

Gender Identity Internalization and the Aftereffects in Selina Hossain's "Leaving Home" ("মেয়েলোকটা"): An Analysis

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Abstract:

Selina Hossain is the most-known female writer of the present-day Bangladesh who writes novels and short stories in Bangla. To make her works accessible to the international readers, some of her fictional writings have been translated into English as well as a few other languages of the world. This article makes a gender-centric study of one such seminal short story by Selina Hossain, entitled "মেয়েলোকটা", which has been translated by Antara Dev Sen as "Leaving Home". How the protagonist of the story, Tarabanu, internalizes her gender identity in her early life through adopting the socio-culturally prevalent gender norms and gender roles, and what effects this internalized gender identity has on her own life then and later on are the issues of detailed discussion of the essay. The dissection of the story is done keeping the life-story of the underclass old woman protagonist, Tarabanu, at the focal point of the analysis, providing necessary references and discussions on different relevant concepts like gender identity, its internalization process, and the aftereffects of the rigid internalization of a secondary gender identity, i.e. female identity.

Keywords: Underclass woman, gender identity, internalization, gender norm, gender role, aftereffect

Introduction:

Selina Hossain (1947-) is one of the major Bangladeshi fiction writers of the present time, and "Leaving Home" ("মেয়েলোকটা") is one of her striking short stories. The English title of the story, "Leaving Home", may apparently seem a mismatch with its original Bangla title, "মেয়েলোকটা", the literal translation of which should be "The Woman". However, a thorough reading of the story leaves the readers with the understanding that the translator, Antara Dev Sen, has named the English translation of the story as "Leaving Home" basing on

the inner meaning of the story. The underclass old woman protagonist of the story, Tarabanu, after living a dutiful and distressing life of a daughter, wife and mother, becomes bound to leave home; and hence, the translator uses the title, "Leaving Home".

"Leaving Home" or "মেয়েলোকটা" is a tragic tale of an underclass rural woman under the patriarchal social and familial system. The setting of the novel is an unnamed Bangladeshi village during the time of a famine in the month of November. How an extremely poor village woman suffers inhumanly from the most basic need of her life—food—at an advanced age of her life, how she is very disrespectfully asked by her daughter-in-law to leave home and earn money at such an old age, and finally, how she becomes bound to leave home finding no other option for survival—these are the overt issues that the story heart-touchingly deals with. However, underneath these overt portrayals of sufferings and struggles, there are covert points to notice and understand. Hence, the essay provides a close look into the course of life of the protagonist of the story from a gender-centric point of view with an aim to locating her internalization of the gender identity and acting accordingly, and understanding the aftereffects of her rigid internalization of the secondary gender identity, i.e. female identity.

Gender Identity Internalization and Aftereffects: Conceptual Underpinnings:

A person's **gender identity** refers to that person's self-conception as a male, female, or other (see *Britannica* "Gender Identity") *Gender identity* is generally viewed as someone's personal and inner sense as a particular self or being. Biological sex-based identity and gender-based identity are two quite different concepts—one is physically delineated while the other is socio-psychologically defined. In most of the cases, one's gender identity corresponds with one's biological sex. A few individuals, however, experience very slight or no kind of link between their gender and sex (see *Britannica* "Gender Identity").

Gender study experts, hence, define gender identity not as a biological issue, rather as a social construct which is "learned through socialization" (Carter 242). Gender identity internalization is seen by them as a socio-psychological process that starts in childhood within families and societies (see Carter 243). During the childhood and adolescent days of their physical and psychological growth, most of the female children gradually learn different socio-culturally accepted gender norms—gender-specific "informal rules and shared beliefs"—and gender roles—gender-definite "expected roles, including behaviours, activities and responsibilities" ("Advancing Positive Gender Norms" 2). Thus, they internalize— "accept or absorb"—the gender norms in

such a way that they subconsciously or unconsciously make these an integral “part of” their belief system as well as of their “character” (*Cambridge “internalize”*). They gradually internalize the socio-culturally accepted gender roles also, and make these a part of their day-to-day existence on earth. Their gender identity is, thus, gradually internalized through different socio-cultural teachings within familial and societal settings.

