

# CONSTRUCTION OF WOMANHOOD IN THE BENGALI LANGUAGE OF BANGLADESH

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## Summary:

The present essay attempts to explore the role of gender-based language differences and of certain markers that reveal the status accorded to women in Bangladesh. Discrimination against women, in its various forms, is endemic in communities and countries around the world, cutting across class, race, age, and religious and national boundaries. One cannot understand the problems of gender discrimination solely by referring to the relationship of power or authority between men and women. Rather one needs to consider the problem by relating it to the specific social formation in which the image of masculinity and femininity is constructed and reconstructed. Following such line of reasoning this essay will examine the nature of gender bias in the Bengali language of Bangladesh, holding the conviction that as a product of social reality language reflects the socio-cultural behaviour of the community who speaks it. This essay will also attempt to shed some light on the processes through which gender based language differences produce actual consequences for women, who become exposed to low self-esteem, depression and systematic exclusion from public discourse.

“Nobody is born as a woman but becomes a woman afterwards”

Simone de Beauvoir

“What it is to be a woman is culturally and historically variable  
and gender itself is a social invention”

Henrietta Moore

**Palavras-chave**

Género; Bangladesh; Língua; Representação; Práticas

**Key Words**

Gender; Bangladesh; Language; Representation; Practices

**Prelude: Concepts of Gender in Bangladesh**

Although the distinction between female and male is one common to all known human cultures, the ways in which male and female bodies are distinguished; the role each one is considered to play in reproduction; local understandings of the biological basis of difference; cultural attributes assigned to the masculine and the feminine; the importance attached to these differences; all these vary enormously from culture to culture. Unlike sex, which is determined at birth, gender identities of men and women are socially and culturally determined. Men and women are produced by culture and from the study and understanding of their cultural ideas and values we can easily decipher the constructive relation between the two genders. The cultural representation of sexes has a clear bearing upon the status and position of women in society. Most human societies have so far been characterized by varying degrees and forms of male dominance, which is not the same as saying that in all cultures women are equally oppressed or dominated by men.

In an utterly patriarchal society like Bangladesh, traditional cultural, social, and religious values and practices have reinforced the lower status accorded to women and have limited their opportunities for education, employment, resources, self-expression, among other rights, though women have always made a significant contribution to society.

After centuries of colonialism under the Mughals (from the sixteenth century to 1757), the British (1757-1947) and the Pakistanis (1947-1971), Bangladesh became an independent state in 1971. The state of Bangladesh's approach to gender has been opportunistic and contradictory, but with several constant underlying themes. The first of these themes is the primary identification of women as mothers and thus their association

with biological reproduction. The major thrust of economic planning is still male oriented. Allocations targeting women's development still amount to less than 0.3 percent of the total public sector development budget, and women are primarily related to social and welfare sectors. Even in the 1980s, 55 percent of the projects directed towards women were in the area of population control.

Another trend in the use of gender imagery in state discourse is the increasing significance of Islam. The second president of the state introduced Islam and declared his commitment to foster the international Islamic brotherhood into the Constitution of Bangladesh. His successor, between 1982 and 1990, declared Islam to be the state religion in 1988. Women's organizations were foremost in opposition to this move. While debates over the true interpretation of gender in Islam continue, there is no doubt that its political expression in present day Bangladesh acts profoundly to curtail women's room for maneuver. Over this period of time, Islamic values along with Islamic-minded ruling parties paved the way for orthodox male dominance and female subordination. As a consequence, we have the institution of *Purdah*<sup>1</sup>, as well as the restricted mobility of women, segregation of roles, and division of labor (public/private sphere) between men and women.

Moreover, in Bangladesh, as in many other countries, the 'natural' association of women with children and family provides an additional level of categorization. Since women are confined to the domestic context, their main sphere of activity is the intra and inter-family relations, as opposed to men, who operate in the political and public domain of social life. Men thus become identified with society and public interest, while women remain associated with family.

