



## Display of Sisterhood in Selina Hossain's Ghumkature Ishwar

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### ABSTRACT

Selina Hossain is a distinguished contemporary female writer from Bangladesh. Being a recognized feminist voice, Hossain delineates gender issues in her literary works. This paper is a humble attempt to study Hossain's Ghumkature Ishwar with a view to focusing her portrayal of sisterhood - a term used by feminists to express the connection of women who are bonded in solidarity. Characters like Ruposhi and Shorishafuli, Shukjan and other village women, and Lutfunnisa, Romela and Zaheda form sisterhood in the novel that sometimes gives them a space of their own, shows the power their bond and helps them to survive in the patriarchal spider-web.

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*"There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."* (Madeleine Albright)

*"Women who understand how powerful they are do not give into envy over meaningless things, instead they fight to maintain the beautiful bond of the sisterhood. These are the real women who know that we need each other's love and support to survive in this world. Love is the essence of being a woman. We must be that light of love that seals the bond and unique beauty of our sisterhood."*

(qtd. in Nelson, n.p.)

### Introduction

Selina Hossain is a leading woman writer of Bangladesh. Born at Rajshahi on June 14, 1947, Hossain served in the Bangla Academy in various capacities and retired as a director. In 2014, she was appointed as the Chairman of Bangladesh Shishu Academy. She has penned numerous short stories, novels and essays. Some of her novels have been translated into several Indian regional languages, into Russian, French and English. Some of the translated novels are *Hangor*, *Nodi*, *Grenade* (English, 1987 and Malayalam, 2001), *Neel Mayurer Joubon* (English, 1983), *Tanaporen* (English, 2000 and Urdu 2003). She is one of those

significant living authors whose several books are in the syllabus of universities such as Rabindra Bharati University, Jadavpur University, and the University of Assam.

Hossain's voyage began with short fiction. Her first book, a gathering of short stories, *Utsho theke Nirontor*, turned out in 1969. She was just 22 in those days but had the mettle to depict the genuine essence of a traditionalist society. The book was abundantly valued by prestigious writer pundit Humayun Azad who respected the crisp new voice of rebellion to the universe of writing. *Utso Theke Nirontor* was only the start and Hossain never thought back; she continued searching out the genuine picture of society with various different works of short fiction, for example, *Jolobotee Megher Batash* (1975), *Khol Korotal* (1982), *Porojonmo* (1986), *Manushti* (1993), *Onura Purnima* (2008), *Narir Rupkotha* (2009), *Obelar Dinkhon* (2009), *Mrityur Nilpadma* (2015) and *Nunpanter Goragori* (2015). The decent variety of her topic, social setting and artistic systems fluctuates starting with one novel or story then onto the next.

A significant subaltern voice, Hossain's works reflects women's struggle in the patriarchal society. Her treatment of the 1952 Language Movement and 1971 Liberation War is considered monumental by both readers and critics. Hossain is essentially a novelist and has officially published more than 30 novels. She has given this genre another life, another dimension. With different themes, shifted style and the utilization of straightforward language, her books have set up her as one of the best fiction writers in Bengali. On one hand, she portrays the story of Kalketu and Phullara while delivering the narrative of Pritilata, the blazing lady who was martyred amid a furnished fight against the British colonizers. Her books envelop at various times, interlacing them into fine stories. Regularly she makes utilization of materials from genuine occasions and circumstances –, for example, the terrible murdering of Shomen Chandra on account of fundamentalists, the slaughtering of Munier Choudhury by the partners or the loss of her girl Lara. A portion of her notable books include *Josnay Surjyo Jala* (1973), *Jalochchwas* (1972), *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1976), *Magna Caitanye Shis* (1979), *Japita Jiban* (1981), *Podoshobdo* (1982), *Neel Moyurer Joubon* (1983), *Chand Bene* (1984), *Poka Makorer Ghor Bosoti* (1986), *Nirantar Ghantadhwani* (1987), *Ksharan* (1988), *Katatara Prajapati* (1989), *Khun O Bhalobasa* (1990), *Kalketu and Fullora* (1992), *Bhalobasa Pritilata* (1992), *Tanaparen* (1994), *Gaayatree Sondhya* (1996), *Dipanwita* (1997), *Juddha* (1998) and *Lara* (2000). *Ghumkature Ishwar* is the story of a group of riverain people. The life of these riverside people is harmonized by the raise and erosion of the strip of sandy land escalating from the river. Ahmed observes that Selina Hossain unfolds the oppression of women in the patriarchal society that “believes in the

natural predominance of male over female and proudly upholds women's dependence on men". Patriarchs in this novel misrepresent biological differences among people; ensuring that men dependably have the prevailing roles, however, women in the novel are bolder and snappier to choose to dissent and some of the time, even overlook the masculine thoughts. Most women in *Ghumkature Ishwar* "reject the notion of biological determinism, which says that men and women are different because of their biology or bodies" ("Yes, the Subaltern Can Speak..." 37). Hossain here spots the woman at the bleeding edge where she assumes significant jobs to improve her status and her society as a whole. She has gone further to speak to the woman as an emphatic being looking for acknowledgment and perceivability in her society.

### **A Homogeneity of Experience**

"Being a woman is all about being with other women", says Sophia A. Nelson in her "Time to Put the 'Sister' Back in 'Sisterhood'" (n.p.) calling women back to join sisterhood – a term as defined by *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns" (n.p.). The sisterhood of women more often than not alludes to their woman's rights, their investment in the women's advance, and their help of other women or their acknowledgment of female characteristics that are unique to women's nature. Women inside and outside consider themselves to be "sisters"— partners in a battle against a typical set of oppressions and oppressors. Sisterhood was demonstrating "not merely contagious, but powerful". Nelson avers that the "women that we embrace as our sisters are sometimes closer than our own family members. They defend us, wipe away our tears, take care of us when we are ill, encourage us in the bad times, lend us money if needed, and support our dreams. And at the very same time these same women will not hesitate to scold us, push us, even anger us in order to protect us" (n.p.).

To some feminists sisterhood provides an alternative to women in their pursuit of spiritual independence. By turning to their female "allies suffering from the same plight, women can truly enjoy freedom and equality in addition to appreciation and comfort from each other" (Jing 202). Female friendship became a way of life (Cott 185). Discovering their gender-prescribed "talents, needs, outlooks, inclinations," women understand that their most obvious opportunity to escape male characterized inadequacy is to uphold and celebrate, through a solid female bond, their particular gender characteristics, which is no lesser than, or stunningly better than those of men (Cott 190). Jeffreys adds that "solidarity of the oppressed

through women's love" for one another is an essential base for women "to identify and reject atrocities against them" (Jeffreys 20).

### **Sisterhood in Ghumkature Ishwar**

Selina Hossain's *Ghumkature Ishwar* deals with illiterate common men and women of a remote riverine rural area of Bangladesh and highlights vividly some female characters that reject to accept "gender polarization". The traditional and patriarchal norms leave women as subordinate to her male counterpart rendering her almost mentally shattered. One of the ways that women in the novel safeguard themselves from the patriarchal whirlpool is *sisterhood*, a term used among feminists to express the connection of women who are bonded in solidarity. Ruposhi's relation with her maidservant Sarishafuli is in ways distinct from how she relates to men. Selina Hossain's gender nonconforming Shukjan attests the feminist doctrine of Second-Wave-Feminism that "Sisterhood is Powerful" through her formation of sisterhood with other women of the village that ultimately paves the way to the deconstruction of the patriarchal narrative of social constructionism. The women protest led by Shukjan in the form of hunger strike claiming justice for the five murders in their village ultimately compels the patriarchal administration to have a dialogue with them. Lutfunnesa's sisterhood with perturbed Romela and unaided Zaheda surprises Adel, a patriarchal agency. Adel cannot imagine that these three women can ignore his masculine power and survive without his support. In fact, he has no idea about the strength of the bond of solidarity that his mother has formed with Romela and Zaheda – who are connected as women, just like a spider-web and if one part of the web vibrates or is in trouble, others come to the rescue. The sisters in *Ghumkature Ishwar* confirm that the idea of "common oppression" is a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex socio-economic reality. Selina Hossain divulges that a sustained women-bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and necessary steps are taken to eliminate them.

### **"No Boundary, No Race, No Class"**

The first example of sisterhood that we notice in the novel is between Rupashi and Sharishafuli. Rupashi is a metropolitan girl who leads a heterosexual life that ultimately causes her tragic end. Her relation with her maidservant Sarishafuli is in ways distinct from how she relates to men. She does not consider Sharishafuli as her "bua" (servant) rather as her companion with whom she unburdens all her joys and sorrows. She often addresses Sharishafuli

ভূমি আমার শুধু কুয়া না, আমার মতো, কথা বলার মানুষ, বিশ্বাসের মানুষ,  
কুয়া?

