Complete translations.

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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) 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 a 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

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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, Manus’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

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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

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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 Sakawat 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
Sharafat’s 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
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 sati\(^3\) 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

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\(^3\) 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 spinster 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

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\(^4\) 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.
**Introduction**

‘Nurse Nelly’ is one of Rokeya’s best known short stories. It was first published in December 1919 (Bengali calendar: Agrahayan, 1326) in Saogat, a Bengali magazine; later, in 1922, it was included in the second volume of her book, Motichur (Sweet Globules). The story is set in colonial Bengal and narrates the tragic tale of a young Bengali Muslim woman, nineteen-year-old Nayeema, who is married into a wealthy family and has two children by her England-returned District Collector husband, but who is coaxed by a group of missionary women into converting to Christianity, resulting eventually not only in her own destruction and death but also in the destruction of her entire family. The author claims that the story is based on a true incident; however, it is not clear if it is related to members of her own immediate family. It is possible that the character of the uncle is based on Rokeya’s own father, a fun-loving, extravagant man who lost his entire ancestral inheritance, a sprawling zamindari, long before his death, and subsequently spent the last years of his life in hardship and poverty, incurring huge debts. Moreover, Rokeya’s biographer and close associate, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, cites the passage in the story describing the narrator’s ancestral home, as Rokeya’s parental home in Pairaband, Rangpur, where the author was born and brought up. Having said this, it should be pointed out that incidents of religious proselytisation by Christian missionaries were very commonplace during the colonial era, and it is possible that Rokeya wrote the story mixing fact with fiction in order to criticise the phenomenon.

The Christian missionaries began coming to India to seek ‘salvation of heathen souls’ towards the beginning of the nineteenth century. During the early years, however, they were seen as a threat to the profits of the East India Company and deemed so ‘subversive a menace to tranquillity’ that they were banned by company officials from entering Calcutta. But as time passed, the missionaries became more popular and influential and created an impact not only in the British Parliament but also on the company’s directors, paving the way for a new Act in 1813. This removed the company’s sweeping ban on ‘missionary enterprise’ and opened the colony to ‘licensed’ missionaries and their gospel of evangelicism, thus allowing them to engage in activities of “civilising” India’s “poor, benighted native souls”.” Together with the introduction of English education in Indian schools through Macaulay’s Minutes of 1835, this measure eventually became one of the most potent ways of perpetuating colonial rule in the subcontinent.

The story depicts the fatal consequences of this colonial practice on one Muslim family in the early years of the twentieth century. The story is told in flashback, and as the narrative progresses we are informed that Nayeema, a nineteen-year-old mother of two children, first became a victim of the missionary nuns when she was admitted in a woman’s hospital for

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4 Wolpert 207.
5 Wolpert 208.


medical treatment. Nayeema comes from an affluent family but, having been brought up in a rural area by her uncle’s family after the death of her parents, she didn’t get an opportunity for education. This makes her gullible and vulnerable, as without education she lacks the skills to evaluate what is good and right for her and her loved ones. She is hardly aware of the values and teachings of her own religion or culture; therefore, it takes little effort for the evangelical nuns to instil doubts about her own religion in her impressionable mind, and convince her that the religion of the ‘Other’ is superior. After the conversion, she is re-named ‘Nelly’, and taken away from her family as well as her familiar surroundings in Bengal to a far-off Lucknow, so that her ‘deliverance’ will not be endangered through reconversion to Islam. This sets her on a path of slow destruction and subsequent death from her guilt and anxiety of abandoning her family as well as her faith, while her mother-in-law (also her aunt and de facto mother, who brought her up from the age of three after Nayeema’s own mother passed away) and her two minor children also meet their end of life from the pain and trauma of Nayeema’s inexplicable abnegation and betrayal of the family. The story ends with Nayeema’s return to and ‘reunion’ with the family, not in life but in death, as her corpse is sent from Lucknow for burial in the family cemetery.

The story elucidates Rokeya’s stock theme of the importance of women’s education and empowerment, as she illustrates how women, when they are left ignorant, may act foolishly like Nayeema and become a source of blight rather than benediction for their families, and thus augur doom for an entire society. However, the author enriches the story by weaving into it the theme of anti-colonial nationalism, as part of her objective is to underscore the evil of conversion, which was used as a strategy by the colonisers to destabilise the local societies; it was a way of ‘thingifying’ the native subjects and reinforcing the colonial bastion. In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon argues:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.6

In ‘Nurse Nelly’ Rokeya gives an example of how this baleful colonial objective was accomplished through a deliberate intervention and subversion of the religion and family life of the colonised people.

It should be emphasised, however, that Rokeya’s intention in the story is not to criticise Christianity as a religion, as she was respectful of all religions. Her invective is directed instead at the ‘salvation-mongering’ missionaries who used Christianity as a tool to empower themselves and to serve the colonial cause. In other words, in Rokeya’s view, these evangelical missionaries were not sincere in their service to the religion or society; rather, they used the religion to ‘enslave’ the local people and to exert their cultural supremacy over them; although they spoke of redeeming ‘benighted’ and ‘fallen’ souls and helping the deprived and the dispossessed, their spirit was more akin to that of the ‘hunter’ than of the ‘hunted’.

