

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Home (‘Griha’)

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum

Introduction

This essay was first published in a Bengali magazine, *Nabanur*, in October 1904 (Bengali calendar: Ashwin 1311). It was republished in *Antapur* in January 1905, and included in Rokeya’s first collection of essays, *Motichur* (Sweet Globules), Vol. I, in 1907. The essay expresses the same sentiment as in Rokeya’s earlier essays, such as ‘Istrijatir Abanati’ (Woman’s Downfall)¹ and ‘Ardhangi’ (The Female-half). In these previous essays she fiercely criticises the Indian patriarchal system for depriving women of all their rights and opportunities in society, and for wilfully subjugating them to a law of male primacy. In this essay, she carries the argument further to suggest that women’s subjugation has also rendered them homeless. Home is a place, Rokeya argues, where one finds rest, happiness and peace. But because Indian women have to constantly depend on the mercy and vagary of men, and have to spend their life in humouring their ‘masters’ and ‘keepers’ rather than in finding their own happiness, they can never be truly at home. To them, home is like a ‘prison’. ‘For those who live in subjugation and do not have the right to consider the house of their “keeper” as their own residence, home is like a prison. For one who is not happy in family life, and dares not to consider herself a member of the family, home cannot be a place of peace,’ Rokeya proffers in a blistering argument.

This despicable condition of subjection and servility applies to most Indian women notwithstanding their age, religion or class. ‘Daughters, wives, widows – women of all kinds are in this miserable state,’ Rokeya affirms. She gives examples from both Hindu and Muslim communities, as well from different social classes – from the royalty to the middle class to the very poor in society – to show that a woman’s social or religious background does not alter her fate. They are all reduced to a subaltern status and doomed to destitution because of their illiteracy and ignorance. In fact, women in India live in a condition similar to, and even worse than, animals. In one of her examples in the essay, Rokeya explains, ‘The house belongs to Sharafat, and as it has a drove of sheep, flocks of ducks and hens, so also is there a group of women. Or the women could be described as “captives”. Because they have no family life!’

Rokeya argues that even if a woman inherits property from her father or husband it does not necessarily empower her in society, because eventually the property is controlled by a man – a brother, brother-in-law, son-in-law, an attorney or someone else. She explains how a Muslim woman who inherits a house from her father is not only deprived of the house by her manipulating husband but also forced to live with his co-wives in the same house. Likewise, a Hindu woman who inherits a sum of money after her husband’s death is swindled out of her entire fortune by her own bamboozling brother, and left in a state in which she can wish for nothing but death. This is how men systematically divest women of their social possessions as well as their dignity, and thrust them into a condition more miserable than that of animals. ‘Therefore I say, we

¹ A translation of this essay was published in the November 2011 issue of *Transnational Literature*. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. ‘Home’, translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

do not even have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal-world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home – only we don't,' Rokeya says vituperatively to conclude her essay.

Rokeya was sometimes accused by her critics of being 'false' and 'unreal' in her portrayal of society; of telling 'grandma's fables' and of 'whipping' people, especially men, unnecessarily. One critic said that her singular aim of writing was to persecute the men,² and another added caustically, 'if she would have read her own depictions carefully enough, she would have realised that she has fabricated reality into cock-and-bull stories.'³ But Rokeya was essentially a realistic writer and she never falsified or exaggerated her representation of life, circumstances or society in her work. Soon after the publication of *Motichur*, Vol. I, a reviewer aptly said about Rokeya's essay, 'Home', 'There is not an iota of lie in the social picture we see in "Home". What we encounter in our daily life is what the writer has documented in her animated style.'⁴ In fact, women in India have been living a life of degradation, destitution and dehumanisation ever since their legal rights were curbed in the ancient Sanskrit text, *Manu's Laws (Manava-dharma-sastra or Manusmriti)*, and they were compared to 'dogs' and 'crows' as physical embodiments of 'untruth, sin and darkness'.⁵ Even the Mohammedan Law, which allows many privileges to women, has not been able to redeem the Muslim women from this senseless tyranny and exploitation, mainly because, in Rokeya's view, the religion has been monopolised and mangled by some hidebound *mullahs* who, she explains elsewhere, take it as 'their religious duty to oppress women'.⁶ In a cutting remark on these misogynistic, mock-guardians of the religion, Rokeya writes in one section of the essay: 'An Islamic scholar once said in a religious sermon, "Usually, women commit more sin; during his spiritual meeting with God, the Prophet saw that most of those burning in hell fire were women." We of course see it on earth that married women, especially those living in zenana, are often subjected to a hellish life.' In their desperate wish that all women will suffer in hell, these zealots have turned this life on earth into a hell for women, Rokeya argues.

Certainly Rokeya was not the first writer in British Bengal to take up the issue of women and fight for women's rights, women's emancipation and women's empowerment – especially the right to their education and economic empowerment. Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) before her, as well as her contemporaries, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), were devoted to this cause. However, Rokeya was the first female writer to participate in the movement, and

² Cited in Anisuzzaman, 'Narumukti, Samakal O Begum Rokeya' [Rokeya, Women's Emancipation and Her Age], *Begum Rokeya: An Immortal Icon* ed. Baby Maudud (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 2011) 49 (my translation).

³ Quoted in Motahar Hossain Sufi, *Begum Rokeya: Jiban O Shahitya* [Begum Rokeya: Life and Works] (Dhaka: Subarna, 2001) 171 (my translation).

⁴ Abdul Mannan Syed, *Begum Rokeya* (Dhaka: Abosar, 2011) 109 (my translation).

⁵ Lyn Reese, *Women in India* (Berkeley, CA: Women in World History Curriculum, 2001) 57.

⁶ Abdul Quadir, ed., *Rokeya Rachanabali* [Complete Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain] 1973 (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999) 203 (my translation).

no one before her had written with the degree of awareness, empathy and intensity as she did; this was because she was herself a victim of the system and wrote with a first-hand experience. Born in a conservative Muslim family, she was not only deprived of any formal education in childhood but also forced to grow up in the confinement of home. In her book, *The Zenana Women* (Aborodhbashini), she scathingly portrays how she had to live in an extreme purdah system from the age of five, which segregated her not only from men but also from women outside her immediate family circle. It is therefore amazing that this woman, brought up in such a restrictive and prohibitive social environment, and with little or no formal education in childhood, grew up to challenge the social status quo and became a fierce but scrupulous advocate of women's education and women's empowerment, to the extent that she not only accuses society of depriving women of the comfort of home (as she does in this essay), but also envisions a society, a utopia, in which women would eventually control the society. We encounter this last in her short story 'Sultana's Dream' – a Ladyland in which Rokeya sarcastically turns the table against the men and forces them into a life of segregated zenana, similar to what they have been enforcing on Indian women, from time immemorial.⁷

* * * * *

Home

Home is a place for rest, comfort and peace, where the householder can return tired and exhausted at the end of the day and relax. Home protects its members from sun, rain and winter. Even birds and animals have homes; they too consider themselves safe in their respective homes. An English poet has sung in emotional exuberance:

Home, sweet home;
There is no place like home.
Sweet sweet home.

If there is no thirst, water has no taste; likewise, we cannot fully appreciate the happiness of home, until we live away from it for a few days. Without the sorrow of separation, there can be no joy of union. Men do not travel all the time, yet being away from the family for the whole day, they are eager to return home in the afternoon; coming back, they sigh in relief.

A home has two parts to it, an outer area [drawing room] and a family area (or home). Making a home is natural; even two birds come together to build a nest. Jackals also have their dens. That nest and den can be considered a dwelling place but not an actual 'home'. Anyway, whether animals have a 'home' or not is not for discussion here.