### **The Dichotomy of Self and Other**

With the help of the socialization process, men have made them the 'self' and women the 'other'. They have turned women into an object, and never allowed them to become subjects. So women exist as 'natural', 'mysterious', 'inhuman', 'unnecessary', 'worst', with no value as human beings. To explain this situation Simone de Beauvoir

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<sup>1</sup> *Purdah* is a relative term that applies to the Muslim and Hindu system. To state briefly, for Muslim women, *Purdah* – in the sense of complete veiling – seems to operate after puberty in relation to all male, except to specific male categories, such as father, uncle, brother, etc.

(1949) said that, “nobody is born as a woman but becomes a woman afterwards” – which means that patriarchy produced an enjoyable thing: women. She also said that, to explain men and women, patriarchy has produced a set of antagonistic perceptions, of which one is positive or necessary or subject; and another is negative or unnecessary or object. For example: masculine and feminine; culture and nature; human and beast; production and reproduction; active and passive. Of these, the first one is good and the second one is bad and patriarchy has opted for the first one. Famous philosophers like Plato and Aristotle also contributed to strengthen the perception of women as ‘others’. For example, Plato thanked God for making him a free man rather than a slave and for making him in the form of a man instead of a woman’s. Aristotle said in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (translated version: 1908) that the younger one should love the elder more than the elder loves the younger; and that wife, children and citizen should love husband, father and king more, but not in the reverse order.

Religious ideas influence women’s position in different societies. When Jewish men in the Morning Prayer praise God by saying that “All the praises go to God, Who has not created me as a woman”, then their wives say without any protest “All the praises go to God, Who has created me according to His will”. This means that men are the masters of creation and women are born to fulfill the will of their masters.

If we look at the formal education system of Bangladesh, we will find out that it helps to enrich the cultural or social construction of femininity. In educational institutions it is usually thought that a girl’s performance is based on hard work and rule-following rather than in brains or brilliance. In the younger age groups, it is common for teachers to talk about boys as having potential, a term often used to explain their poor performance. Quite the contrary, if a girl is performing poorly there will be no way she can be considered as good. While boys, no matter how poorly they are performing, seem to be thought to have hidden qualities.

From the discussion outlined above, we can hold the proposition that women are constructed both for and by the male order. Their selves and self-perception, as well as the meaning of their actions, are defined within that order, largely without the women’s consent. Following such line of understanding, this paper analyzes the gender bias in language from the standpoint of the Bengali language and, by doing that, attempts to

define the relationship between gender and language. The linguistic and textual analysis will show how gender identity is both constructed and reflected through language in Bengali culture and society, because, in order to state facts, we first need language. If one takes a closer look over the usage of vernacular in Bangladesh, one can easily find out that language is arranged in such a way that men are identified with glorified and exalted positions, while women are identified with more service-oriented positions, in which they are being dominated and instructed by men.

### **Gender as a Parameter of Language Variation**

A society is an organized group of persons functioning in different socio-cultural environments. The socio-cultural environment includes customs, traditions, religious beliefs, tastes and preferences, social institutions, etc. All these aspects have a bearing on the behaviour of people. As a product of social reality, language reflects the socio-cultural behaviour of the community who speaks it. In other words, language reflects the thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and culture of its users.

Differences within the use of a language are natural in all human societies and these linguistic differences are explained by Socio-Linguistics as variations, referring to social variables such as class, age, ethnicity, and sex/gender.

In the past few years, under the impact of feminist movements, a number of studies have appeared in the West, identifying gender as a major parameter of language variation. When we say 'gender bias' in language, we mean the superior-inferior paradigm involved, because of the distinction in gender. We therefore search for their language correlates.

In order to understand gender-based language differences clearly, one should know the social structure in which the (social) position of male and female groups is designed. McLennan (1865), a Scottish lawyer, and Bachofen (1861), a German evolutionist, observed that the human social organization began, to a large extent, as a matriarchal system, which, later on, gradually shifted to the male-dominated patriarchal system. If you study the old Bengali society or, in a broader sense, the then Indian sub-continent, as discussed by A.S. Altekar (1959), Azizah Al-Hibri (1982), Meredith Borthwick (1984) or in the famous Monushanghita literature (Sensastri: 1985), you will

immediately conclude that the Bengali society, like most other societies, was a strongly male-oriented culture, revealing the unquestionable super-ordinate position of men.

