The Challenges of Being a Woman in Bangladesh: Meenaâ??s Story

Description

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Authorâ??s Memo

I think the need to tell a story started at a young age when I would sit with my grandfather and hear tales of old Bengal, life before the partition between Pakistan and India, how the formation of Bangladesh came to be and all the myths and legends of a time long gone. When I realized that I could use my words to express my thoughts and observations, I felt I had a responsibility to give voice to some of the issues I saw or felt were wrong or needed to be addressed. One of my earliest publications was of a young girl who I saw on the streets and how it affected me as a child who did not have to worry about food or shelter. As I grew older, I realized more and more that I wanted to use my words to speak about my feelings of injustice, inequality and the human struggles that we all face on a daily. I needed to use autoethnography to make what I was reading and writing about to create a relation and to feel that my ethnicity, gender or background did not isolate me from English literature, rather it made me a part of it. This is how I can write about the challenges of being a woman in Bangladesh.

When I wrote â??Traditional Marriageâ?• I used my own experiences and feelings to create a character to show how society can dominate and subdue women. For â??Ami Tau Amiâ?• the inspiration was my mother, who grew up at a time when women were discouraged from working or having a profession. And â??Ashaâ?• was the story of a young lady who came to work for my mother; she was no longer accepted by her husband because she could not have children. My stories are meant to give women

from Bangladesh a chance to show their pain, strength and resilience. It is a way for me to try to connect with the rest of the world despite the differences in language and culture.

I wrote â??Traditional Marriage,â?• a story about a young woman named Meena who falls in love and marries Sumon, with all the ideological dreams of a young woman in love. But as she had to live in a joined family structure with her in-laws, it meant that she was constantly verbally abused and emotionally tortured, belittled by her in laws. As a female and a daughter in law, she was considered an easy prey for societies cruelty. Meena wanted to be financially independent, but was unable to do so, again to please her husband and society. Meena was in a vicious cycle as she was not allowed to work or use her education and create her own self-worth. Her continuous humiliation and emotional suffering, finally forces her to make some drastic choices. The result is Meena taking her own life. She leaves a note for her husband that perhaps her death will free him. Emotional trauma and suicide are still a taboo in many societies and Meena too felt that she had to accept her mental suffering, till she reached a point where she felt that it would be better if she killed herself.

I wrote about Meena after my marriage, painful though it maybe to write this, but I was always treated with passive aggression by my mother-in-law. But unlike Meena, I was supported by my husband and parents. However, because of society and cultural belief that women were to hold the family together, I felt that by letting my mother-in-law bully me, I was actually helping â??my family. My mother and husband did not agree with this and would tell me otherwise, but society would remind me of my role and I would think to myself maybe next time it would be better. But it never got better. It took my motherâ??s death for me to finally push back and decide that I wanted nothing to do with societies expectations or my in-laws.

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CHAPTER 1

The hardest thing for Meena, was trying to please her mother in- law; she always failed. Something or other would always happen, a snide remark, a glare, purposeful secrets. If she would tell Meena frankly what bothered her, Meena

> would try to fix herself. Society had very little patience for daughters-in-law. It was always their fault.

On the outside she looked well: Composed, wearing a pretty floral *shalwar kameez*, and with her hair tied back into a pony tail. The bangles she wore made of gold jingled as she worked around the sitting area, putting away and adjusting things. The slightest change in alignment bothered her and so for the last hour she was busy cleaning and fixing this corner. She was of average height. Her face and body still retained the chubbiness of her teens and this added only to her misery. She was an average looking female who had gone from being carefree to fretful. The lines of worry were etched around the corner of her mouth. Marital life had taken a toll on her.

She sighed with relief when she was finally able to align the picture perfectly to the imaginary line. She knew she obsessed with little things, but she couldnâ??t help it and day by day her obsessions were increasing. She knew she fussed a little extra when there was dust or when the wiping cloths for every part of the apartment had not been separated, but she couldnâ??t help herself.