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Nurse Nelly

I

My younger sister-in-law, Khuki, had been suffering from a mysterious illness for three years. At last, on her doctor’s advice, she went to Lucknow [capital of Uttar Pradesh] for a change of air. I, too, went with her. God willing, several of us travelled together – Khuki’s husband, son and a few other family members.

A friend of ours, Mr Hem, was living in Lucknow. On hearing that his wife, Bimala Devi, was sick and had been admitted to a women’s hospital, I went to see her. She was confined to her bed and had to depend on nurses to change her and to dress the ulcer wound on her arm. In short, she was wholly reliant on the nurses’ supervision. I was there for about two hours and saw some five nurses attending to her various needs. But the one who took away the bucket full of discharges of blood and pus from her body … her face struck me as somewhat familiar.

I used to visit Mr Hem’s wife every alternate day but frankly, I was not so keen to see Bimala; I went there, rather, to take another look at that sad, haggard face of the nurse, this icon of sorrow. That face of hers, familiar yet unrecognisable, used to perturb me. One day Bimala asked, ‘Well, why do you look at Nurse Nelly so intently?’ Hiding my real reason, I said, ‘Her haggard face makes me so sad.’

Bimala said, ‘Yes she is very unlucky. I also feel for her. But what to do? It is impossible to help her with money. She gets only six rupees a month – not enough to feed herself. At first, I used to give her a quarter or a half a rupee coin but later I found out that Sister Riva would take it from her and divide it among all the hospital attendants – sometimes Sister Nelly would be lucky enough to get a fraction from it. How unfair of Sister Riva! All the dirty work is done by Nelly, but she gets barely enough to eat.’

I asked if Nelly was from the sweeper caste.

Bimala replied, ‘No, she is a Bengali Christian. It is rumoured that she was a housewife in a middleclass Muslim family once. Some nuns coaxed her into converting to Christianity and leave home. They changed her name to “Nelly”. She has been asked to look after us, I mean Bengali patients, because she knows Bengali.

‘She is prohibited from visiting the Muslim quarters lest someone would convert her back to Islam. There is also a rumour that Nelly can even read the Qur’an.’

My misgivings multiplied when I heard that Nelly could read the Qur’an. God knew which Muslim family she had disgraced to become an outcast. Alas, such humiliation of the Qur’an! Christian Nelly – sweeper Nelly – she held the Qur’an with the same hands she used to clean the waste bucket, full of the detestable blood and pus. As a matter of fact, Nelly did the work of a sweeper at the hospital, but her superiors called her Nurse Nelly only to please her.

I continued to come to the hospital as usual on the pretext of visiting Bimala, but I never found the opportunity to speak with Nelly as I would have liked. Nelly also came to us frequently with the excuse of work – or otherwise she would gaze at me from a distance with her beautiful wide eyes. If our eyes ever met accidentally, she would look down and walk away with a show of reluctance. Though I made several
attempts, I didn’t know how to get close to Nelly. On the rare occasion when I got the chance to ask her something, she would only weep uncontrollably. However, an opportune moment finally came for me to interact with Nelly.

At last it was decided that Khuki would undergo surgery on her festering wound. But I was determined not to let her be admitted to the hospital under any circumstance. I had a fierce argument with Khuki’s husband on this; he tried in every way to make me understand the benefits of the hospital; he employed every art and science of reasoning, and even gave the example of Mr Hem’s wife to emphasise his point. But the ruin once caused by the hospital had scorched me to the core. That wound hadn’t healed yet. I didn’t explain these details to Khuki’s husband, but finally I won through sheer persistence. Exclaiming ‘Long live women’s whim,’ Khuki’s husband gave up all arguments and conceded that the surgery would be performed at home.

A senior doctor from the hospital, Miss Folly, arrived with her team at the appointed time. She had two or three nurses with her as well. We were Bengalis and didn’t know a whit of Hindi; therefore, Nurse Nelly had to come along to act as a translator. Everyone left after the surgery; only two of the nurses, Nelly and Lizi, stayed behind to take care of the patient.

The next day, during a leisure time after lunch and Khuki’s medication, I asked Nelly discreetly, ‘Nurse, where are you from?’ In reply, she fell at my feet and, somehow restraining her tears, said, ‘Bubujan [Elder Sister], couldn’t you recognise me?’

What! My head began to turn, and suddenly I felt utterly exhausted. Yes, alas, I recognised her! What a brutal truth, a dreadful truth, I had come upon. Nelly recounted her long, miserable story, and every word of that account was washed in tears.

II

My parental home was in the village of …pur. After the death of my grandfather, my father and paternal uncle divided the inherited property between them in equal halves. With the exception of their servants and maids, there were only three people in my uncle’s family – Uncle himself, his wife and their only daughter, Nayeema. In our family, with five siblings, we numbered seven in all. Yet all the time we used to hear Uncle didn’t have enough money, he was in lots of debt, etcetera.

