

## Images of Bangladesh in Niaz Zaman's Novels

Sabiha Huq<sup>1</sup>  
Khulna University, Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Niaz Zaman, a renowned Bangladeshi writer in English, has employed realism in all three novels she has thus far written: *The Crooked Neem Tree* (1982), *A Different Sita* (2011) and *The Baromashi Tapes* (2011). Against the backdrop of Bangladesh at different points in time, Zaman's novels focus on women's struggles in ways that according to critics like Toril Moi, may seem to be a feministic realism in woman's fiction. The worlds depicted in her novels differ in a variety of ways but not in focal themes, as she draws upon women's experiences in pre- and post-independence Bangladesh with a singularity of style, adhering to historical facts. Representation of regular lives with the most commonplace details like clothing, food, rituals, daily habits, etc. is sometimes mingled with romance, rebellion and accidents; and this blend infuses her stories with glorious and extraordinary journeys of ordinary women. Quite expectedly, imperfections of human life also become significant parts of such narratives of lived experiences, and that often becomes an aesthetic experience in Zaman's fiction. The women in her novels are given as much moral strength as needed for women to become leading figures in events carried out single-handedly without the presence of men. This paper is an attempt at reading how Zaman has used her fictional work to depict an essentially Bangladeshi reality.

### Keywords

Realism, feministic realism, Bangladesh, independence, representation, imperfection

### Introduction

In order to do justice to realistic fiction one must learn to speak of its central achievement, that is, its art of representation. Since its inception in the history of world literature, the novel's main concern has been the mimetic one as it attempted to represent life. The emphasis on the "air of reality" as the novel's "supreme virtue" (Henry James, qtd. in Paris 140) evidences that the earliest criticism of the novel vouched for its representational reality. Ian Watt also

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<sup>1</sup> **Sabiha Huq** is professor of English at Khulna University, Bangladesh. She did her PhD at University of Oslo and her research interests include postcolonial literature, women's fiction, Ibsen and modern drama, and translation studies. She has published her research articles in international journals. Her translations and original works have been published in different books and magazines. E-mail: sabiha.huq@gmail.com.

suggests that the “distinctive characteristics” of the novel are “its emphasis upon the particular, its circumstantial view of life, and its full and authentic reporting of experience” (qtd. in Paris 141). A novelist has to face a continuous tug of war between authenticity of experience and the flow of imagination, because the central concern of a novel is “the imitation of social and psychological reality” (Paris 149) along with its “formal and thematic values” (Paris 149). Erich Auerbach suggests that the foundations of modern realism are “the serious treatment of everyday reality” and “the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background” (491).

The question here is whether the art of representation is at some variance from that of male narratives if the fiction writer is a woman. Writers of realistic fiction mainly concentrate on character and social milieu. To assess any novelist, therefore, one needs to concentrate on his/her reporting of experience with characters and society. John Stuart Mill's assessment of women as creative writers is ambivalent as he gives credit to women for their art of representation but criticises them for the lack of novelty in their representational faculty. In Mill's words,

Our best novelists in point of composition, and of the management of detail, have mostly been women.... But they have not yet produced any of those great and luminous new ideas which form an era in thought, nor those fundamentally new conceptions in art, which open a vista of possible effects not before thought of, and found a new school. (129)

Mill's final words in this regard are that more time is required if women's literature is to have a different “collective character” from that of men and rise beyond the accepted male models and “guide itself by its own impulses” (133).

In “Feminist, Female, Feminine” Toril Moi refers to Dale Spender's claim that there are numerous examples of intellectual theft of women's ideas by men, which Spender calls “patriarchal efforts to silence women” (119). It seems that the idea of following the male tradition has been reversed in recent years, and women are allegedly becoming masters of their own art. However, the language has remained politicised. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* Moi refers to Cheri Kramare thus: “English Lexicon is a structure organized to glorify maleness and ignore, trivialize or derogate femaleness” (155). Moi further claims with reference to Spender's *Man Made Language* that the English language, which is literally man-made, is still chiefly under male control. Spender calls it a “monopoly” over language by means of which the male (patriarchy) has “ensured [its] own primacy, and consequently [has] ensured the invisibility or ‘other’ nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited” (156).

### **Niaz Zaman, a Bangladeshi Female Writer**

The essentially sexist notion of language that Moi and Spender have explained may not directly work in a Bangladeshi context where the first language of the people is Bengali. English is a dominant foreign language here as the Indian subcontinent, of which Bangladesh is a part, has a history of about two hundred years of British colonial rule (1757-1947). Nonetheless, access to English as a second language has been easier for the men than the women in this patriarchal society as formal education was largely a privilege for the former. In recent years education has been made accessible to women, but while Niaz Zaman was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, English education and higher education were mostly reserved for men, as is evident in one of her recent writings titled “An Accidental Feminist.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview (Haque, *Star Campus*), Zaman mentions that she had to convince her conservative parents with great persuasion to get admitted in the M.A. class at the University of Dhaka, which also explains why she calls herself “the accidental feminist” in the piece.

Zaman, writing (from a state that is not only post-colony but also largely the result of linguistic nationalism) after more than a century since the publication of *The Subjection of Women*, in an era when she hardly had an accepted model of a Bangladeshi writer writing in English, must have found her task challenging. This may be seen as constituting several complex indices of her makings as a literary artist. Her position as a woman writer, coming from a non-Bengali family background and residing in Bangladesh, would definitely be different from most contemporary authors in that sense. She is a keen observer of events, and as a person with deep sensitivity and openness of mind, Zaman perceives her surroundings and searches for expressions of her thoughts. Dramatic changes have occurred in the history of Bangladesh since she became a resident of the country, but she could never express her innermost thoughts in Bangla which was the dominant medium but not her native tongue. Thus, as a conscientious creative writer, her choice of writing in English and to write about recent and contemporary history of the country of domicile is not surprising. Evidently, she has tried to fulfil her responsibilities to a generation of Bangladeshis being educated in English and also to a large Bangladeshi and South Asian diaspora. Zaman comments that to write well one has to write what one knows (Haque). She has expressed her support for realistic writing and in her novels she has visibly remained faithful to facts.

How a female writer of fiction represents reality is a matter of serious investigation, and challenging too, as Miller’s omnipresent guillotine would be ever-ready to challenge her work and label it as a blind imitation of the male

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<sup>2</sup> A recent piece of writing in which Niaz Zaman narrates her university days and calls herself “an accidental feminist.” She presented it at an international conference on “Redrawing Gender Boundaries” at BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 21-22 May 2017.

tradition. Reality requires authenticity and credibility, both of which limit the use of imagination. Conversely, a certain amount of imagination is needed for the aesthetic values of any sort of fiction. One may say that reality and imagination are concomitant in Niaz Zaman's fictional world. Her three novels, *The Crooked Neem Tree*, *The Baromashi Tapes* and *A Different Sita*, give a synchronic and broader narrative of an emerging Bangladesh within which micro narratives of women are woven. Based on this theoretical view, this paper intends to highlight different aspects of Zaman's realism in which the feminist strand predominates. Though the three works of fiction do not constitute a trilogy, there is an organic relationship among the three as they depict interesting turns in the history of the nation. Fascinatingly, all three have female protagonists around whose weal and woe the narratives are centred and, as such, she is essentially different from male authors. The amalgamation of social and psychological realities legitimises the thematic values of her narratives.

According to Auerbach, as mentioned before, the primary foundation for modern realism is "the serious treatment of everyday reality" (391). In *Mimesis* he observes that the existential problematic of reality is informed by the insights of historicism and it is characterised by "a sense of historical dynamics, of the incomparability of historical phenomena and of their constant inner mobility" (391). Niaz Zaman presents historical phenomena from a different perspective. Her novels stand against the narratives of pre-and post-independence Bangladesh by famous male authors like Shawkat Osman (1917-98), Akhtaruzzaman Elias (1943-97), Shahidul Zahir (1953-2008) and others. These male writers have presented the worlds of their male protagonists that describe their struggles, their desires and aspirations, their frustrations and their interactions with the newly established nation. Unlike them, Zaman presents the untold narratives of women during the important historical turns of the coming into being of Bangladesh and its existence thereafter. She presents a Bangladesh she has witnessed in the turbulent years of its struggle for independence, and its rise as a nation, from the female perspective. Sometimes, she looks at Bangladesh society as an outsider and sometimes as an insider, which also makes her writings interesting. The paper looks for instances in her writings that mark her a realist as well as a feminist.

### **Pre-independence Bangladesh in Zaman's First Novel, *The Crooked Neem Tree***

*The Crooked Neem Tree* (1982), Zaman's first novel, is about a Punjabi girl living in East Pakistan with her family. The novel describes how she falls in love with a young Bihari artist but finally ends up marrying a Bengali. The novelty of the story does not prove itself inauthentic, because there were hundreds of non-Bengali families in East Pakistan who migrated to Lahore, Karachi and other parts of West Pakistan as confrontation between the two wings of Pakistan became inevitable. Marriage between Bengalis and non-Bengalis was not rare, but the fact

is that hardly anyone has written about a non-Bengali woman staying back with a Bengali husband. Zaman has done that, and has done it in an intimate way. Though an author's personal life should not necessarily be a point of reference in literary interpretations, it is equally true that nobody writes anything in a vacuum. It may be suggested that this intimate understanding of the protagonist may have sprouted from the author's own experience in East Pakistan as the wife of a Bengali husband. Zaman has shown the development of the protagonist, Seema, happening simultaneously with that of the Bengali nation, which is going through ups and downs. The novel is set in the nineteen sixties, when East Pakistanis were strongly conscious about their Bengali nationalism and the deprivation forced on them by the West Pakistani Government. Though a date is not given, we may speculate the year from the release of the film *Devdas*<sup>3</sup> featuring Dilip Kumar in 1955. Such inter-semiotic reference points as soft markers to date the novel speak of a level of political consciousness that is generally presumed as not being the forte of the female writer.

Seema is a resident of the capital of East Pakistan and a university student. Through her depiction we visualise Dacca (now Dhaka), and Zaman here offers a real picture of the city. Seema visits different places in the city, among which the Shahid Minar<sup>4</sup> is one. She does not look at it with equal reverence as a Bengali would do, because she looks at it from a West Pakistani perspective. She does not even speak Bengali. All this seems to be real because a Punjabi girl cannot be expected to love the Bengalis and their language overnight. Indeed, her friendship with Khalid, the Bengali classmate, gradually makes her sympathetic towards the deprived Bengali East Pakistanis. Yet, the change in her comes long after their first acquaintance. They walk through the lanes around the Dhaka University campus and Khalid tells her of many things happening in the country of which she was not aware and she could not agree with. Seema narrates these walks thus:

I found that there were many things I could talk about with this Bengali boy. There were many issues we thought about differently, many times so differently that we had violent arguments, but the arguments were usually over by the time we had to separate: he towards Azimpur, I towards Minto Road, where the government officials' residences were. (34-35)

In one of these walks, Khalid asks Seema if she knows the Bangla language. When Seema answers in the negative, Khalid rebukes her and says, "How can you know a people or come to love them if you don't know their language? You can't ever understand them if you can't understand their language" (35). Seema expresses

<sup>3</sup> Based on a romance written by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938), published in 1917. The novel was filmed in 1955, Dilip Kumar, a famous Indian actor, played the role of the protagonist.

<sup>4</sup> Shahid Minar is the mausoleum built in memory of the language martyrs of Bangladesh. In *A Different Sita*, Niaz Zaman uses a variant spelling, "Shaheed Minar."

her interest in learning the language and asks Khalid to help her with it. On another occasion, Khalid tells her of the economic deprivation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan. Seema seems to contend that East Pakistan achieved many things after the Partition, but later she realises how right Khalid is. The novel blends socialist vision with feminist realism. Khalid is an avowed follower of socialist idealism, and Seema, influenced by him, narrates:

I knew that without Khalid I would be a very different person. With him and his arguments – his arguments that tore away all false facades – I had become a far more vital person. Without him, I knew I would drift into the class of the affluent who live in a world of fantasy and make-believe, a world where the trivial matters, a world whose values are alien to ninety percent of people.... In a world where half the people went in rags, what right had I to possess twenty saris and thirty *kameezes*? (98)

Conversely, Seema's feminist thoughts are her own. Her heart revolts against the forced marriage of her friend Nasreen, who later attempts suicide because of an unhappy conjugal life. The novelist here depicts the sad life of girls who cannot marry according to their own choice. Seema fights such social restrictions as she decides to break up her engagement with her cousin when she comes to know his true nature. Her elopement with Khalid finally establishes her as an independent human being.

The novelist employs realism in describing the complications of inter-racial marriage. Khalid and Seema have differences in eating habits and they also differ in their ideas regarding clothing. Zaman shows how Seema makes voluntary adjustments with Khalid, but also how she asserts herself on occasions that mark the essentially feminist outlook of the novel.

The novel is a treatise on Bangladeshi culture and the female subject's acculturation to it. There are references to Bangla literature. Seema is hesitant to enter Khalid's bedroom, seeing a decoration or "alpana" on the floor. Khalid eases her mind by humouring her. Seema shows interest in Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Khalid wants to read out *Devdas* to her; he also explains to her a few Tagore songs which she likes after understanding the lines. There is a reference to Tagore's dance drama *Shyama* (1939). Little by little Seema becomes accustomed to the food, language and culture of the Bengalis. The fact that a wife adopts the husband's culture, never vice versa, becomes true in Seema's case. Still, that her heart belongs to her first love is a harsh realisation for her husband towards the end of the novel. Seema manages to convince her husband that she loves him, which again hints at the fact that marriages stand on compromise and sympathy. However, the novel keeps some things unclear. For example, if a baby is born to Seema, what its mother tongue will be remains unresolved. As the novel does not show the

independence of Bangladesh, it seems that some of the issues such as the child's nationality and language could be left undecided.

### 1971 in Zaman's Second Novel, *A Different Sita*

A far more concrete picture of Bangladesh becoming independent is found in the novel *A Different Sita* (2011), which further develops the saga of the nation. The conversion of the myth of Sita rescued by her husband Rama in the *Ramayana* happens in the novel. In this novel the author makes her protagonist, Shabina, a middle-class Bengali housewife, the saviour of her husband, Haider, during the war of independence in 1971. Exploitation, cunning, treason, etc. are part of the reality of war and along with these exist love, friendship, romance and trust. The span of the novel is between 21 February and 16 December in 1971, ten crucial months in the history of Bangladesh. The characters in the novel go through their trials, but the most dramatic experience happens in Shabina's life as she shifts the myth of the *Ramayana* that constructs the title of the novel. Sita is the wife of Rama, the king of Ayodhya, and she is abducted by Ravana in the epic. Finally, she is rescued by Rama who takes her back in faith and love, believing her to be chaste although she spent months in Ravana's custody. Sita, nonetheless, has to submit to ordeals to prove her chastity as Rama submits to the rage of patriarchy. In the novel, the female protagonist rescues her husband from the concentration camp at the cost of her chastity. Seema considers her act with contentment and has no regrets about it. Therefore, the author challenges both the notion of a woman's chastity and passivity and treats the war from a feminist perspective.

Zaman points to the fact that the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975) conferred the title "Birangana" upon the women war victims. Although it is the female equivalent of "hero," these women were virtually considered as "barangana," fallen women; and the plight of Shabina amply elucidates the perverse logic behind such nomenclature. The author clearly states her position as one who would make her protagonist hold her head high while narrating her story of being physically exploited during the war. The novel sets out with a Prologue, in which Shabina says:

No one called me birangana. I was not discovered cowering naked in a bunker. I cannot call myself a heroine of the war. My fight was not for Bangla Desh,<sup>5</sup> it was for my husband, my family. (Prologue, n.p.)

In Zaman's novel, Shabina thus becomes a vital signpost of double marginalisation as woman – the loss of her chastity does not qualify her for

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<sup>5</sup> Zaman uses this spelling of the name of the country as it was the initial English spelling. Later it changed into "Bangladesh."

accolades as her violation cannot be squared with the narrative of mainstream nationalist discourse.

Shabina narrates the story to let her children know the truth; she takes pride in the fact that she sacrificed her chastity to keep her family inviolate, but at the same time she knows that all facts cannot be revealed until later when all misgivings are gone. However, it is too late for her as her husband and elder son die before she can reveal the story and she narrates it to her two younger children, who have different fathers. She hints at her extramarital affair which she discloses in the story. Thus the novel is a kind of intimate revelation of a woman – a narrative that neither makes any pretence of keeping on the wraps of “good womanhood,” nor indulges in the more commonplace glorification of trauma that characterises most texts of partition and nation formation. Zaman's claim to fame here lies in her foregrounding of the female subject as a private self whose perception of the evolving of Bangladesh is privileged.

In Shabina's persona the experience of living in Dhaka, a city at the centre of turmoil in 1971, is narrated. Shabina describes the atmosphere of the city on 21 February 1971 thus:

But this twenty-first February was different, different from any that that had gone before. Mujib had won the election and Haider and I, who had first voted for him and then taken our children to Cox's Bazar for a holiday, felt proud that our two votes were among the overwhelming number of votes that gave Mujib 162 seats in the National Assembly and assured him the premiership of Pakistan. (1)

Here Shabina represents the Bengalis who were expecting Sheikh Mujib to be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Like Khalid in *The Crooked Neem Tree*, she too points at how East Pakistan (Bangladesh in the offing) was being economically exploited by West Pakistan, but this time with concrete reference to the jute industry of East Pakistan. The jute would be produced and processed in East Pakistan, while all the money from the trade would be used to develop West Pakistan. Shabina gives voice against this injustice.

There is a quite long passage in which Shabina narrates the history of Bengali culture which is syncretic in nature, embracing both *sufi* and indigenous traditions. 21 February 1971, a specific moment in the country's history, is illustrated and the characters become almost real. Men, women and children taking part in the morning procession or “probhatferi”<sup>6</sup> are vividly narrated. Shabina becomes sentimental and euphoric when she refers to the language martyrs:

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<sup>6</sup> Early morning barefoot procession on 21 February as part of the celebration of the Language Martyrs' Day in Bangladesh. Since 1999, the day has also been observed as the International Mother Language Day.



No, we cannot forget you Salam, Barkat, Jabbar. When you died, you and the unknown others started a movement. It was not just a movement for the right to speak in Bengali, but the right to think in Bengali, be Bengali – different from the homogenized idea of Pakistani, which denied the difference of race, ethnicity, culture. (1)

One significant point in Shabina's narrative is the relationship between Bengali and non-Bengali people living in the same area of the city or going to the same schools and colleges. The war had not broken out then and Bengalis had good relations with their non-Bengali neighbours. The existence of Saeed, the college friend of Haider, also points to this reality. Saeed's brother considered Haider as another brother and when Saeed joined the army after college and Haider did not, Saeed's brother commented that "having one brother in the army was enough," which clearly shows the intimate relationship they had. This is a historical reality of the South Asian nations divided by the arbitrary decisions made by the English colonisers with their local collaborators. General people were not antagonistic towards each other, but their fates were to be decided by political leaders. The novel refers to Jinnah, Yahya and other West Pakistani leaders who failed to keep East and West Pakistan together, and at the same time it depicts how Saeed or the *Kababwallah* are part of the other side of this antagonism between the provinces subsumed into one state. Their appearance in the narrative is real, though at times, just when Shabina is in need of their help, they appear, which is almost magical.

There is reference to inter-racial marriage too. However, Shabina's non-Bengali friend's refusal to enter her bedroom seeing the "alpana" decoration in front of the door shows a cultural prejudice too. Readers may remember Seema's hesitation while entering the alpana decorated bedroom in Khalid's house in the first novel. It seems that inter-racial marriages continued throughout the years though racial prejudice persisted.

The conversation between Saeed and Haider on political issues turns grave. Haider asks Saeed, "Will you shoot me, Saeed, if I stood up and defied the government?" Saeed's answer is:

You are a Bengali and like all Bengalis emotional and you think too much.  
Yes, I too am emotional and, whatever you believe, I too think. But, if I were ordered to shoot the man in front of me, I would take aim and fire. