* or spiritual teacher for their *baul* practice. In contrast, *bauls* of Netrokona did not receive any spiritual teacher like them, but followed Pir or Fakir or a religious master. They were directly influenced by Pir or Fakir (Sarker 2018: 48-9). Greatest bauls of the latter

region are Hason Raja, Radharomon Dutta, Pagla Kanai, Kangal Harinath, Gagan Harkara, Duddu Shah, Shanal Fakir, Alefchan Dewan, Mohin Shah, Shitlong Shah, Monomohon Dutta, Panjushah, Ukil Munshi, Rashid Uddin, Syed Shahnoor, Jalal Khan, Shah Abdul Karim and many others (Kabir 2017 9). Ukil Munshi wrote more than thousand songs. This paper concentrates on a few songs of his. Mahbub Kabir has compiled two hundred and one songs and published a book titled *Ukil Munshir Gan*, Songs of Ukil Munshi in English in 2018.

Another term is patriarchy which refers to father or the male who dominate and control the family and all of its decision. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines patriarchy as "a social system in which men have all the power" (Longman 2009:1277). Sultana (2911:3) cites Lerner as such: patriarchy is "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power". So, patriarchy is nothing but the power-play and dominance of the male over women specifically and in general, over the less powerful of the society.

Finally comes the term hegemony referring to social domination. This term was coined by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (2004, 2010), (whose life span was 1891-1937). The term was used by him to describe the operation of ideology in modern capitalist society (Brooker 2003: 119). Ideology primarily is used to establish power and secondarily, there are some people who do not keep faith in their ideology and at this time, violence and state force are used to make them abide by the rules (Gramsci 2004: 673). Gramsci (2010), in his writing "Hegemony of Language" found an interesting link between language and hegemony. Language is immensely used to dominate other social groups. He wrote, "Language is linked with issues of power and politics". Therefore, language is an important means of power-play and domination which ensures the presence of hegemony in the society. There are hegemonic masculinity and femininity in every language. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women. So, this term ensures the control of

patriarchy over women and the less powerful population of the society. In contrast, as Schippers (2007:88) cites from Pyke and Johnson, "hegemonic femininity is confined to power relations among women". So, ideal and absolute womanhood are ensured in hegemonic femininity.

Then a question is raised about hegemony of language which refers to the dominance of one language upon another. People can exercise and practice power with the help of language. There are some feminine qualities quite opposite to masculine ones. A man and a woman do not express their feeling in the same way. The language used by women is much more passive which expresses subordination or dependence. Gilbert and Gubar (2004: 812) commented that in patriarchy, women are categorized in two classes: angelic and devilish or monster. If a woman behaves in womanly manner, she is angelic but her manly behavior will make her devilish. Even when a man behaves in a subordinating and dominatable way, he is called womanish, which is quite passive. This passivity is expressed through hegemony of language of woman.

III

Ukil Munshi has used female voice in many of his songs, where he transcends the living soul and moves towards the pursuit of supreme spirit, but this female voice also represents the subordination of female and basically womanliness. In Munshi's songs, female characters stare at the floating boats in search of their lovers. Some of them ask about their lovers or sometimes request the boatman to inform their parents to take them to their parental houses. These urges for love or going to parental houses or this waiting for lovers indicate precise scenery of wet-land of Bangladesh. To convince the supreme authority, the God or even the religious teacher, Ukil Munshi uses female voice and behaves womanly as womanliness represents inferiority and subordination. His songs indicate a regret denoting separation from spiritual *guru* or Pir, in the broad sense, from the absolute lord. As requesting, crying and urging are characteristics of women, Munshi behaves in womanly manner to embody his inferiority and powerlessness. Here is an example:

"Brother boatman from a distant land
Steered a colorful boat,

Will you take me boatman?
I want to go to my father's house.

Going to eat, no rice I get
No cloth on my body.
How many days will I stay, boatman
In the house of dumb husband?