Allow me to say a few words about the state of our homes. If we observe our social conditions, we see that most women in India are bereft of the happiness of home. For those who live in subjugation and do not have the right to consider the house of their 'keeper' as their own residence, home is like a prison. For one who is not happy in family life, and dares not to consider herself a member of the family, home cannot be a place of peace. Daughters, wives, widows – women of all kinds are in this miserable state. As evidence, I'll provide glimpses of some of these households. This attempt to expose the inner life of the zenana will obviously offend some of our brothers. But what to do; we have no choice but to operate on this festering ulcer. If it causes pain for the patient, he will have to endure it. If I don't remove the skin somewhat, how do I show the bruise inside? So I pray to my brothers for permission to lift the purdah from some parts of the zenana.

I am not saying that our society has no virtue at all. There are plenty of virtues, but drawbacks too. Imagine that a person has one good hand, but an ulcer on the other. Should he not seek treatment for the hand with the ulcer, just because the other hand is in good shape? To provide the treatment, it's essential to obtain a full account of the illness.

Today we'll discuss the ailment in the body of our society. Let the healthy part remain as it is. There are many happy families in our society; they are not the focus of our discussion. Let them continue to live in happiness. Come readers, let's visit a few secluded rooms behind the high iron gates.

1. Haven't I said that unless we go abroad we cannot experience the joy of returning home? Once we went to a town near Jamalpur, in the province of Bihar, for a visit. A friend of ours lived there. Since our male relatives were on friendly terms with the male members of that family, we were curious to meet the women of this Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. 'Home', translated and introduced by Mohammad A. Quayum. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Sharafat¹ lawyer's family. We found the ladies gentle and soft-spoken, albeit somewhat like frogs living in a well. They greeted us in a suitable way. Sharafat's wife Hasina, sister Jamila, Jamila's daughter, daughter-in-law and others were present there. Later when I invited Jamila to visit us, she said that she had never gone out of the house, and that was their family pride. They had never ridden in a carriage or any other mode of transport. On whether they had ever boarded a palanquin, I can't remember if the answer was 'yes' or 'no'. In utter amazement, I asked, 'Then how do you go to your in-laws' after marriage? How did your sister-in-law come here?' Jamila replied, 'She is the daughter of one of our relatives. All the houses you see in this locality belong to the members of our clan.' She then took me to another room and said, 'This is my daughter's house. Let's go home now.' She led me through a narrow lane (lined with houses on one side and a high wall on another), in a roundabout way. We visited all the rooms of her house. They seemed to be 'out of bounds' for the sun. When she opened one of the doors, I met Hasina's daughter-in-law. Jamila said, 'See, on that side of the door is my brother's house, on this side it is ours. Because the bride lives in that room, we keep the door closed. Now you understand why we never need a transport.' We could visit all the houses in that way. But not interested to tour the whole precinct, we returned to our house, which was much more comparable to a home. Jamila said that she would travel to Mecca soon – she didn't wish to live in this sinful country for much longer. We hope she will be able to appreciate the joy of returning home when she arrives back from Mecca.

Do the readers think that Hasina or Jamila is at home? Definitely not! Just living inside the four walls of a house doesn't make it a home. Bride-chamber is called 'Khwabgah' in this part of the world, but it should actually be called a 'tomb'. The house belongs to Sharafat, and as it has a drove of sheep, flocks of ducks and hens, so also is there a group of women. Or the women could be described as 'captives'. Because they have no family life! Think of the situation at your own house; you'll then understand Hasina's condition.

2. It could be said about the situation of the wives in many of the families, 'things look glowing and glamorous outside, but inside all is dry and drab.' That is, there is lots of ostentatious display outwardly, as if the husband is the commander of seven thousand soldiers but, inside the zenana, the wife remains famine-stricken. Outside, there is the decorated lounge, animal stables and everything else, but inside the wife lacks a suitable place for prayer.

3. We'll now show the 'bruise' inside the zenana. The male head of the family usually thinks that the house belongs to him, and the rest of the family are his dependents.² We have visited a family in Maldah several times, but we have never seen the head of the household, Kalim's wife happy. Her sad appearance attracts our

¹ All the names in this essay are imaginary. They have been used mainly for narrative convenience.