We were quite secure financially, and lived a happy life with plenty to eat and more than enough jewellery to wear. Where was the equal to our magnificent home? It was an immense dwelling standing in the middle of about one hundred acres of rent-free land and surrounded by a thick grove on all sides, with tigers, boars, jackals and all else harbouring in there. We didn’t have a clock at home, but that didn’t prevent us from keeping to our daily routine. In the morning, we got up from bed with the lilting calls of doves, Indian nightingales and other native birds. At sunset, the yelping of jackals alerted us that it was time for evening prayer. The loud cry of ospreys made us aware that it was three in the morning. Our childhood was spent in utmost happiness in a small village surrounded by lush nature.

After a period, my aunt passed away, leaving behind her only daughter of three years. My uncle was at his wit’s end to cope with the situation. Bringing up his

Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain. ‘Nurse Nelly’, translated by Mohammad A. Quayum.
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daughter was his main problem. One day my mother said to reassure him, ‘Why are you so worried? Nayeema’s mother is no more, but I am still here. The same arms that have raised my three daughters, Jabela, Hamida and Abida, won’t they be able to care for Nayeema as well?’ It was as if Uncle had found a sudden rescue in a boundless sea of danger. The next day he left Nayeema, with five maids, at our house.

Nayeema was the youngest of all our brothers and sisters, so we loved her immensely. Our parents also loved her more than all of us, I believe. In this way, Nayeema continued to grow up like a princess, showered with care and love.

We didn’t care much about higher education in the village, and whatever little training we got, Nayeema also received it. In the opinion of our friends and relatives, nothing was more counterproductive in this world than the education of women. Most of the time was devoted to learning things of practical, not academic value. Weaving reticulated bags, grooming hair, dicing areca nuts, shredding coconut, grinding cumin, making diapered bedcovers, etcetera, which were considered essential tasks to learn – Nayeema had gradually mastered them all.

Nayeema had been living with us since she was three years old. In the meantime, Uncle had passed away. He had squandered the entire share of his property, except Nayeema’s mother’s ornaments, which he had handed over to Father before his death.

After living away for eight or ten years, my eldest brother, Mr Jamal Ahmed, had returned home, being transferred and promoted to the post of District Magistrate. After a few days, I came from my in-laws’ house to see him, and so did several of our relatives. Our house was bustling with people.

One day, we four sisters were chitchatting when suddenly Bhaijan [Elder Brother] stepped into the room. Addressing us, he said, ‘Do you girls not study? How do you live with such obtuse minds? Oh, yes, Nayeema, what do you study?’

Nayeema replied, ‘I have read the Qur’an. Now I am learning its translation from our eldest sister.’

Brother snapped with a chuckle, ‘That’s all! Don’t you study anything else – a bit of Bengali or English?’

I narrated my life-experience of eighteen years and said, ‘Bhaijan, you have studied a lot of English and Bengali, gone to England, and have become a District Magistrate or a Collector, many years after returning home. What will Nayeema gain from studying English? Can she become a District Collector?’

Bhaijan replied, ‘If Nayeema gets a good education, she can become a Collector’s wife. She’ll get a good husband, be married to a good family.’

We all began to giggle. I immediately informed mother of Bhaijan’s strange remark. With a grin, I said, ‘Bhaijan thinks if Nayeema gets a good education she can become a Collector’s wife.’ Listening to me, Mother’s face grew solemn and she said, ‘Okay, right, so will it be.’

III

Our house was in a flurry. Bhaijan was getting married to Nayeema. We were ecstatic that our ‘baby doll’ Nayeema was becoming our Bhabijan [Elder Sister-in-law]. Our youngest sister Abida was in a huff; she was utterly adamant not to touch Nayeema’s feet in obeisance, because Nayeema was two years younger than her. Everyone
taunted her about it to madness. In the meantime, Bhaijan was also extremely annoyed, livid with rage, to be truthful. He was England-returned, strictly opposed to child-marriage; how could he marry a ten-year old girl and make a clown of himself? How would he show his face to Bengal’s cultured community? He put all the blame on me and said, ‘Jabeda is the source of all mischief. I said something playfully the other day and she went and informed Mother about it, and now this horror.’

Whether Bhaijan was angry or whatever else, his chief virtue was that he was never disobedient to our parents or relatives. A few pleasing words from Mother and some words of advice from Father made him yield easily. Mother protested that she had brought up the orphan girl with utmost love and care and wouldn’t allow her to be married to a stranger, and so on. Bhaijan didn’t object any more. Like an obliging, obedient boy, he prepared himself for the wedding.

A distant sister-in-law of ours said to me, teasing Bhaijan, ‘Well, aren’t we going to paste henna on the England-returned gentleman’s hands?’ Bhaijan replied in a suppressed anger, ‘Do whatever you please! If smearing henna or something worse makes you happy, I have no objection. I have decided to bear everything without a fuss – torment me as much as you wish!’

I immediately made some henna paste and put it on his two hands. I didn’t intend to keep it there for too long, but I got involved in something else and forgot about it altogether. When I returned after a long stretch, I saw poor Bhaijan still sitting there indifferently, resting his hands on the two arms of the easy chair. I quickly brought some water and began to wash his hands. Seeing deep red marks on his palms, Bhaijan became furious. He had acquired a lot of knowledge and had even studied Botany, but he was not aware of the peculiar efficacy of henna. In a flash, he pulled his hands away, went to the toilet and made generous use of soap and sponge on the marks. But the henna proved to be stubbornly unyielding.