Bengali languages, both classical and current, exhibit certain markers that reveal the status accorded to women in Bengali society. Different people may interpret some of these markers differently, but the nuances in vocabulary certainly show the status we accord to our women in our society.

There is no age in Bengali language that could be treated as an exception to this rule. Sometimes the enthusiasts and the traditionalists may claim that the status of women in the by-gone ages was equal to that of men, or that women had great educational opportunities and that they excelled in many fields. While it is true that there were several women poets, statespersons and intellectuals in the past, the status accorded to women as a group was indeed inferior to that of men. Humayun Azad, a maverick Bengali writer, being more critical opined that “like other subalterns/minorities a few women are being conferred higher prestige. But it doesn’t make any sense since, being recognized by the patriarchal dominant ideology, these women ultimately serve patriarchy. These women deceptively accept the hegemonic construction of womanhood and the responsibility for upholding male dominance as well” (Azad: 1998). We all desire to prove that we had a golden age in the past during which everything was all right and milk and honey flowed. But the present reality could not come about in a day nor was it a degradation of the past.

In this paper I propose to present some linguistic insight into Bengali, the language that I know best (since it is my mother tongue!), and discuss how this linguistic material reflects the status of women in Bengali society. What I am saying here can be easily attested in any language. So, do not think that Bengali society ill-treats women worse than others. In reality, no society is free from the overall features that I am discussing in this paper. The West might be seen as place where women are accorded the same status as men. But if you take a closer look over the English language you will find how it also functions as an instrument of gender discrimination. According to the 3<sup>rd</sup> *New International Webster Dictionary* (1966) ‘manly’ means “having qualities appropriate to a man: not effeminate or timorous; bold, resolute, open in conduct or bearing, belonging or appropriate in character to a man, of undaunted courage: gallant, bold”. The same dictionary denotes ‘womanly’ as “marked by qualities characteristic of a woman,

possessed of the character or behaviour befitting a grown woman, characteristic of, belonging to, or suitable to a woman's nature and attitudes rather than to a man's".

### **Some Dark Sides of Women Status in Bengali Literature**

Patriarchal civilization does not produce women but it has produced the construction of the concept of womanhood. Men have denominated women with various words; defined them; explained the existing definitions; located them; enacted regulations for them; and employed them as mating-partners and housekeepers. For example, Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Victorian English poet, in his famous poem 'The Princess: A Medley' (1847) wrote that "[...] but this is fixt; As are the roots of earth and base of all; Man for the field and woman for the hearth; Man for the sword and for the needle she; Man with the head and woman with the heart; Man to command and woman to obey; All else confusion". These stereotypical images of womanhood have vividly been reflected in Bengali literature. As a representative of male personhood, the great noble laureate Bengali poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore (1974) said, "Women are not the sole creation of God/ It is men who put beauty into her formless matter" (*Shudhu Bidhatar srishti naho tumi nari/ Purush gareche tore shoundarja shanchari*). Like a romantic, to whom women are only signified as appealing or lovely, Tagore could only sense the complexion, colour and smell through which men intend to construct the image of women. He feels a male chauvinistic piety for his womenfolk, as well as pride for having been born as a man. He shares the belief that both men and God created women, a belief that ultimately projects men as 'self' and women as 'other'. While discarding the full existential reality of women, he builds up the characteristic notion of womanhood as half-being and half-imagination (*Ordhek manobi tumi, ordhek kalpona*). Another great Bengali poet and writer, the National Poet of Bangladesh Kazi Nazrul Islam (1993), wanted to demonstrate the extraordinary strength of women by saying that "the king is reigning over the kingdom while the queen over the king" (*Raja koriteche rajya shashon, rajare shashiche rani*). But unfortunately he could not understand that ruling the king does not imply her strength, rather it connotes her destituteness. Nazrul, apparently out of sympathy, actually bore the voice of patriarchy and depicted women as the prey of patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy feels a surreptitious and romantic pleasure in finding the