² Our focus here is not on any particular individual or incident. We have taken examples from several true incidents from different places to create a general picture of the situation. The presence of newly budded mango groves on one side of the river and snow-capped bare trees beside the Niagara Falls on another, should not lead the readers to think that the artist is ignorant, because the tree, the budded mango-groves, the snow-capped trees are all true.

quiet sympathy. She is unhappy because her husband has been in a dispute with her sister's husband for several years. That's why Kalim's wife is not allowed to visit her sister. She can't muster enough courage to say, 'Of course my sister will come and visit me.' Alas! The house belongs to Kalim. It is for him to decide who can or cannot enter there. On the other side too, Salim is the owner. Kalim's wife is barred from entering there.

It is needless to say that Kalim's wife has no lack of food, clothing or jewellery. But can jewellery mitigate the pain of estrangement from one's only sister, especially when the parents are no longer there? I have heard that she was not free from her husband's torture either. Can she then see her place of residence as 'sweet home'? Does she not sigh in sorrow and say in private, 'There is no other person more hapless and homeless than myself?'

4. Two brothers have a fight at some place; assume that the elder brother is 'Hum', and the younger brother is 'Sam'. After the fight, Hum tells his daughter, 'Hamida, as long as you live in my house, you are not allowed to write letters to Jobeda (Sam's daughter).' Father's command must be obeyed! But Hamida has loved her cousin from childhood; it is not easy for her to erase her from her mind so quickly. She begins to feel tormented by an excruciating pain. These two girls were entwined together by their childhood memories, strung into one by their letters even when they were far apart; by tearing apart those two flowers of the same stem, Hum has demonstrated that he is the true master of the house. By trampling on, and breaking the tender hearts of two helpless, innocent girls, the master of the house demonstrates his own power. It goes without saying that Jobeda is also not allowed to write to Hamida. If they somehow manage to send letters to one another, then Hamida's letter is intercepted by Sam and Jobeda's letter is crushed in the clenched fist of Hum. The suppressed tears and heartrending sighs of the two girls fizzle away behind their bedroom curtains. It is said that according to the law, the father has no right to intercept the letters of an eighteen (or a twenty-two?) year old daughter. But that law has no place in the zenana. The poet has rightly said:

You keep sitting at the edge of the world,
In futile affection. Not knowing how the rest of the world,
Rages on –

Therefore, let the law be; how would Hamida or Jobeda benefit from it? So many other letters are intercepted likewise by fathers and uncles – who keeps count of them? A widow passes her time somehow in reading the letters from her brothers and sisters, but if the younger brother-in-law who has provided refuge to her after her husband's demise is enraged by it, then there is no way she can continue receiving those letters. Only God can help these cursed zenana 'inmates'.

5. We have known Ramasundari for several years. She is a childless widow. Her late husband left behind a lot of wealth, even a few brick-built houses, at the time of his death. Now the husband's younger brother has inherited all that property. The younger brother-in-law is reluctant to provide her food and shelter. I said, 'Perhaps she quarrels with her brother-in-law's wife.' In reply, someone (who has known Rama

for fourteen or fifteen years) said, 'Rama can do everything, except getting into a fight. She knows how to make strangers her friends, but not how to turn her family into strangers.'

'Why can't she find shelter at her younger brother-in-law's home, when possessed of such noble qualities?'

'Because of her bad luck.'

Ah, luckless women! You consider your own shortcomings as misfortunes, but when it comes to suffering you continue to bear the brunt of your own deeds. Your drawbacks are ignorance, inefficiency, infirmity and many more. Ramasundari said, 'I live because I have to; I eat because I have to – our sati³ practice was much better. The government has added to the sufferings of widows by abolishing that practice.' Can't God hear those words of Rama? What kind of a merciful being is He?

6. Once we went to visit a palace when the king was away. He was a celebrated king, and his annual income was huge.

To use poetic language, the place was beautiful like the house of gods; the drawing room sparkled with many extravagant furniture and fittings. Silver-coloured chairs were scattered everywhere, all expectantly waiting for the king. A slender ray of light had fallen on a mirror in a corner; a reflection from it, falling on the chandelier, had transformed the place into a luminous world of light. In one of the rooms, the king's gorgeous silver bedstead, made up with a mosquito net and beautiful linens, was waiting for the absent king. Readers might ask, 'Why doesn't the queen use the bed?' Well, in that case, wouldn't such a beautiful item remain beyond the sight of the king's entourage and his guests? After visiting the drawing room, we entered the queen's quarters.