[You are not only my servant;  
you are my companion with  
whom I can talk, whom I can  
trust. Do you understand that?]

(Hossain 9)

And Sharishafuli also testifies Rupashi's temperament when she laments for the unexpected death of Rupashi

শুধু বুক ভেঙে যায় সেই মেয়েটির জন্য যার সঙ্গে ও বন্ধুর মতো থাক  
পেরেছিল।

[Her hearts break for the girl  
with whom she stayed like a  
friend.] (Hossain 8)

Sophia A. Nelson explains this sort of apparently unusual relationship claiming that sisterhood knows “no boundary, no race, no class or geography”. Sisterhood “transcends” and “transforms us for the better. Sisterhood is from the heart” (n.p.). Sharishafuli feels a gender sorority for Rupashi from the heart and looks after her with great affection. This attachment has given these two women a separate room of their own where they can share their own sorrows and joys. The bond between these two sisters are so intrinsic that even after Rupashi's death, she keeps on haunting Sharishafuli and Sharishafuli finds it justified because

ওর মত কাছ রূপসীকে আর কে দেখাচ্ছে? এমন খোলাসেলা, এমন গোপন, এমনভাবে ব্যবহৃত  
জীবনের গ্লানিতে?

[Who has seen Ruposhi more  
closely than herself? So naked,  
so secrete, somuch used in  
life's lassitude?] (Hossain 29)

### “Sisterhood is Powerful”

Selina Hossain's gender nonconforming Shukjan attests the feminist doctrine of Second-Wave-Feminism that “Sisterhood is Powerful”. Forming a sisterhood with other women of the village she ultimately leads to the deconstruction of the patriarchal narrative of social constructionism. When there are no men in the village to protest the atrocities of the terrorist, she, boldly, assembles all women of the village and starts a hunger strike. She convinces other women that

যে দ্যাশে বিচার নাই সেই দ্যাশের রাজার পুণিনাভ অথবা, আর রাজার পুণিনাভ না অইলে  
প্রজাতান্ত পায়না। এইডা শাস্ত্রের কথা, শাস্ত্রের কথা ফলবোই ফলবো।

[If the country has got no  
justice, the king of the country  
cannot be blessed, and if the  
king is not blessed, the  
subjects do not get food to eat.  
It is written Shasta, and the  
word of Shasta will come  
true.] (Hossain 29)

Ahmed observes that this protest of Sukjan and her sisters “is a surprise to the police, an agency of patriarchy, and at first they cannot believe that these ignorant and weak women will continue to starve” and at the end “will compel the Home Minister to have a dialogue with them” (“Yes, the Subaltern Can Speak...” 24). The spark of sisterhood power is finally unleashed when the minister approaches them:

পাঁচ খুনের পর ধাইকা আমরা না খাইয়া আছি। যতদিন হত্যার বিচার এইবেলা, ততদিন মোর  
অন্ন স্পর্শ করবু না।

তখন সকল সম্মিলিত কণ্ঠে চেঁচিয়ে উঠে, হত্যাকারীর বিচার চাই, বিচার চাই

[We have been starving since  
the five murders. We will not  
touch our meal until justice is  
done.

Then everyone in an united  
voice shouts, we want justice,  
we want justice.] (Hossain 39)

This is totally a new experience for the patriarchal world, but this empowered sisterhood of the women of the village transforms the minister who admits that he is overwhelmed by their protest for justice:

আমি আপনার সচেতন উপস্থিতিতে অভিভূত হয়েছি। চারপাশে এমন ব্যস্তত মানুষ থাকলেই  
অনেক সমস্যার সমাধান হতো। আপনারাইতো আমাদের পথ দেখাবেন।

[I am overwhelmed by your  
conscious cognition. If we  
have enlightened people like  
you around us, most of the  
problem will be solved. It is

you who will show us the  
way.] (Hossain 39)

Women of the village are satiated that their movement has produced a result at last.