Wet land, broken residence
No mosquito nets above
Four bearers will take me
In three-hand house.
Ukil says, if I go to father's house,
I'll never return here." (Ullah 2021: 13)

In the above-mentioned song, Ukil, in the voice of a woman, requests a boatman to carry her to her father's house. She leads a very depressed and impoverished life at her husband's house. If she can go there once, she will never return. This is the surface meaning of the song. But connotated meaning is that Ukil Munshi longs for someone who can take him to the highest lord. He has a very distressed life. Here Ukil, despite being a man, talks, rather urges in the form of a woman. Father figure is obviously God who is superior. In the society, men's behavior must be men-like. Strength, power, dominance, control including every masculine quality are the characteristics of men. Crying, urging, requesting, adoring all these are feminine qualities. As Ukil Munshi urges to God, he requests in the voice of a woman. Thus, womanliness is present in Munshi's songs. Some more songs can be described in the same way.

"Southern wind cannot be seen in eyes
It touches my body and burns my heart
O southern wind
O wind
My friend's house is in the southern part
He has never returned to me for what fault of this unfortunate?
Many people from this and that land come and go

At whose arbor, he forgets me and does not want to come
O wind
His heart is heartless and hard as stone
He didn't take my news for a single day
How much irritating the black cuckoo is
It always keeps chirping koo-kooo.
O wind-
Southern wind blows up the sail of the boat
Holding the oar of the boat, he keeps singing jari song.
Seeing sails, I stare at with hopes-
Whether he anchors his boat at the ghat of Ukil." (Ullah 2021: 13)

In this song, apparently Ukil Munshi urges to a boatman to take him to the southern country. This urging is again feminine. But from the biography of Ukil Munshi, it is known that he was a follower of Pir Mojaffar Ahmad of Richi village of Habigonj district (Kabir 2018:17, 21; Rahman 2018 69-70; Sarkar 2918: 63-64). If it is measured from the house of Ukil Munshi, the house of Pir Mojaffar Ahmad will be at the southern part. Ukil Munshi followed Sufism. He was influenced by ideas of Pir Mojaffar Ahmad. His direct relevance with religion, especially with God and Islamic prophet is noticed in his songs. For example, he writes,

"Ya Rafiqul Al, Ya Habibulla
Ya Shofiul Muj Nobin
Which name embodies God?
You will be Alamin.
Your glory, your value
Will be known to Allah Subahan." (Rahman2018: 82)

"Kalma La-ilaha Illaha Mohammad Rasul
Hey mind, always chant the name, never forget." (Rahman 2018: 87)

In another song, Ukil Munshi addresses the prophet of Islam as such:

"You are the king of the world, the guarantor of the Ummah
Khatemun Nabin." (Rahman 2018: 82)

Thus, religion is reflected in his songs. His religious master, Pir Mojaffar Ahmad suggested him not to sing on the stage with musical instruments. He also

suggested singing only in domestic programs organized within households. He followed his instruction, but not everything. He did not use musical instruments in his songs but he kept performing on stages. This made Pir upset (Sarker 3018: 63-4). For this reason, Munshi wrote and sang the song where he regrets for the separation from his *guru* or master. The song has a direct relation with spirituality. Using the metaphor of love and separation, Ukil indicates the unbearable pain and distress of spiritual separation from his Pir. Even in this song, he, in melancholic mood, takes the disguise of a woman. To show his womanliness and subordination upon someone greater or superior, Ukil uses female voice. One more example can be given,

> "Boatman of tide, you're going by boat in the full river
>
> Anchor your boat and kindly tell me if you know anything of my friend." (Rahman 2018: 75)

All these examples from different songs of Ukil Munshi are with the messages from a woman crying for any sort of news from her beloved or father's house. Though connotatively these songs bear a very spiritual connotation, apparent narration indicates women's dependence upon men and their submissiveness. The female voice wants relief from the distress of life and therefore is requesting the boatman, as a messenger, that she needs to be rescued.