She sat on the sofa and tried to calm herself. She reflected on her life and tried not to think why today she was feeling this way, tense, edgy. A dull ache was lodged in her throat. She knew the reason; she saw it in her mind the way her mother-in- law had behaved with her in front of all the relatives. Every time she thought of her mother- in-law she wanted to shiver, not out of fright, but because of the despondency that followed after she spoke to her or met with her. Her mother â??in-law stood slim and tall. At sixty she still liked to dress up and wear the faÃ§ade of sophistication. Her friends and family adored her but her eyes would become cold the minute she would gaze upon Meena.

Perhaps, Meena thought, â??I am a disappointment to her. Her son fell in love with me and she did not get to choose a wife for her son.â?• Meena recalled how her mother-in-law had behaved at their wedding, refusing to attend any functions, threatening everyone that she would kill herself. For Meena, her wedding had been a nightmare. She hadnâ??t understood the intrigues of the elderly women who loved to gossip and laugh at the fact that Meenaâ??s mother, Anni, had a daughter who was hated by her in- laws. Meena recalled how sad her father had been and how disappointed her mother had been at the in-lawsâ?? behavior, but her parents gulped it all down for the sake of their daughter. They liked Sumon, Meenaâ??s husband. He was a tall man, very mild-mannered and endearing. He had very dark eyes and a bony face. He hated conflicts and tried not to interfere. The one time he had spoken out was when he married Meena, the very reason why Meenaâ??s mother in -law hated her even more.

The hardest thing for Meena, was trying to please her mother in- law; she always failed. Something or other would always happen, a snide remark, a glare, purposeful secrets. If she would tell Meena frankly what bothered her, Meena would try to fix herself. Society had very little patience for daughters-in-law. It was always their fault. She remembered trying to tell her other in-laws, including her father-in-law and was met with nothing but coldness. Their smiles had thawed and the answers were the same, â??She is your elder, you will respect her. You will always have to be silent, even if she has hurt your feelings.â?•

â??Butâ??

â??There is no but, our society is built on the foundation of respectability. Respect your in-laws and especially your mother-in-law.â?•

Meena knew she was no match for them, especially her mother-in-law her. She sighed as she remembered how her mother-in-law had taken her aside yesterday at her husbandâ??s cousinâ??s wedding and told her she was upset with her brother-in-law (Meenaâ??s uncle through marriage). She forbade Meena to talk to him or give *salaam* to him. Meena didnâ??t know what to do or say. Suman was busy talking to his father; she tried to call him but before he could come to her side, her uncle-in-law came. He was a pleasant man who kept to himself. He was a well to do businessman and his prosperity added to Meenaâ??s mother-in-lawâ??s dislike for him. So, *Amma* (the formal name for mother-in-law)) hated him and his family. He looked at her straight and said â??Hello, Meena.â?• Meena became red with agitation and started to wring her hands. She kept her eyes downcast, all the while wondering if she would say hello or not, or if she should listen to Amma. The one side that still hoped, knew it was wrong to not respond, but yet what if this time Amma would see that Meena did try to please her? And so Meena kept her head bowed down and did not speak to the uncle.

Amma came rushing to her side,

â??Really *bhaiya*, daughter-in-laws these days. They donâ??t even have the proper manner to greet their elders. Makes me wonder what her parents have taught her.â?•

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â??But you told meâ?¦.â??

â??Quiet, *beyadob* (rude person)! You are rude to talk back to me, go away from here.â?•

Meena rushed out of the auditorium where the wedding was being held and went to the bathroom. She howled and cried not knowing what to do or say. If she told Sumon and he brought up the topic, his mother would rant and rave and threaten to kill herself and finally her father-in-law would interfere and give them a lecture on the *bordoa* or bad luck, one received from hurting a parent. He went along with his wife, never once having the courage to stand against her.

Sumonâ??s fatherâ??s eyes always betrayed him. A tall man, with a thin frame and white hair. He could never look at Meena eye to eye and after these episodes, he would try to be extra sweet and call her â??Maâ??. Meena felt disgusted; the hypocrisy made her cringe and she asked herself again and again why an educated woman like herself was being subjected to this sort of nonsense. But it was too late. She was married and her in-laws lived upstairs which meant there was never any getting away from them.