IV

In a woman’s hospital in … city, a Muslim woman from a privileged background had been staying for two months. Her six-year-old son, Jafar, was also with her. There was no lack of care for her at the hospital. All the senior and junior lady doctors and nurses looked after her by turns. In short, she was getting a royal treatment there. Her husband and younger brother-in-law came to see her every day. Her mother-in-law also visited her from time to time, with the woman’s five year old daughter, Jamila. The patient was my sister-in-law Nayeema.

Mother was not willing to send Nayeema to the hospital. But when her health gradually continued to deteriorate, as a last resort Bhaijan said to mother, ‘Mother, I have never disobeyed you so far, but now since somebody’s life depends on getting treatment at the hospital, please do not oppose it. I’ll not be able to honour your word today.’ Bhaijan regretted transgressing maternal advice that day for the rest of his life.

In the next room, some missionary women were chattering and laughing. One of them bragged, ‘We’ll see this time! Our damned critics won’t be able to ridicule us any more that we convert only the famine-stricken, hungry, homeless people.’

Second woman: ‘With a kill like this, even our Lord Bishop in Calcutta would be gratified.’

Third woman: ‘Gee, you brag too much! How challenging can it be to lure a nineteen year old girl (even if she is a mother of two, she is still a juvenile) and convert to Christianity?’

First woman: ‘May not be difficult … but it will create a ripple – the whole of Bengal will be in a clamour. It’s no joke to cajole a Collector’s wife.’

Second woman: ‘Come, it’s getting dark. Today I’ll sing devotional songs in Madam Nayeema’s room. She’ll be in the hospital for another month, so there is enough time for us.’

A few missionary women visited Nayeema all the time. Attending and nursing patients was their highest doctrine, and Nayeema was easily charmed by their seemingly selfless, unassuming love. In the evening, they sang devotional songs in praise of Jesus’s grace and mercy and thus convinced her of the way for her to save herself from hellfire. Nayeema didn’t know anything about the philosophy, science and history of her own religion – thus the glory of Christ created a deep mark on her impressionable mind easily. Her body began to recuperate, but her soul began to grow poisoned. To one who has never seen light, the glow of a firefly seems as luminous as the sun. Such was Nayeema’s case.

V

After three months, Nayeema – no, my revered sister-in-law – returned from the hospital. But she had changed a lot; she was no longer the soft-spoken, sweet-smiling Nayeema. She was not affable with anyone any more. Everyone thought that her long bout of illness had made her peevish. Hoping that the fresh air of the countryside would bring back her affectionate, cheerful self, Bhaijan sent her to our village home with Mother. But it didn’t work. She failed to forget her companions at the hospital and loathed the open air of the farmland.

One day, Nayeema demanded from her mother-in-law, why had she not been given higher education? What did they lack? What prevented them? Mother kept staring at her daughter-in-law in bewilderment. With an uncertain smile, she said, ‘What does the foolish girl say?’

Nayeema: ‘I am saying baloney! You have kept me in the state of a pure brute. You didn’t give me a shred of education that would allow me to mingle with decent people. My husband asked that I be given education, but hearing it, you rushed into our matrimonial bondage.’

Mother: ‘You were never such a harpy before, my child. Where did you learn such language? I brought you up since you were three years old. You were so precious to us; that’s why we have kept you in the family, instead of marrying you to a stranger. And you call it bondage?’

Nayeema: ‘What do the illiterate know about the value of education? That’s why you didn’t think it important. All you knew was marriage.’

Mother: ‘Child, we’ll see how you give education to your daughter and turn her into a memsahib. I am not against education, but living in the countryside we didn’t have the right facilities. There was no religious school, primary school or school for girls. Even good female teachers were not available to tutor at home. Now having lived in the city, if you can arrange for good education, that should be fine.’
That’s exactly what happened. There were hardly any facilities for women’s education in the countryside, and even if there were some schools for Muslim girls like an oasis in the desert, why would the privileged class send their daughters there? What else could they do in the provincial areas? Therefore, several missionary women were appointed by turn for Jamila’s education. In their customary way, they began their lessons by telling stories from the Bible.

Nayeema didn’t seem satisfied with that. Eventually, a European governess was appointed for her daughter. By gradually spreading her influence, the governess became my Bhabijan’s companion, Jamila’s instructor and the guardian of the family, all at once. Miss Lawrence was now indispensable in the household; she had lured everyone in the family with her genial ways.

VI

There was a huge uproar in the area. The local court house was teeming with a vast multitude of people. Almost everyone living in the neighbourhood had gathered there. Why? What was the matter? District Collector Mr Jamal Ahmed’s wife, Mrs Nayeema Khatun, had run away to the colonial mission house with 25,000 rupees worth of jewellery and 17,000 rupees in cash. A complex lawsuit had been going on over it for a month. Both parties had engaged renowned lawyers. Nayeema had come to the courtroom in a palanquin. It was the day for the verdict.

Many newspaper journalists had gathered there; publishing such a sensational story would make their paper extremely appealing to readers.

Some came to watch the fun and cheer. Some came to mock and jeer. Some took the opportunity to give a pep talk against woman’s education. A few others slammed the sheer notion of women’s education. To add insult to injury, some congratulated the England-returned Mr Jamal Ahmed on his daughter having attained the height of education.

Some, saddened by the incident, came to show genuine sympathy. Some came to console and express pity. Some were terrified that if it were to continue it would be difficult to protect their own women. If a prominent Collector’s wife could run away from home enticed by the missionary ladies, what could stop it from happening to them?

Nayeema herself acknowledged that she had embraced Christianity of her own free will. She had no desire to leave home, because she had nothing against her mother-in-law and her husband. But the lack of facilities for baptism at home had forced her to take refuge at the mission house. She had renounced her husband, daughter, son, home – in a word, everything – for the sake of religion, for the love of Jesus only.

The judge wanted to settle the case amicably by saying that now that Nayeema had been baptised she could return home. But Miss Lawrence stunned everyone in the courtroom by giving a long lecture on the inimical environment in the zenith generally and the adverse condition in the inner quarters of Nayeema’s home in particular. She had become intimately aware of the secrets of the zenana by having frequented several private quarters in Bihar and Calcutta over the last ten years.

The final decree was that whatever money and jewellery Nayeema had brought with her would remain with her, but the son and the daughter would remain in the
custody of the father. Nayeema tried really hard to win the custody of her son, but she didn’t succeed.

VII

Nayeema was now living with the missionary women in the official residence of the British administrators in the area. There was no limit to pampering her. Where should they keep their proselytised memsahib – if they carry her on the head, lice attack her; if she is put on the ground, she is beaten by ants? It’s astounding to have such piety, such extraordinary self-denial, in a nineteen year old girl. She became the icon for the British missionaries; the jewel in their coronet and a cherished treasure. Such extreme indulgence and adoration bewildered Nayeema. But why was the jolly memsahib so distressed despite all the love?

Abdication from everything for the sake of Jesus seemed blissful only so long as she had not been separated from her cherished family. Gradually, as the lawsuit took an unfavourable turn and the glimmer of seeing her husband and children again vanished, Nayeema’s exultation dissipated also. She began to feel contrite on her way back from the court with the pride of victory on her shoulders. Stepping out of the palanquin, Nayeema fainted. The missionary sisters murmured ‘too hot’, and began to fan her, enclosing her in a circle. It was hot no doubt, like a heart-scorching heat!

On regaining consciousness, Nayeema confessed her sin, recited the basic article of faith in Islam again and again, and kept invoking Allah’s name. But now it was all in vain. Late at night, she would think of escaping from the place to go and seek her husband’s forgiveness. But, alas, she didn’t know the way to return home. How far was the Collector Saheb’s residence from the missionary house, and in which direction? Who would show her the way? Alas, oh alas! No one!

Eventually, feeding Nayeema also became a problem for the missionary women. Everyone worked here for a livelihood, went from house to house to teach or to preach. Why should Nayeema sit idly? At last, they asked her to work as a nurse at the hospital, but knowing that it would be unsafe to keep her in Bengal, they sent her to far-away Lucknow.

While leaving home, Nayeema had brought along a copy of the Qur’an to show to the world, by rebutting every verse in it, that Islam was a hollow religion that bred fanaticism and orthodoxy. But now she had given up on such foolish ideas, and that very copy of the Qur’an was now her only companion in sorrow. When everyone went to bed at night, she would get up, take her ablution, and sit down with the Qur’an reverentially. But she could barely recite – the continuous flow of tears from her eyes wetted the pages, so that she had to keep some blotting papers handy to wipe them. Brought up in the lap of joy, Nayeema never knew before that crying in penance could bring such solace.

Thinking of her husband was Nayeema’s main preoccupation now. He became the subject of her meditation, cogitation, and her rosary. She would pray, ‘Oh Allah, lead this miserable woman once more, just once, to the feet of her husband. You are omnipotent, capable of doing everything! Can’t you do this little favour for me? The door of atonement hasn’t shut yet; take me back, oh God, the most beneficent, the most merciful.’

Nayeema became Nurse Nelly on arrival at the Lucknow hospital. During the day, she was busy taking care of patients and had little time for prayer or recitation of the Qur’an. There were only the irrepressible tears! In the beginning, other nurses and even the lady doctors had tried to comfort her with various words of hope. But one who has lost both her religion and worldly possessions, in this life and the next; who has relinquished a free commonwealth to become a detestable sweeper; who has in her own hands set fire to a happy and prosperous home, where is the comfort for her? Therefore, at last, no one tried to console her any more.

In this way, seven long years had passed. Nelly hadn’t spent a single day during this time without crying. She somehow continued to spend her days in her emaciated body, eagerly looking forward to the night. Her only solace was that at night she had more time to pray and recite the Holy Qur’an. But on the day she was called for night duty, Nelly was deprived even of the bliss of prayer. Sobahan Allah, Glory be to Allah! There was so much peace in sitting up and praying late at night and in soaking the prayer mat with a flood of tears!