queen reigning over the king, but it holds vehement objection to be ruled by women. Patriarchy, by allowing women to rule over the king or husband, has eventually imprisoned them as an ever-remaining mistress/caretaker/concubine. Another face of the patriarchal indoctrination system can be found in its attempt to converge the idea of God with that of the shape of man. According to the religious belief, God/Allah/Brahma is considered as being shapeless. But the patriarchal ideology and its indoctrination system have placed the image of God in the background of the husband (*shwami*), that is to say, of the man. The notion of God in the shape of man has been sustained by the famous Bengali poet Gulam Mustafa (1971). In his poem ‘Munajat’ (act of supplication after the prayer), he makes an analogy between God and husband (*shwami*) and writes: “Oh! Eternal and Infinite Lovely God, you are the judge of the final judgment” (*Ananta Asheem Premomoy Tumi Bichar Diner Shwami*). In this way, classical literatures clearly portray the power structure or the social position of men and women in society. There has always been a male-oriented approach in all these records.

### **Differences in Gender Role**

Differences in gender role are important in our culture. When we see the role played by a man as depicted in classical literature, he is a scholar in the educated assembly, he is a warrior in the battlefield, and he is a trader when he is involved in earning money. And he uses to leave his home in order to accomplish higher studies, a military expedition or an embassy. During this time of separation (*bicched*), the woman who is confined to her home is patiently waiting (*opekkha*) and lamenting (*ha-hutash*). A woman’s work is naturally confined to her home and family, while men live in a larger world. In this culture, men are defined in terms of what they do in the world, while women are defined in terms of the men with whom they are associated.

### **Traditional Societies, Language, and Women**

In traditional societies, specific traits are assigned to men and women. These cultures set up rigid social norms for the sexes. Any violation of these norms will be viewed seriously. A comparison of the qualities ascribed to both sexes in Bengali will reveal actual values put on males and females in society. *Gyan* ‘knowledge’, *shokti*

‘strength’, and *prottoy* ‘confidence’ are ascribed to males. *Lajja* ‘shyness’, *aggata* ‘ignorance’, *viruta* ‘timidity’, and *durbalata* ‘weakness’ are the qualities ascribed to females. In other words, men are entitled to get wisdom and strength whereas women lack wisdom (hence they are foolish) and strength (hence they are weak), thus indicating the superior and inferior status of men and women respectively.

There are several terms used to denote a woman. Of these, the general statement ‘*narir buddhi kom-e hoi*’ has the meaning of ‘foolish person’. On the other hand, in various Bengali dictionaries (Samsad Bangla Abhidhan: 1991), the word *birja* concurrently signifies the male semen/sperm and valour, boldness or heroism. In fact, patriarchy, being very tactful, affixes courage and bravery to the image of men. He who possesses *birja* eventually can be treated as a hero. And presumably for this reason we glorify the heroic representation of the male with the word *birpurush* (brave man), while there is no feminine term in this regard. The word *shittitya*, meaning ‘chastity’, is associated only with women. Another praiseworthy quality attributed to women is *dhairja*, ‘patience’, which means to bear the faulty behaviour of a husband. All these illustrations indicate the inferior status attributed to women by society. The terms *gharer lakkhi* (fortune of the household) and *gharkanna* (*ghar* corresponds to the English term household and *kanna* stands for woman), among others, associate women with the house.

### **Language and Male Superiority**

In any society where the male plays a superior role and commands greater respect, it is quite natural for the members of that society to put a higher value on the male child. *Bangsher bati* connotes the urge for a male child to look after the property and/or to lead the funeral mortuary of his parents. Religious ideas also influence the demeaning of women’s position in different societies. For example in Bangladesh, particularly in rural settings, the birth of a male child is declared with the ritual of announcing *azan* (an official call to Muslims to attend a prayer meeting in a mosque), while that of a female child remains ignored. In a family, a woman’s suggestions are considered faulty and thus also ignored. The proverbs *maia manush aktu derite bujhe* (women understand quite late) and *maia manusher buddhi-te kan dite nai* (don’t listen to a woman’s advice) or the fact

that a man who listens to his wife will be referred too badly as *stroina* (henpecked) illustrate this point.