### **Empathy**

Empathy is one of the most important aspects that one must have in the formation of sisterhood. Sophia A. Nelson is of the view that a woman's "ability to relate, ..., understand, discuss, share, and engage other women will absolutely impact how successful" she is "as a member of the sisterhood of women" (n.p.). Selina Hossain explores this version of sisterhood while portraying Lutfunnesa's relationship with her daughter Romela and her daughter-in-law Zaheda. Lutfunnesa's husband Khabiruddin is untraced for a longtime and she has got no idea whether he is alive. Her daughter has recently got dissociated from her husband, Sawpan due to her dark skin. Sawpan is dreaming to go to the city and marry a beautiful lady with a huge dowry. Her son Adel has also decided to trough out his wife Zaheda as her father has failed to give him the dowry he demanded. But, Lutfunnisa stands by her pregnant daughter-in-law and orders Adel to leave her house instantaneously. She "understands" the agony of her daughter and daughter in law and her "empathy" forces her to for a strange show of sisterhood between these trio. When Zaheda thinks her world ends

জাহেদা ওর পায়ের উপর উপুড় হয়ে বলে, মুই অমন কোনখানে যাবু আন্না? মোর পাডের  
শুভার কে দেখবে?

[Zaheda lying with her face downward  
on her feet, says, where will I go now  
mother? Who will look after the  
enemy (baby) in my womb?] (Hossain  
111)

Determined, Lufunnisa replies,

মুই দেখমু। তোমারেও মুই দেখমু।

[I will. I will look after you  
too.] (Hossain 111)

Day after that Adel comes back but the consequences the he is to be faced is beyond his imagination. Quite unaware of the power of the sisterhood that has been formed by now, he faces a new Zaheda in their house, a jolly women laughing and gossiping with Romela. After being avoided by Zaheda and Romela, he faces the fierce look of her mother. Adel is perplexed.

আদেল ভিতরে ভিতরে খুব বিপন্ন বোধ করে, কি করবে বুঝতে পারেনা, মনে হয় এখানে যেন ও  
এক নতুন আগলুক, এদের কাজকে ও চেনে না। ডেলার চেয়ার ও একে একে প্রত্যেকের মুখের  
দিকে তাকায়।

[Adel feels at a loss inside, he  
does not understand what to  
do, he feels like a stranger  
here, he does not know any  
one of them. With an attempt  
to recognize them, he looks at  
everyone's face.] (Hossain  
112)

He again receives order from Lutfunnisa to leave the house forever. Though he attempts to argue that this is his house too, he feels threatened by the newly formed alliance by these three sisters. Adel wonders

ওর কিম্বায় পুরোয় না, কেমন করে এতকিছু হয়ে যাচ্ছে, তাও বুঝতে পারেনা। ও  
ধারের বটগাছের শিকড়ের উপর বাস থাকে। ওর আর বাড়ি ফেরা হয়না।

[His amazement continues,  
how is everything happening,  
he cannot understand. He  
comes to the riverside and sits  
on the roots of banyan tree. He  
does not go back home.]  
(Hossain 112)

“To be a “sister” is to be a friend”. Sophia A. Nelson continues, “it is to give a smile, lend a hand, .... to be a covering, a balm, a helping hand, a fierce advocate and builder of other women” (n.p.). Lutfunnisa is presented here as a true patron of sisterhood who tries to build the lives of two other helpless women. For endorsing the cause of sisterhood, she has to sacrifice her maternal instinct for her son, Adel. Patriarchy does not expect a woman to behave with her son in this way even though he is a rogue. But Lutfunnisa is a new woman who “value other women as she “value” herself. She knows how important it is to stand by these two forsaken ladies and she has not been hesitant for doing so. Sisterhood gives them a new life:



তিনজন নারীর দিল হসিন্দুশিতে কাটো। তারা ভালো থাকে, গল্পগুজব করে, চাঁদনি রাতে  
দেখে, পাখির ডাক শোনে...

[Three women send their lives  
happily. They are well, they  
gossip, see the moonlight at  
night, and listen to chirping of  
birds....] (Hossain 113)

### Conclusion

The magic of sisterhood allows Selina Hossain's characters to diagnose their feminine role and finally to deconstruct it. Their sisterhood is about shared experience, trust and knowing each other. Ruposhi-Sarishafuli sisterhood breaks the barrier of class and instead of becoming master and servant, these two women become friends. Shukjan's mass sisterhood with the village women is qualitatively different from Ruposhi-Sarishafuli relationship. Shukjan upholds the feminist doctrine of Second- Wave-Feminism that "Sisterhood is Powerful". The women protest led by Shukjan claiming justice for the five murders puzzles the patriarchal machineries. Finally, Hossain presents Lutfunnisa, Romela and Zaheda as connected women. This mother daughter and daughter-in-law form a strong bond of solidarity like a spider-web and if one part of the web vibrates or is in trouble, others come to the rescue. This is the most spectacular show of sisterhood that the novel presents where the patriarchal agent Adel is abandoned by his mother and finally by his wife and sister.

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