The queen's rooms were also decorated with chairs, tables and teapoys, but they were all covered with dust. It didn't look like the king had ever stepped into any of those rooms. A few Bengali books were strewn around the queen's bed.

I was disappointed to see the queen. The image of her I had conceived upon visiting the drawing room ... she looked just its opposite. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl (of sixteen/seventeen years of age), wearing an imported plain fabric with a red border. The only ornaments she wore were three glass bangles on each hand; her head was covered with dry, matted hair, which had not been touched by oil for fifteen days or so. She looked so sad that one could easily take her for an incarnation of sorrow. Many consider the eyes as the windows of the soul; the heart-rending emotions her eyes displayed were beyond expression.

The King was always away, in Calcutta mostly. He had no lack of celestial nymphs and voluptuous beauties there, while the queen lived in an eternal anguish of separation. She had an abundant supply of servants, maids, spiritual advisors, priests and all else; there was also plentiful joy and merriment in the house; only the queen's heart found no bliss. The palace felt more like a prison to her, as if she was living a cursed life of exile there with a troop of housemaids. One of our female companions

³ A religious practice in some Indian communities in which a recently widowed woman would have to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The practice was outlawed by the British in 1829. (Ed.)

said in an aside, 'One who has such a beautiful palace and a fairylike queen, why on earth should he live away from home?'

The queen was well-versed in Bengali and spent most of her lonely time reading books. She was reticent and didn't say much, but the few words she spoke were admirable. One of our elderly female companions said, 'You are the queen, why are you in such a shabby condition? Come, I'll tidy up your hair.' The queen replied, 'Being a queen is the curse of my life.' She was right, although people may find a queen's status so enchanting.

What else can we call these wounds in the life of the zenana but festering sore? Does it have no remedy? A widow yearns for sati; what should a wife do?

7. According to the Mohammedan law, women can inherit their fathers' property, and even 'own' a house. But what does it matter – the actual owner is always the husband, son, son-in-law, younger brother-in-law or some other male relative in the family. In their absence, a government officer or attorney becomes the owner. The female proprietor becomes a puppet in the hands of the attorney; whatever the attorney says, the ignorant, illiterate proprietor accepts that.

Mohsena, a home owner, has a fight with her husband and goes to live with Kasem, a distant brother-in-law. That house is her paternal inheritance, therefore, very dear to her. Her only daughter has also passed away, yet she has allowed her son-in-law (along with his daughters) to live there. In a situation like this, the son-in-law, Jamal, could be considered his mother-in-law's dependent. But strangely, when Mohsena returned to her house, the sentry stopped her from entering it. She got furious and said, 'What? I cannot enter my own house? Bring a veil; I want to step out of the palanquin.' The sentry replied, 'I can't bring the veil; I don't have the master's orders.' Mohsena asked, 'Who is your master? Your only master is me.'

'Please forgive my rudeness,' answered the sentry, 'but can you save me from his abuse? You live behind purdah, and we know Mr Jamal only. Everyone knows that you are the real owner of this house but, please, have mercy on me and go back. If you step down here, I'll be punished; even madam herself will be insulted.'

Anyway, the madam went back. She inquired with Kasem, 'Is there no law which would allow me to take back the possession of the house?' Kasem said, 'Yes, there is. You lodge a complaint and we'll help.' In the meantime, hearing about this complaint, Jamal came to see Kasem. In a polite, honey-tongued language, Jamal explained to Kasem, 'Well, if you help my mother-in-law now, you'll actually be indulging the women. If you are in a similar predicament later and someone comes to the aid of the women in your family, would you be happy? Think about it; is this what we want? Why make enemies for no reason?'

Kasem came to Mohsena's room and explained, 'Litigation is too troublesome. Better not to go into such hassle.' The poor woman was shocked, and wept in anger in silence.