As her suggestions are not taken into account, a woman observes silence in many matters, including in her decisions regarding her own marriage. Marriage is the most important social transition in a woman's life. Cultural expectations allow the boy, but not the girl, to express an opinion about the match before betrothal takes place. Her silence continues even at her wedding. A bride should be beautiful, but a bride should also be submissive and silent.

Another remarkable word that signifies male supremacy is *jat*. In the *Samsad Bengali Dictionary* (Samsad Banglad Abhidhan: 1991), the word *jat* stands for various meanings. For example, while it exerts senses like producing, variety, and ethos, in one aspect, it concurrently invokes meanings like storage, storehouse or storeroom. This dual meaning helps us to decipher the materialistic inner meaning of the apparently idealistic word *jat*. In Bangladesh, along with the influence of modernism and capitalism, the word *jati* (nation, e.g., the Bengali Nation) etymologically derives from the word *jat*, which excludes women, despite the fact that women are indeed the producers of the nation. French Marxist Anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1978) analyses these facts in a very lucid way. According to Meillassoux, with the Neolithic revolution, human beings became more expedient in their struggle with nature, due to the invention of new tools and skills. And this paved the way to a more sedentary life, characterized by a self-sufficient village economy:

In these agriculture based simple societies production, circulation and distribution of foodstuffs followed a social hierarchy centered on the notion of seniority. It means the seniors held much authority over the juniors since the juniors were dependent on the seniors to learn necessary production techniques. And among the seniors the eldest one had been conferred upon the highest authority. Having such an endowment he collected the product of the juniors' activities, stored the product and redistributed it among the community members. But this authority of the seniors could be challenged at any juncture since the quantity of vital technical production knowledge in this kind of society was limited and could be mastered in a relatively short time. Moreover the seniors were not only numerically but also physically the weakest category. So, in order to perpetuate their authority, the seniors must extend their knowledge beyond fundamental subsistence skills to new fields (social learning, knowledge of customs, genealogies, history) and even further to artificial fields (magic, divination, religious rituals, etc.). It indicates that the seniors transformed their physical age into social age by setting barriers to regulate the transmission of these new branches of knowledge. Among such customs were the rules governing marriage, i.e., the establishment of marriage relationships between homologous

groups, exogamy and prohibition of incest, etc. And to persuade the juniors to follow these rules there appeared the system of bride wealth. Out of the goods produced by the community and handed over to the seniors as prestation, some portions were kept over at the level of the seniors to make the juniors dependent on them for having access to bride wealth at the time of marriage. (Meillassoux: 1978)

In this way, the natural right of making conjugal unions has turned out to be an economic phenomenon. More significantly, it ensured the seniors' authority over the reproductive capacity of the nubile women of the community. And this control over the nubile women eventually guaranteed the seniors' authority over the reproducers of the producers. Women, being exchanged in marriage, became the object to build inter-tribal alliances. Treated only as an object of exchange, they lost their social identity. The male became the possessor of the lineage/clan/community/society/nation, grabbed the means of production and there started the notion of patrilineal descent, at least in most societies. And presumably for this reason we call fellow community members *jatbhai* (agnatic brothers) but never use the term *jatbon* (agnatic sisters). Similarly, while commemorating our ancestors, we never say *purba-nari* (foremother), instead we always use the term *purba-purush* (forefather).

### **Women as Commodities**

As Vasanthakumari (1991) points out, language is mixed with expressions that reflect the status of a woman as a commodity. Consider the following phrase denoting the action of performing the marriage of a girl: *bie deoa* refers to the process of giving away a girl in marriage. Let me describe a real-life fact. On one of my journeys by launch, I found a guy asking his friend about the physiognomy/appearance of a prospective bride. And the friend, shrugging his shoulders, expressionlessly replied *bajarjat ache*, which means that the bride's physiognomic beauty had been valued as her advantage in the market, or more particularly in the market of potential brides.

### **Language and the Married Status of Women**

Tradition usually does not allow a woman to remarry or break the marriage but allows a husband to abandon his wife. This concept of matrimonial bondage, which ultimately makes the male spouse superior, is found to be backed by Islamic sanction.