One’s gender identity plays an important role in the overall life-activities of an individual. The gender norms that one firmly believes in and the gender roles that one internalizes to perform throughout life shape the character and nature of that very person and establish one’s gender identity. “Harmful gender norms” and negative gender roles, “especially those related to rigid notions,” can affect someone’s “wellbeing negatively.” (“Gender and Health”) “Rigid gender norms also negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination as a result” (“Gender and Health”). In a patriarchal society, gender is “hierarchal” that “produces inequalities” between genders like male, female and other (“Gender and Health”). Women and girls frequently face “inequality and discrimination” at home and the outer world both for their biological sex as well as for their feminine gender identity (“Gender and Health”). They “often face ... restrictions on mobility; lack of access to decision-making power; lower literacy rates; discriminatory attitudes of communities” etc. that put “their health and well-being at risk.” (“Gender and Health”) They also face “unintended pregnancies, malnutrition and elder abuse, ... unacceptably high levels of violence..., early and forced marriage” etc. amongst other problems (“Gender and Health”). The gender-based inequalities and discriminations “intersect with other social and economic inequalities” (“Gender and Health”) that often take a toll on girls’ and women’s lives and overall well-being.

The Protagonist’s Internalization of Her Gender Identity in Selina Hossain’s “Leaving Home”: Through the life-story of its protagonist, Tarabanu, Selina Hossain’s short story, “Leaving Home,” brings forth the issue of gender identity and gender norms internalization in front of the readers. The story, from its third person limited point of view, tells the tale of unfortunate Tarabanu, a very poor and helpless old female of 62 years, focusing on her present miserable condition. However, Tarabanu’s past is frequently revealed to the readers with the help of flashbacks or her thinking about the past days and incidents. Thus, a strong link is created between the present and the past— Tarabanu’s utmost misery of the present time and her past days of internalizing a very passive secondary gender identity, i.e. rigid femininity. Also, the final result of the unfortunate woman’s internalization of different harmful gender norms and self-damaging gender roles is vividly portrayed at the end of the story which might make the cautious readers

interested in thinking about the issue of internalization of harmful gender norms and negative gender roles.

Tarabanu, the protagonist or the main character of the story, is a 62-year-old elderly village woman belonging to the underclass—“a social class made up of people who are very poor and have very little power or chance to improve their lives” (“Underclass” *The Britannica Dictionary*). She is a widow; her husband, Osman, died of stomach problem “during a drought.” (75) Tarabanu was the mother of “seven children—five daughters and two sons.” (75) However, three of the daughters are dead now and the elder son, Baquer, is missing for a long time. Before the onset of the plot of the story, Tarabanu used to live a poverty-stricken disrespectful life with her youngest child, Taher, and his family in her ancestral village—the village which was the abode of both her father and her in-laws. Tarabanu is seen to be in a very miserable condition at the beginning of the tale since she is made bound to leave her residence of a very long time by her daughter-in law and her son. As she is leaving home and her native village, Tarabanu is recalling her past days in her father’s residence and her in-laws’ house. And this recalling of the past is mostly full of information regarding her understanding of her gender roles and gender identity.

The story begins with Tarabanu’s leaving home one morning at the very early hours in search of food and shelter to save her life during the time of a terrible famine. The beginning is as under:

Tarabanu is walking. She can walk very well, yet she carries on with unsteady steps. She wants to go somewhere, but she doesn’t quite know where. All her life, she’d been told not to step out of her home because she was a woman. So she can’t find her way around either. Her father’s house is in the same village as her in-laws’. There was never any need to venture beyond the village lands. Before her marriage, her parents used to say that a young woman should not gad about. Just stay home like a nice girl. She did that. After her marriage, her mother-in-law used to say, ‘Don’t go beyond the pond.’ Tarabanu didn’t. Her husband Osman had a quick temper. The bamboo cane in his hand would come alive ever so often, to turn Tarabanu’s back red. She suffered in silence. She never showed anyone her welts. She tried to be docile all her life, just to hear people praise her as a good woman. (74)

Here, in this extract, the early days of Tarabanu’s life has become quite clearly visible to us—the readers. Also, her internalization of the socio-culturally promoted gender norms—informal gender-based rules and shared beliefs—and the gender roles—roles of a good daughter, good wife, good

daughter-in-law, good mother, and overall “a good woman”—and their hidden mechanism are revealed here (74). All her life, Tarabanu has been taught that since she is a female, she has to act like a good girl and a good woman—she has to be at home; she should not go outside and roam like the males; she has to listen to her parents and the elders; she has to take care of the household tasks; she has to be obedient to her husband; she has to tolerate all the tortures of her husband without making any complaints; overall, she has to be “docile” and “nice” (74).

Thus, Tarabanu internalizes her gender identity and related socio-culturally promoted gender norms in such a way that she cannot think about anything else other than performing the role of a good woman. The narrator mentions the hollowness of the relationship between Tarabanu and her husband, Osman, by saying—“She can’t remember when Osman died. Doesn’t want to either – she was quite relieved at his death. Even so, she wept as expected and gave up her colourful clothes for white widow’s weeds – all because she so wanted people to think of her as a good woman.” (75) Getting severe ill-treatment from him, Tarabanu even wishes for her husband’s death many a times; the narrator mentions in the story, “Tarabanu used to sit on the bank of the pond, looking out on the water, and tell herself: Be patient; Tarabanu, all happiness is destined for you once he’s dead. Her mother-in-law had taught her that.” (75)

Hence, it is understandable from the above discussion and examples that Tarabanu rigidly believes in her feminine gender identity that develops from her linking herself with her biological features as well as her positive reception of all the socio-culturally promoted gender norms and gender roles from her familial and social settings. The elders, both in her family and the family of the in-laws, especially her own father and the mother-in-law, play a great role in teaching her the socio-culturally as well as religiously expected gender norms and roles. She, like a very obedient student, internalizes their lessons, and thus, turns into a very passive, compliant, so-called “good woman” (75).

The Aftereffects of Tarabanu’s Rigid Internalization of the Secondary Gender Identity: In the conceptual underpinnings part of the essay, we have already found that rigid gender norms internalization often affect people negatively irrespective of their gender identities. Tarabanu’s strong internalization of a secondary gender identity, i.e. femininity, definitely harms her a lot. Here femininity or female gender identity is mentioned as secondary to masculinity or the male gender identity since, in the patriarchal world, gender is hierarchical, and here the male gender is viewed as superior to the female gender.

Believing in the teachings of her family and the in-laws, Tarabanu tries her best to adopt many rigid and harmful gender norms and self-damaging gender roles. Her husband beats her up mercilessly with canes every now and then, and she just patiently accepts all the tortures to show to the society that she is a good, obedient wife. After her husband's death, she starts wearing saris of somber colour as per the social practice; this is also done to prove herself a good wife. Never ever in her life, she has gone beyond the boundaries of the places of her residence—her parental house and the residence of her in-laws. She remembers the day when “long ago” all the village people went to see “Raushan Ara” who turned into “Raushan Miya”. But even on that day, she did not go to see him, rather “she had stayed home.” (78) This way, Tarabanu lives a life of almost absolute indifference which is full of restrictions and boundaries set by the patriarchal gender norms and gender roles.

As she lives within the boundary of her residence and is guided by others, Tarabanu even does not know her rights, let alone assert those. She does not know how to live a dignified, independent life. Her husband beats her very often; but she just tolerates his violent actions without any complaints. She patiently waits for his death to get relief from the domestic violence. Later, in her old age, her children are seen not to care for her; but now also, she cannot help but think about them like a stereotypical loving mother. The narrator mentions:

They had had seven children—five daughters, two sons. Taher was the youngest, Baquer the one before that. Baquer moved to the city in search of work and never returned. Three of the five daughters were dead. They had always been plagued by illness. One is a widow—she works as a domestic help in Dhaka and lives in a slum. The other lives with her in-laws; she hasn't heard from her for a long time. Tarabanu can't make out why she is thinking of them now, sitting under this tree. They are not part of her life any more. (75)

Thus, Tarabanu performs the roles of a stereotypical good woman, an all-enduring wife and a very loving mother at the cost of her minimum human rights. And, all these happen primarily because of her rigid internalization of the harmful gender norms and self-damaging gender roles.