There are many more examples. Khadija was the heiress of a vast fortune. Her husband, Hashem, was poor but an educated person. He embezzled the whole property by cunning and fraud and Khadija became penniless. Living in Khadija's own paternal home, Hashem married two or three more times and continued to torment her by forcing her to live with the co-wives. Without such humiliation of the

wife, where is the pride of the all-powerful male? If Khadija expresses the slightest annoyance at it, the elderly women in the family condemn her for lack of devotion to the husband; some even bring out some ancient books (Bengali translations of the Prophet's teachings) and read from it, 'Never open your mouth even if your husband chooses to decapitate you.' Some sing in a modulated voice:

Woman's morshed,⁴ regard thy husband as sertaj,⁵
A wife equal to the morshed, will ever worship her lord.

There is not one person to empathise with Khadija's sorrow. What else can we call it but infernal suffering? An Islamic scholar once said in a religious sermon, 'Usually, women commit more sin; during his spiritual meeting with God, the Prophet saw that most of those burning in hell fire were women.' We of course see it on earth that married women, especially those living in zenana, are often subjected to a hellish life.

8. Who doesn't know about all the horrible tricks that are devised to deprive daughters of their paternal inheritance? No brother of course ever acknowledges it, because that would be humouring the women.⁶ So we have to tell those lamentable tales ourselves. In many cases, daughters are given in marriage to opium-addicts, ganja-addicts, illiterates, the sick elderly – people who are incapable of claiming their share of the inheritance legally. Or, sisters are asked to sign a 'no-claim' statement before marriage and, sometimes, even forced to stay as spinsters to be treated as slaves by the brother's wife. And if there is no son in a family, only daughters – six or twelve of them – then the lucky husband of the eldest sister tries to keep the remaining sisters unmarried. This is the festering sore of the society. Oh, revered Prophet, you tried to help us by giving us right to our ancestral property, but your cunning followers are trying to do harm to women in every way. The Mohammedan law remains confined within the covers of the book like the dark letters on its pages. He who has money controls both power and the law. The legal system is not likely to work for the weak and illiterate women like us.⁷

9. A new widow, Saudamini, took shelter with her two sons and a daughter at her brother's house. After nine or ten months, her two sons (15 and 12 years old) died

⁴ Morshed: Guide, teacher, advisor.

⁵ Sertaj: Crown – that is deserving of respect like a crown.

⁶ An article with incidents of women's sufferings was sent for publication in an Urdu newspaper but the editor didn't have the courage to publish it. He said that printing such an article would infuriate the men. The good news is that Bengali publications have enough moral courage; otherwise, we wouldn't have the opportunity to lament for our sorrow either.

⁷ Rokeya is generalising here by putting herself in the company of 'weak and illiterate women' to indicate that by and large all women are the same in a patriarchal system. They are all equally deemed inferior and deprived of their rights and opportunities. Besides, Rokeya herself was forced out of her home in Bihar by her step-son-in-law after the death of her husband in 1909, following which she moved to Calcutta and lived the rest of her life there. As for her education, as I mentioned in the Introduction, Rokeya was autodidactic and never had the opportunity of attending school or attaining formal education. For details about Rokeya's life, see my essay, 'Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,' in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, at: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13179>. (Ed.)

within the space of ten days. Saudamini had some company documents with her worth ten thousand rupees.

When Saudamini was almost deranged in grief over the loss of her two sons, her brother Nagendra, taking advantage of the situation (that is, within a month of death of the two boys), asked her to deposit all the money in his name. He said, 'There could be a problem if the money is put in a woman's name. After all, I am not a stranger.' The sister was not in her right mind; whatever Nagendra asked her to write, she wrote accordingly. She thought, 'If my two angelic boys are gone, what shall I do with the cursed money. Nagendra will certainly take care of Prativa's (her daughter's) marriage. Death is the only thing I cherish.' Nagendra eventually got two of his own daughters married, but Prativa's marriage never crossed his mind. When she turned twelve, Saudamani became restless about the marriage; but the more she nagged her brother, the more he replied, 'No suitable grooms are available.'