She had eventually gone back to the auditorium, all the while telling herself to be strong, yet her heart had pounded and bile had formed in her mouth. She would not give Amma the pleasure of seeing her retreating back to her home. She might not be able to vocalize herself, but she would show her. So, she went back and encountered the cold stares of all the murubbis or older relatives, who had already decided that she was a rude woman, who did not know her place in life. Her inner self shrank against the coldness of the elders.

> It seemed to her that all the dreams she had as a child of making her own money and way in the world were slowly being stripped away one by one. Is that the price one had to pay to be with the one they loved?

CHAPTER 2

Somehow, she had managed to finish the ceremony, all the while wearing a fake smile and trying not to think of anything. In the car, she had kept quiet. The minute they arrived home, she rushed through the door and hugged Majeda and cried once more.

â??What happened?â• asked Sumon.

She told him about the incident and he kept quiet.

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â??What to do Meena, I donâ??t know what to do. We canâ??t even move out as my salary is still not very high and Amma knows this. This whole building is in her name so I am just living here and not paying any rent. She feels she is doing us a favor. I donâ??t know what to do anymore. But I will try to be there for you.â•

Meena looked at him wanting to say many of the things that stormed within her, such as standing up more for her, but she knew that already Sumon was disliked by most of the family members because they felt he indulged Meena and was disobedient to his mother. And how could she berate him for not standing up for her, when she was unable to stand up for herself. None of them wanted to hear the other side, for how can a society built on the foundations of so many years of tradition suddenly change for her. Meena knew it was hopeless to want changes, but a part wondered if it was the fate of women like her to be at the mercy of in-laws. Here she had thought that her education would protect her, but against the united front of society even an educated Meena balked.

Meena had tried to keep herself busy with her part time work at a local NGO where she helped the American councilors translate. She knew she could get a better paying job, but she wanted to come home on time for Sumon and fix up the house. Sumon insisted that his mother would find more reasons to complain if she worked full time. It seemed to her that all the dreams she had as a child of making her own money and way in the world were slowly being stripped away one by one. Is that the price one had to pay to be with the one they loved? Or did she have to give up more because she was a female? But perhaps it was time to look for something better. But her inner voice stormed at her, wasnâ??t she supposed to stay home and look after the house? Would she end up disappointing Sumon also?

Ma, her mother, kept on telling her that it was her choice to get married here. If Meena had agreed to an arranged marriage, as was the norm in Dhaka, none of this would have happened. Now that she was in this situation she couldnâ??t even complain. Ma had made it clear that once you got married it was for life. Still Ma understood her sadness and tried in her no-nonsense manner to soothe her. Her father had decided to remain quiet the few times she had gone home crying. Her ally and her comforter, other than her family and friends was Majeda, the maid; Ma had sent her to stay with Meena. Majeda had been in their family for almost twenty years. She was a small woman, shriveled in size. Her hair

was white and dark. Her eyes were a clear black and she always wore her sari like that of the villagers, with one turn. She always covered her head and although she wore a serene expression, Meena, however, knew how deadly her tongue could become.

Majeda would console her whenever she was sad and would tell her that Allah will one day make her Amma realize her mistakes. Meena doubted it. Majeda tried her best, in her own way to protect Meena. She had gone to her village and had brought a charm for her. A silver square *tabis* with *doa* written inside to protect her from harm. Majeda was convinced that her Amma used charms to cover peopleâ??s eyes, so no one saw her for what she was. Meena did not believe in all this, but a part of her wondered if it was possible.

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> â??I donâ??t care how long it takes, each and every day I will make you suffer and make you pay for my sonâ??s disobedience.â?•

CHAPTER 3

Everyday Amma did something to upset her. It was either by calling her and complaining that her music was bothering her, or she would send one of her guests to Meenaâ??s apartment who would try and advise Meena to try and become a better daughter-in-law. She would throw a dinner party and forget to invite her. She would not answer Meenaâ??s calls and then have the servant call Meena to say she was busy. The list was endless. Women, Meena thought to herself, as she fixed a corner, were capable of the greatest of cruelties, especially when pride was concerned.