At first I couldn’t recognise Nelly in her skeletal body, but when she said, ‘Bubujan, can’t you remember me?’ I was left with no more doubt. I felt as though I had been struck by a fire bolt, and instantly slumped to the ground. How could I not recognise my own cousin-sister who had grown up in my maternal care? No wonder she could recite the Qur’an; how many Bengali Christians were capable of that? But alas! Who would have wanted to see the paradisiacal nymph Nayeema in the form of an infernal worm, in Nelly? The Nayeema, who came to our house in childhood with five maids, had now become a nursemaid to others.

Alack, o destiny! The many tricks you play,
You take us to the crest of happiness
Only to push us into the pit of sorrow!

VIII

I couldn’t restrain my tears while listening to Nelly’s story. I reminded myself repeatedly that Nayeema’s suffering was the result of her own sin; it was her due, and there was no reason for me to feel sad about it. But the story of Nelly’s disgrace, told in a distressful tone, would have splintered even a stone to pieces; what more a human being?

After finishing her own account, Nelly kept quiet for a moment and then asked about the well-being of her family. I explained to her everything as briefly and calmly as I could. I said, ‘The day Bhaijan returned home with a defeated face, having lost the lawsuit, mother heaved a sigh, ‘Ah, Nayeema,’ and instantly became bedridden. Her constant refrain to express her unbearable sorrow and anguish was ‘Ah, Nayeema.’ Bhaijan was a man and didn’t show his grief outwardly, but like a wounded lion he bore all the humiliation, shame, resentment and anger in silence.

‘Mother passed away after two months. Soon after that, poor Jamila fell ill. She didn’t dare to go close to her father, noticing his solemn face. Her only refuge was her grandmother, and having lost her, the motherless child almost began to crumble.

‘In the frenzy of high fever, Jamila would moan incoherently for her mother. She would whine, ‘Mother, why have you gone to the hospital again? Come back!'
Jafar cries for you all the time. Grandmother is also not there.’ Jamila didn’t suffer for long; death took her up in its placid lap within a few days.

‘Bhaijan was devastated by the death of Mother and Jamila in the space of days. He couldn’t take it any more. Poor Jafar also began to cry a lot. Bhaijan kept a watchful eye on him, but how long could a motherless child of one year remain healthy? He too met his death within a month.

‘Bhaijan never married again. His blissful family was reduced to names on a tomb, and his only surviving blood-relative was me. Imagine for once that graveyard of your own making, Nayeema, and picture your husband living in that cemetery.’ Before I could finish my words, Nayeema fainted and fell to the ground.

As I was planning to splash some water on Nelly’s face, Khuki’s husband knocked on the door and his grown-up daughter, Siddiqa, rushed into the room. I couldn’t tend to Nelly any more in their presence. Siddiqa then led me to her mother by the hand.

IX

By God’s grace, we returned home after Khuki regained her health. Before returning, we visited a few more cities in the north, especially Delhi, Agra and Lahore. The sight of Anarkali’s tomb in Lahore evoked the images of Emperor Akbar’s might and splendour on the one hand, and Prince Selim’s unadulterated love on the other – and I saw both simultaneously in my mind’s eye.¹

The sight of the Taj Mahal in Agra made me aware of something else. No matter how much the misogynists rage against woman’s education, the triumph of truth is inevitable. Education is vital for both men and women. Just because fire has the potential to burn down a house, can any householder do without fire?

The monument of Taj Mahal is renowned worldwide and it is considered one of the seven wonders on earth. There are very few people who haven’t heard about the Taj Mahal. Yet, how many have heard about Mumtaj Mahal, the woman who lies buried in that far-famed mausoleum? Even the exquisite Taj Mahal, built with the most beautiful marble stones, has not made the queen buried in its womb unforgettable. And what about Nurjahan Begum?² Virtually nothing has been done to

¹ Prince Selim’s beloved, Anarkali, was buried alive at the behest of Emperor Akbar. [Translator’s note: This is Rokeya’s footnote, in which she is making a reference to the legendary story of Akbar, his concubine Nadira Begum (dubbed ‘Anarkali’ for her rare beauty), and her incestuous relationship with Akbar’s son Salim, who later ascended the throne as Emperor Jahangir. Historical information is scarce on the incident. However, according to the British tourist and traveller William Finch, who came to Lahore during 1608 to 1611, when Akbar became suspicious that Anarkali, who was also the mother of his son Danial Shah, was having a secret relationship with Salim (Jahangir), he ordered her to be buried alive in the wall of Lahore Fort. It is believed that Jahangir built a splendid tomb in memory of his beloved, at the place where she was buried, after ascending the throne. The tomb survives till today and a couplet by Jahangir written on the grave in Persian reads, ‘If I could behold my beloved only once, I would remain thankful to Allah till doomsday.’ For details on the story, see http://dawn.com/2012/02/12/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history/ and http://www.wichaar.com/news/315/ARTICLE/16056/2009-09-01.html.]

² Nur Jahan, meaning ‘Light of the World’, was born of Persian parents, as Mehr-un-Nisaa, in 1577. She became the twelfth wife of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (who was her second husband). It is believed that Jahangir had problems in running the affairs of the empire, owing to his addiction to

immortalise her; her humble, ordinary tomb lies neglected and covered with trees and shrubs in a little known place in Lahore. Many even don’t know about its existence, yet Nurjahan Begum’s memory has become timeless. What is it that has made her immortal? Education! It is the grace of education which has made her a radiant and renowned figure. God forbid, the Taj Mahal can be destroyed by an earthquake or by war, but Nurjahan’s glory will last forever.

Anyway, I should not deviate from the story too far. Even after returning home, I couldn’t bring up Nelly’s story with anyone. She had cried and begged at my feet, urging that I request Bhaijan to ask her to return home. She would be happy to spend the rest of her life as a humble maidservant or an abominable sweeper in her husband’s home. Excessive crying had caused her consumption, and I knew that the poor woman wouldn’t live for much longer. I went for a visit to my paternal – no, since Father is no more – fraternal home during the puja holidays.

One day, I saw Bhaijan in a somewhat jovial mood. Taking this opportunity, I sat by his feet and asked gently, ‘Bhaijan, let me press your feet.’ Pleased, he said, ‘Okay, but is there a motive?’ This brought back memories of our happy childhood. In my girlhood days, I used to press Bhaijan’s feet or snap his fingers to get his favour. That’s why he asked me today if there was a motive. I revealed my purpose with considerable difficulty and in as direct and uncluttered a language as I could. Narrating Nayeema’s heart-scorching story of sorrow, I said, ‘Tormented by guilt, Nayeema’s love for you has now become like pure gold.’

After hearing everything, Bhaijan replied, ‘Can I then expect to see Nayeema again? I have not died so far only because I wish to see her just one more time. I remember everything; I haven’t forgotten a single bit of it in the long seven-and-half years. I remember the day Mother fell ill with a sigh, ‘Oh, Nayeema,’ and never recovered again. I remember the way Jamila used to cry for her mother, hiding her face in my arms; unable to mention her mother to me from fear, the poor girl used to whine in an untold sorrow in the pretext of one thing or another. Eventually, she died in my lap rambling incoherently about her mother. Moreover, I remember the day my blind man’s prop and last recourse for support in life, Jafar, breathed his last while resting his head on my bosom. He never slept except in my arms, and it is in my arms too where he slept his last.

‘After so much humiliation, I am still shamelessly alive, only because I wanted to see Nayeema just one more time. If I had given up my job, I would probably have been consumed by memory in my lonely life. I would probably have lost my health in a short while and died. The day Jafar died, I loaded this pistol because I wanted to commit suicide ...

opium and alcohol, and it is Nur Jahan who became the de-facto ruler behind the throne. After Jahangir’s death, she fell from grace, as one of her stepsons, Khurrum, ascended the throne assuming the title Shah Jahan (‘Ruler of the World’). Shah Jahan confined her to house arrest, and during this period, Nur Jahan spent her time in artistic activities, including composing Persian poems under the pen name Makhlfi.

Mumtaz Mahal (‘Jewel of the Palace’) was Nur Jahan’s niece, who became Shah Jahan’s third and most favourite wife. She was born in 1593 as Arjumand Banu Begum. Shah Jahan built the world’s richest mausoleum, Taj Mahal, to commemorate his love for his ‘Jewel’, after her death in 1631.

(Translator’s note)
Bhaijan took out a six-barrel pistol from his pocket and showed it to me. He then continued, ‘But I didn’t kill myself. I am still alive, enduring memory’s scorpion sting and suffering all the affliction and humiliation, only in the hope of seeing Nayeema one more time ...’

I looked up at Bhaijan’s face with a bit of encouragement and hope. I thought Nayeema was lucky again, and perhaps would find shelter at the feet of her husband once more. But I became disappointed by the look on his face. He looked fierce; sparks of fire were emitting from his eyes. Holding the pistol firmly in his fist, he said, ‘Can you somehow bring Nayeema just for once in front of me? Then I’ll settle my last score of life with her. That’s my last wish in life. I want nothing else. I’ll kill Nayeema – no, did you say she is now ‘Nelly’ – okay then, I’ll kill Nelly by shooting her with this pistol. I’ll kill Nelly with this pistol, firing six bullets one at a time, and then I’ll hang in the gallows. But no, well, I can’t do that! Nayeema has reaffirmed her faith in Islam and become a Muslim again. Then she cannot be subjected to homicide. It is forbidden to kill a fellow Muslim.’ With that, he put the pistol down on the floor.

Right then his servant boy brought in an urgent telegram. Bhaijan opened and read it.

The hospital authorities in Lucknow had written, ‘Keep a grave ready, Nurse Nelly’s dead body has been sent.’
Fixture
Akhtar Mohiuddin
Translated by Ishrat Bashir

Introductory Note
Novelist, playwright and short story writer, Akhtar Mohiuddin, was born on 17 April 1928 in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. He lived in Lal Bazaar until his death in 2001. One of the pioneers of modern short story in Kashmiri, Mohiuddin has authored many collections of short stories, novels, travelogues, and plays. Mohiuddin published his first collection of short stories, Sat Sangar (Seven Peaks) in 1955. That was followed by Sonzal (Rainbow) in 1959. Vanun ma Baniyam and Seven One Nine Seven Nine and Other Stories were published posthumously in 2009. He has also published two novels, Daud Dug (Disease and Pain) and Zuv Te zolana (Precarious Life). His novel Jahanumukh Panun panun Naar (To Each According to His Own Hell) was also published posthumously. Mohiuddin has been honoured with many prestigious awards including Padam Shri (1968), the fourth highest civilian award given in India.

Akhtar Mohiuddin believed that ‘Great art is one in which we can hear the very heartbeat of life, and on whose lips we can see the innocent smile of a small child’. He would call art ‘the apple of life’s eye’. That is why his works throb with the life of ordinary people around him. They reflect the society he lived in. His later works deal with the popular uprising of 1990s in Kashmir. In fact, Akhtar Mohiuddin renounced his Padam Shri in the wake of mass killings during this movement in Kashmir. Akhtar Mohiuddin skillfully used the modernist fictional techniques of stream of consciousness and interior monologue in his works. The short story Fixture included in Seven One Nine Seven Nine and Other Stories (2009) is in the form of an interior monologue.

* * * *
Fixture

That peg on the wall, I have no clue when it was fixed or who fixed it. I have always seen it there. To me it is an inseparable part of the wall. If ever I won’t see it there, it will seem to me that the wall has lost some important part of itself because of which it could no longer support the house. The house will collapse at any moment and everything will turn to dust and there will be an apocalypse.

However, I had faith that I will always see this peg nailed to the wall. I looked at it all the time. Sometimes I would steal a cursory glance at it even during the night, and seeing it there would think that everything in the universe was in order. It made me sure and certain that the earth was spinning on its axis without any impediment. The peg had never let me lose this faith. It seemed to have been there for ever and would remain till the very end. It was like the sun that appears at the horizon every morning and sets at the time when it should. Who would ever sleep with the fear that there will be no dawn? How could one sleep in peace with that fear? One is always sure to see the crescent at the end of every month – if not on the 29th but on 30th for sure! Won’t one lose calm if this does not happen? Everyone has faith; absolute faith that every sunset is followed by a sunrise and every sunrise by a sunset. No doubt in it! Similarly I never had any doubt or fear that this peg on the wall would not be there someday. How could I? It had been always there. It was there before my birth and all my life I found it there. It was a fixture. Fixtures don’t change either their form or place. It is not in their nature. But for one thing!

Above this peg on the wall was fixed a tiny square painted wooden shelf. And on this shelf was a photo. Not exactly a photo; we must call it a picture because it was the picture of a man who, according to hearsay, lived 1,750,000 years ago. There would have then been no cameras to take his photo with. Even if there had been one, the photograph could not have been preserved for millions of years. Neither camera nor photograph is a fixture but yes, Time is! 1,750,000 years! Now you only understood my meaning, not the essence. You can’t get the essence for I too don’t have words to express it in. However, let us both assume that time is a fixture, it has been always there.

The man in the picture on the little square wooden shelf, who is said to have lived 1,750,000 years ago, has no special quality in himself. He has got a small forehead with fur on his face, neck and head. But one of his prominent features is his eyes which are small but crystal clear as a lake as if they have never known any unpleasant and evil thing. It seems that sin has not even touched him.

Sitting at the top, he keeps surveying the surroundings with his small eyes. The look on his lips sometimes strike fear into my heart that he is staring at my sins – sins that I hide even from myself.

At such times, I just avert my gaze from it, turn a deaf ear and hum a tune. But when nothing works, his looks pierce me like an arrowheads and then I look at him shamefacedly with helpless eyes and say silently, ‘I am trapped in this world. I have to wear masks upon mask’. But his piercing steady gaze circumscribes me like a bridle that pulls me down and down to the dark cave of time, that cave which no one knows about. I feel short of breath, and dreadful.

But on that day I feel all the bridles breaking away and such a feeling of freedom overwhelms me as would follow taking a decision after being in a terrible dilemma. Whether it brings reward or punishment is not the question. What is
important is the sense of freedom and end of the entire abyss. Such a sense of absolute freedom do I get when I see my overcoat or suit or any other piece of my clothing hanging on the peg. What I feel then is that the picture on the shelf above the peg has assumed the face of this world with the hook of Time, a fixture, nailed to its heart. And having travelled 1,750,000 years in a moment, it hangs there in my shape analysing the environs. On that day, his small eyes no longer appear crystal clear and pure. But they drip with thick, dirty black drool of deceit and fraud, hypocrisy and dishonesty. His forehead no longer appears small but big with so many lines across it like a square of a long endless road where one not only loses his way but one’s innocence as well, or where one is crushed under the wheels of Time to become prey of poor ants.

Many a time I think to ask him in the dead of night whether …!! But what shall I ask him? Can my voice reach 1,750,000 years back? Yes! If my coat is hung on the peg below the picture, the picture will assume my face. Only then is it possible to ask him. No, not even then! At that time won’t it be me, myself? Then I will have to ask myself and answer it myself. Is it possible for me to reach to myself? That too when we two are distanced apart, estranged. What affinity do we have that we could commune?

Would that the impossible would become possible … That both of us were nailed with the same fixture in the heart … Maybe we can meet then … I and me! And 1,750,000 years will be travelled in a moment.