This womanliness epitomizes hegemony of language in terms of gender as the society establishes some specific attributions. Ukil Munshi uses the thing that to convince a superior authority or the lord, the male and even the dominator, language must be obedient which traces femaleness.

IV

Passivity of women, another concern of this paper, is also found in the surface level of selected *baul* songs written and sung by Ukil Munshi. Almost no woman of Bangladesh can go anywhere alone. Even if she wants to go to her father's house, she is to wait for someone coming from father's house. Ukil Munshi writes, "Seeing sails, I stare at with hopes" (Ullah 2021:13). Whenever the woman sees any sail in the river, she stares at it with the hope if someone is coming to take her as she alone is not allowed or is unable to go. In another song, Munshi

writes, "My life is spent on floating, tell me what is Ukil means" (Rahman 2018:76). Here Ukil, presents with his own name but with the female voice, says that her life is not stable, rather it keeps on floating on the water of a river and she does not get any means for escape and this is why she needs help of someone superior. In another song, Munshi writes,

> "Dear confidante
> When *Krishna* plays the flute
> I sit to cook
> O friend, I cry in the occasion of smoke
> I give salt, instead of turmeric." (Rahman 2018: 89)

The love relation of Radha and Krishna is very popular in this region. People give examples of common things to visualize the essence of that thing. In religious books, when heaven and hell are described, examples are given from real life just so that people can visualize the abstract thing. When it is said that in hell there are fires and the faulty people will be burnt forever, example of fire is given but it is also mentioned that that fire will be much deadlier and more unbearable. When heaven is described, many tasty and delicious fruits and food are mentioned and it is also said that that food and fruit will be much tastier in heaven. Common examples are given so that people can get the meaning easily. To epitomize the essence of love, Munshi uses the example of Radha and Krishna's love and indicates the depth of their love. If the incident of the song is taken as an example, a female character is not even able to cry publicly for her friend and hence she is to pretend to cook for the sake of crying. Hence, the song describes female's passivity in a well-articulated manner.

In Munshi's songs, female characters are so obedient and passive that they cannot even move without man's support. Munshi writes,

> "Hey boatman, anchor your boat at the *ghat*
> Kindly visit me, who is unfortunate and unhappy forever-
> I was married at a distant land, leading a life of exile
> If you meet my father, ask him
> Please, do, dear boatman. Otherwise I'll be undone

> If boats are not sent, my caste and family will be questioned." (Rahman 2018: 83)

The female voice of this song lives a life in exile and therefore she wants to escape from this life. She is incapable of getting rid of this life, and therefore requesting the boatman that her father needs to send a boat for her so that she can go home. This journey is obviously a voyage from the earth to the eternal life but the passivity of the voyager is expressed through a female character. In another song, Ukil Munshi's female voice says, "I was sent in exile as Sita" (Rahman2018: 74). Sita is a Hindu mythological character who was banished in a jungle. The language used by female voice explicitly expresses its subordinating tone. Marriage seems to be similar to living in an exile from where she needs to be rescued but she cannot get it alone due to her submissiveness. In another song, Munshi states, "Seeing sails, I stare at it with hopes" (Ullah 2021: 13). Whenever she sees any sail, she thinks, probably someone comes from her parents' house and thence she becomes hopeful. This dependence also shows passivity of women.

Thus, whenever Ukil Munshi himself expresses his own spiritual passivity, he uses the voice of women. As passivity, urging for forgiveness, dependence-whether physical or spiritual, are qualities of female, this voice is used largely.

V

Finally, this paper aims at investigating how patriarchy depicts female and their voice in literature. Patriarchy presents female in such a way what they desire or how they look at women. In songs of Ukil Munshi, supreme lord is the representative of patriarchy. Very cordial and loyal language of women is used to convince the lord. So, consciously or unconsciously the lord is practicing power and authoritativeness.