According to the Islamic principle, if a couple gets divorced and afterwards wants to remarry, the divorced wife must be married off to someone else (*hilla bie*) for the interim period. Moreover, very often, on the death of a newly married man, the widow is accused of being the bearer of evil or of a malevolent spirit. She is condemned as *bhatar khagi* (someone who has eaten up her husband). The usage of the term *bandha*, sterile woman, also indicates that a woman is blamed for everything. The description of human qualities is based, for instance, on this double standard. A bold man is courageous (*shahoshi*) but a bold woman is aggressive (*ugra*). The notion of *adar* (ways of making love) is also marked by male traits. In Abul Mansur's famous novel *Jibon Khudha*, we find Halima, on her husband's departure, requesting her husband to treat her with *adar*. It indicates the husband as love giver (active) and the wife as taker (passive). Simone de Beauvoir, in her attempts to unfold the masculine construction of sexual affairs, says that male hegemony can easily be revealed through the position taken at the time of copulation. For most of the species, while copulating, the female lies down underneath the male (de Beauvoir: 1949).

### **Lack of Parallel Terms for Women**

Many of the terms referring to women are derived from the corresponding terms for men, and this seems to be taken as the norm, not only for linguistic derivation but also for meaning derivation. However, for some terms there are no female corresponding terms. Consider the following examples:

Shati	Chaste
Emam	Religious leader
Dakter	Doctor
Montri	Minister
Kobi	Poet
Hajji	Pilgrim

### **Language Change in a Free Democratic Country**

When Bangladesh became a Republic, many changes in the social status of women had already been initiated. The Constitution of Bangladesh intended to give equal rights to women. In the public domain, women are allowed to practice all the professions men practice. However, language has not much changed the attitude of society. Perhaps language is a good reflection of how society views women, despite constitutional provisions in the contrary. Previously, many occupational terms such as doctor or police readily evoked the image of a man rather than that of a woman. By adding certain feminine forms to these professional terms, new feminine forms have been developed. For example *mohila dakter* ‘lady doctor’, and *mohila pulish* ‘lady police’.

Similar differences in vocabulary based on gender bias exist in all dialects of Bengali language. These differences are the result of the differences in position and status of the two genders in a given society. When these conditions change, the differences are bound to modify too.

### **Non-Reciprocal Usage**

The inferior status of a woman is further revealed in the non-reciprocal usage of the forms of address. A husband generally addresses his wife by her name or with less or non-honorific terms. On the contrary, in a Muslim society like Bangladesh, while being socialized, women are expected to believe that God has created women to please their husbands, parents and children. Otherwise women are remarked as guilty or sinners. The wife must be fully loyal and dutiful to her husband as well as to her family. Wives do not address their husbands by mentioning their names. Especially in front of others, they address their husbands as the father of their children (*Faruk-er bap*, ‘Faruk’s father’) or my man, ‘*amar uni*’. The belief that heaven lies at the feet of the husband (*shwamir pa-er niche stri-er behesht*) makes it even more difficult for a wife to perceive herself as an equal to her husband.

While a husband uses a non-honorific or less honorific reference pronoun *o* ‘she’ to refer to his wife, she refers to him by an honorific pronoun *uni* ‘he’, with respect. As non-naming denotes respect in many cases, she follows this pattern of address as well as of reference. By assuming a superior status in society, a man commands his wife by using non-honorific singular imperatives like *asho* ‘come’, and *jao* ‘go’. However, a woman

uses the tag questions as substitutes for commands and this is considered to be a polite way of requesting a person to do a thing: *Aktu oshudh kina anba/anben?* or “Would you please buy some medicine?”.

The above discussed linguistic differences in women’s and men’s speech is interpreted as a reflection of male dominance and female subordination. Though a few changes in the status of women are apparent now, old practices still persist. The nature of gender differences in the Bengali language clearly reflects the social and cultural factors prevalent in Bangladesh. If there is one message that echoes forth from the recently held international women conference in Beijing, it is that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights. If this message is properly understood, many forms of gender discriminations will finally disappear.

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