Meena knew as long as she was married, she would have to endure all sorts of humiliation and pain. Recalling the events were always painful and like today, it sent Meena into a frenzy of cleaning. While cleaning, she remained silent, all the while her inner world was chaotic, seeped into discussions of faults and hopelessness. During these times, Sumon seemed to realize her need to dust and so he would sit quietly in a corner and wait for her to speak or finish cleaning.

The next day after Suman had left for work, the bell rang. Majeda was telling someone that Meena was not feeling well and so was resting. She then heard her mother-in-lawâ??s shrill voice. She pushed the fragile Majeda aside and entered. She looked thunderous.

â??Why did you leave early yesterday, Meena? Every time you are asked to do anything you conveniently escape.â?•

She sat down, carefully fixing her white sari. She knew she looked attractive while Meena looked down at herself and wondered what offended Amma more, Meenaâ??s obvious lack of figure or Meenaâ??s

clothes. Ammaâ??s face was getting darker as she waited for Meenaâ??s reply. Meenaâ??s inner voice broke out and before she could stop herself, she said,

â??You, youâ??-tricked me.â?•

â??What? How dare you, do you know who you are talking to? How dare you? You are nothing. I can get my son married again and rid him of someone like you.â?•

For the first time, Meena did not listen to the years of discipline and training.

â??You, on purpose made me look bad. Why do you hate me so much?â?•

Amma gave her a look of contempt. Her mouth became a thin line and her eyes slit-like.

â??I donâ??t like you because my son chose you when I should have been the one to choose his spouse. I donâ??t care how long it takes, each and every day I will make you suffer and make you pay for my sonâ??s disobedience.â?•

She got up and left without a thought. Meena sat down and felt numb.

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> The darkness was spreading inside her and the silence was replaced by a voice.
> It grew louder and continued to nag her.

CHAPTER 4

Meena didnâ??t know why she felt so numb, this was not the first time she had shared such scenes with her mother-in- law. Yet, finally hearing that Amma still planned to get rid of her made her heart thunder and scream. What if she was successful? How could Meena prevent such a thing? Her parents didnâ??t have space and they would never let her move in with her husband. Again traditions had to be maintained. The daughter had to live with her husband when she got married. What would happen to her if she was separated from Sumon? Would she be able to manage by herself? Her inner voice battled telling her she would not survive. A weak voice told her she could, she was educated. But the stronger voice asked her if education was enough to survive in a male and elderly dominated society that believed strongly in tradition. Her weak voice quietened down, knowing that she could not win. Just like all the other times Meena had not won. Just like she never won against her mother-in-law.

The day she and Sumon had declared that they would be eating separately from Amma as Majeda was cooking for them, Amma had screamed and accused Meena of being a witch who had wielded magic on her Sumon. Meena and Sumon had kept quiet, but from then on, they had not eaten with her.

Mealtimes had been painful before, where Amma would comment or pass a remark that would not sit well with Meena and so, she had decided to not eat together anymore and Sumon had agreed. But it had led to weeks of Sumon hearing lectures from both his parents.

There were so many instances where Meena had to gulp down her feelings. The time her mother had come to her house and her mother-in-law had stopped to say that she needed to have Majeda help her servant clean the fridge. Amma had seen her mother and did not even return her salaam or greeting. She looked passed her and proceeded to talk and then walked out. Meena had looked at her mother and seen the red tinge of embarrassment. She had felt helpless and violated for allowing Amma to come to her so-called home and humiliate her mother. But as always, she was helpless. From then on, both her parents had refused to come and so she would go over to their house instead.

Meena sat in her room in solitude wondering why she wasnâ??t stronger, more efficient. If she tried to really budget harder, maybe then she and Sumon would be able to find a place to move to, a cheaper place. But would Sumon agree? He liked living in this flat. When she had met Sumon she thought that they would be able to overcome anything. She had thought that eventually Sumonâ??s mother would come to like her. She had wanted to badly to please Amma. Meena had dreamed of the day she and Amma would have a great relationship and Amma would embrace her into her family. Now, she wondered if it would ever happen. She would always be on the outside and worst of all, Sumon would also slowly lose his family because of her.