Tarabanu, in her later life, is seen to be tortured by her daughter-in-law, Mazrin, and her youngest son, Taher, for food and shelter. Also, she is shown utter disrespect by them. Mazrin and Taher take her as “a burden”, and ask her to earn money or to leave home (75). Mazrin says, “Go, earn some money, old woman” (75). She calls her a “stupid”, and shouts to her to get out of the house (75). Taher supports his wife by remaining silent when she maltreats and

disrespects his mother. Mazrin does not give Tarabanu anything to eat for a whole a day, asks her to die when she seeks some food from her.

After living a life of utter suffering and disrespect, Tarabanu now falls in a life-threatening trouble at the last stage of her life. She becomes bound to leave home. As she walks alone through the village road towards an unknown destination, she thinks about home, “Home? ... She doesn’t have a home. Where the husband beats you up, is that the husband’s home? Or can it ever be your own home? And where the son wants to drive you out, what kind of home is that?” (76) She realizes that she never really had had a place called home.

Tarabanu also becomes bound to think about earning though she was never encouraged earlier to bother about the outer world, let alone earning. The narrator mentions, “Earning. She had never thought of earning money. She hadn’t even stepped out of her home. Earning money was a mystery to her.” (75) When she is given “a taka” by a young man out of kindness, Tarabanu cannot decide whether this is called earning (77).

Leaving home, Tarabanu, thus, feels nervous and hesitant. She actually even thinks about committing suicide before leaving home to get rid of all the troubles of life. But she cannot do so since the “*moulvis* say that if you kill yourself, you don’t find place either in heaven or hell. You are stuck in between.” (76) So, Tarabanu becomes bound to take the tough decision of leaving home to live an independent life at the last stage of her life during the very difficult time of a famine. She has not eaten anything for about two days. Still, she is walking through a village road which luckily takes people to a place where the government has “set up a *langarkhana*.” (78) The narrator describes the look of utterly distressed Tarabanu as she walks through the village road—“Her torn sari covers her head and it hitched up to her knees. Her feet are cracked, white with dust. She isn’t wearing a blouse. She can’t remember how long ago she had lost the use of blouses. The *anchal* of her sari flies in the wind. She doesn’t feel the need to wrap it around herself, to cover her body.” (77)

After walking for a long time, Tarabanu reaches a market-like place from where she buys some “*muri*” with the one taka that she got by begging. (77) She eats some *muri* and drinks water from a nearby stagnant pond. Out of fatigue, she falls asleep, and in her sleep, she dreams of *khichuri* (78). When Tarabanu starts walking again, she sees many other people to walk very fast towards the *langarkhana*. But she cannot keep pace with any of them. Just before the time of nightfall, “she collapses in the street” at “Bhaduaghat Chaupatty”, and within a short time, she dies there (79).

Next day, people gather to see Tarabanu's corpse. “They are all relieved. She is not a family, not a distant relative, not even a village acquaintance. ... They also discuss the manner of her death. Some even say that death should not come like this.” (80) By the noon time, Tarabanu turns into “an unclaimed corpse” (80), and the government officials and other people start to speak against her for “gadding about” and dying “in the street like that.” (81)

From the above examples and discussion, it is clear that Tarabanu undergoes suffering and maltreatment all her life even in the hands of her close family members for her having a rigidly passive feminine gender identity which results in from her internalization of some very rigid gender norms and gender roles at a very early stage of her life. She has to suffer throughout her whole life, especially in her married life and mostly at the last stage of her life, for her internalization of the identity of a passive female. She even has to lose her residence, and soon her life, for her not having any material possession to support her at her old age. Her gender identity and gender norms turn her economically dependent upon the male members of her family which make her less human than them. As a result, she cannot live a dignified life, and even in death, there is none to feel sorry for her and to show minimum respect to her dead body.

Conclusion:

Selina Hossain's “মেয়েলোকটা” or “Leaving Home” (in Antara Dev Sen's translation) tells the tragic tale of an extremely marginalized old village woman, Tarabanu, who is a victim of the patriarchal social and familial system. In her early childhood, through socio-cultural teaching, most of which is done by her close family members, she internalizes different harmful and self-damaging gender norms that leads her to the internalization of a rigidly passive gender identity. She has to suffer inhumanly throughout her whole life for her gender norms and gender roles which are linked to her internalized rigid femininity. She lives a miserable life and dies a pathetic death mostly for her gender roles and gender identity.

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