Prativa remained still unmarried at the age of fifteen. Would anyone believe that no groom could be found even with a dowry of ten thousand rupees? The neighbours began to criticise Nagendra and swear at him, 'Such a worthless uncle. What a shame!' But it had no effect on him. Village calumnies and animadversions dissipate in the surrounding cornfields. Huge hogs could hide in those immense jute fields – couldn't a few words of criticism lie there in secret also?

Saudamani realised that her husband's hard earned money had fattened Nagendra and helped him to marry his daughters; only her own Prativa remained unwed. A female poet, Mankumari, has sung:

Moan, oh sisters. I too shall cry,
If nothing else I'll shed a few tears,
For you all, in loneliness.
Whenever I see an elderly unwed woman,
Not blessed with marriage – I shall cry,
Whenever I spot a girl living with co-wives,
Heart-broken, I shall cry;
Whenever I see a woman a helpless dependent,
I shall cry and pray for her death,
This base, undignified life I wish to offer,
To propitiate your life. So worthless I am,
Only lament I can, and lament I'll for you, oh sisters, for ever.

I cannot of course agree and cry in unison with the poet. She wants to spend all her energy in moaning. Nothing more! Such shedding of tears in seclusion has reduced us to our present hapless state.

Readers of this essay will probably conclude that I have taken up writing only to demonise our brothers. Not so! I have not used caustic words against the men in any place, or condemned anyone as wicked, diabolic or heartless. I have only documented the distress of the women. Isn't there a saying, 'narrating one's personal sorrow results in slander?' That is what has happened in this case. The chronicle of women's sorrow has somehow become a vilification of the men.

The good news is that we have many men who allow their wives to live in peace and homely happiness. But, regretfully, we have to acknowledge that in many families, the husband acts wrongfully and deplorably as the ‘master’.

Now our worthy men will perhaps appreciate that I made no mistake in saying, ‘We are homeless in this wide world.’ Every letter of that statement is true. No matter what circumstances in which we live, we always live in the house of our protectors. That home of the family head may not always shield us from sun, rain or winter, yet when the thatched roof of the dilapidated hut gets worn out – its last bit of straw covering gets blown away by a cyclone, and we spend the whole night getting drenched by the dripping rainwater, the flash of lightning dazzles our eyes, the roaring of thunder causes tremor on earth and in our hearts, and we fear every moment if we will get killed by a bolt of lightning – we still live in our keeper’s home.

When we live in a palace as a queen or a princess, still then we live in our keeper’s home. Again, when that enormous edifice comes crashing in an earthquake – and we get injured while rushing down the stairs, and seek shelter in the cowshed, bloodied and almost unconscious – still then we live in our keeper’s home.

Or, even if we live as wives, daughters or daughters-in-law in a middle-class family, we live in our keeper’s home. And when, on the night of the new moon in the month of *Chaitra* [last month of the Bengali calendar], wicked people get into a fray and set the master’s house on fire, and everything in it keeps furiously burning and we somehow save our lives by running and taking shelter under a tree, and continue to shiver – then too we live in our keeper’s home. (I am not sure if we have to live in a keeper’s home even inside the grave!)

I am using the word ‘home’ in Bengali to mean what it stands for in English. The circumstances in which the queen, Rama, Hamida, Jobeda and others live, as shown earlier – do they live in the happiness of a home? Wherever there is health and happiness, that’s where the home is. When one becomes a widow, the in-laws’ house becomes unliveable in a sense, and the wretched woman looks to shelter with her father or brother. The adverse outcome of this is depicted in Saudamini’s case. There is a saying in Hindi:

When the house is on fire, I rush to the forest for refuge,
But the forest is on fire too, what can the forest do,
When my fortune is in flames?

Therefore I say, we do not even have a little hut to call our home. No other creature in the animal-world is destitute like us. Everyone has a home – only we don’t.⁸

⁸ This treatise has not been written for sisters who live a happy family life. It is meant for those who are homeless.