In addition, there are some specific songs of Ukil Munshi where it can be clearly examined how women are described by men and in men dominated society. Munshi writes,

> "I travel in countries in the dress of madness
> No one loves me when I am seen

My beauty is gone, not I am faulty
Neighbors call me bad when they see me
I have made their reproaches fragrant flowers
I have worn their disgrace in my neck as a jewelry." (Rahman 2018: 78)

Literally, a woman wanders from country to country but she is not loved as she is in the dress of a mad person. As she loves someone, neighbors call her in bad names and she made all these disgraces as her fragrance and jewelry. Now raises a question what her fault is and why she is called in bad names by neighbors. The answer is very easy. She loves someone explicitly. This explicit expression of love is not authorized by patriarchal society and moreover she does not behave in womanly manner. As she does not act womanly, she is not angelic, rather devilish. Gilbert and Gubar (2004: 812) discuss in 'The Madwoman in the Attic' that women are of two types namely angelic and monster. If a woman behaves unwomanly, she will be considered as a monster, and even as mad. In Ukil Munshi's above-mentioned song, the woman is exhibited as mad. She wanders around wearing the dress of a mad person. She is insane, as she expresses her love openly which is quite unwomanly. Another point to be mentioned is that the woman loses that her beauty and hence no one loves her. This idea of beauty is also controlled by male dominated society. Only for the loss of physical beauty, the woman does not get any social respect. Though connotatively, Ukil Munshi tries to convey the separation from the supreme lord and lacking of spirituality in this song, but to portray the thing, he is using a woman's character, not a male one. Unmanly things must be projected with those who are not men.

Another song can be examined in the light of patriarchal portrait of female.

"Being a beggar of love, I go from door to door
Leaving my house, in the forest and jungle
For whom my mind always cries
Will that friend fondle me?
Dear confidante, please go. Captor of Radha's heart
Will he take my life, his female servant?" (Rahman 2018: 79)

Hence, the speaker of the song is addressed as a beggar for love. A beggar is inferior to one who gives away or donates alms. Though the giver is the lord himself, even it might be the Pir whom Ukil Munshi followed, he practices power and dominance. The point is that a woman is comparable to a beggar in terms of gender; they have no social respect and no controlling power as authorized by patriarchy.

> Another song of Ukil Munshi is as follows:
> "Brother boatman from a distant land
> Steered a colorful boat,
> Will you take me boatman?
> I want to go to my father's house." (Ullah 2021: 13)

> Here, a woman appeals to a boatman to take her to her parental house. To urge is an unmanly act and females are used here to show that unmanliness. Though at the end of this song, it is clear that this journey is not from husband's house to father's house, rather from the earthly life to the divine life. The last stanza is as follows:

> "Four bearers will take me
> In three-hand house.
> Ukil says, if I go to father's house,
> I'll never return here." (Ullah 2021: 13)

In Muslim society, when one dies, he is carried on a bier or *Khatli* which is carried by four bearers. The house of three feet indicates the grave and the size refers to the grave size of the Muslim. Munshi's direct name is present in the song, but he is speaking in the voice of a woman. This depiction is quite common in Bangladeshi society. When a man cries, he is compared to a woman as crying is only possible by women. This is a kind of womanly thing. So, when Ukil Munshi himself is begging to the ultimate lord, he is playing the role of a woman and this is how female are portrayed by men in a male dominated society.

VI

In conclusion, baul songs of Ukil Munshi pictures Bengali society vividly where the real condition of female and their passive subordinate expression are presented. This paper also showed how women are explicitly and implicitly controlled intellectually and physically by patriarchy. Ukil Munshi uses popular incidents of relationship to describe the love and separation from guru, spiritual teacher; and in a broad sense, from the ultimate lord. To do so, he portrays the common life accurately which unconsciously represent the patriarchal sensation and thinking.

Though women occupy a respectable position in baul society, they are not out of the grip of patriarchy. When passivity, inaction, dependence and submissiveness are described, women are attached as if passivity and dependence were the identity of the women. Women's expression is discussed as an example of passiveness in baul songs of Ukil Munshi. These attributions are imposed upon by patriarchy.

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