A day later Amma called Meena upstairs. She got up from her reading and sighed. She combed her hair, tidied and composed herself. She tried to calm the voices within her. She climbed the stairs and entered her in-lawâ??s apartment. Amma had spared no expenses at decorating her apartment. Everything had to be the best. But she did not even want to give her old things to Meena. So Meena had to scrape and slowly buy her furniture and appliances. Her parents had helped to a certain extent, but how much could she take from them without being embarrassed?

She went to the living room and immediately her heart started pounding. Sumonâ??s Uncle, whom Amma had told her to ignore, was sitting there. He wore a serene expression. But Meena was immediately embarrassed as she realized that she had fallen for her Ammaâ??s tricks and had kept quiet when he had said hello. Meena gave her salaams and kept her eyes down.

â??Meena apologize to Uncle for being such a byadob.â?•

â??No, no,â?• said Uncle, â??there is no need. Meena didnâ??t hear me. There were so many people. I donâ??t know why you are making a big deal out of it. Meena is always very well-mannered.â?•

Hearing this, Ammaâ??s eyes become cold and her face darkened, â??You donâ??t know what she is like. I donâ??t trust her. She is the one who turned Sumon against me.â?•

Meena continued to look down. Darkness was enfolding her. She blinked to keep it at bay. Her heart hammered, the voices within her were silent.

â??*Na na bhabi*, you are mistaken, young people will always do what they need to do. Itâ??s not her fault. Please, I donâ??t want the poor thing to feel bad. No need Meena, come and sit down.â?•

â??Of course, she will not sit down. I will not have her sit down and think that nothing is wrong. I did not accept her then, I do not accept her now and any brats that she thinks she will have, I will not accept them either.â?•

â??Now now, sister donâ??t be so cruelâ?•â??â??â??

Meena did not hear any more. Her heart had frozen. What she had kept inside her heart and was a secret from even Sumon was that she suspected she was pregnant. When she had finally had the courage to visit the doctor, she found out she had a tumor and perhaps she would never be able to have children. As devastating as it was Meena had hoped that perhaps one of the spiritual healers would be able to help her. But now she realized that even her children were doomed. They would never be accepted and forever have to hear about how flawed their mother was.

Somewhere deep down she had hoped that may be someday a child would be able to bridge the gap, but now even that hope was squished. How could Amma be so cruel, so heartless? Meena knew the answer. Her mother-in-law was capable of kindness but only towards those whom she liked. She hated Meena and hence no matter what Meena did, Amma would never be able to love her or trust her. She left the room, without waiting to hear anymore and ran upstairs. She sat down on her bed. Meena felt as though she was incapable of thinking or feeling. She could just see her mother-in-law complaining to her father-in-law that Meena had been rude to her. The darkness was spreading inside her and the silence was replaced by a voice. It grew louder and continued to nag her. Majeda was busy cooking. Meena closed the door.

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She continued to pray and hope that this was another of Meenaâ??s spells where she was sad and had locked herself for a good cry; she would be coming out soon. But soon became a while.

CHAPTER 5

Several hours later, Majeda knocked on her door but got no reply. She began to worry. A part of her was uneasy. She wished she had gone with Meena. She called out Meenaâ??s name and banged on the door, but no sound came out. She sat down outside the room and started praying, waiting for Sumon to come home. She didnâ??t know how to use the phone and Meenaâ??s parents lived too far away. If she went upstairs Meenaâ??s mother-in-law would scold her and tell her to go away. She continued to pray and hope that this was another of Meenaâ??s spells where she was sad and had locked herself for a good cry; she would be coming out soon. But soon became a while.

When Sumon broke open the door, he found Meena in bed. She looked peaceful, but he knew she was no longer with them. The bottle of sleeping pills was completely empty. He had rushed her to the hospital, but they had said it was too late. On her study table she had left a note: *â??I am not strong enough to win against her and society. My parents have suffered enough embarrassment. I wish to end it all and give you the chance to move on, marry someone of their choice and be happy. Forgive me and understand why I did this. But to live in the shadows and always feel I am not good enoughâ??- I canâ??tâ??â??*

When Sumon gave this letter to his mother, there was no expression on her face. Her mind told her heart which was a little fluttery, she was right and that it was a good thing to be rid of Meena once and for all.

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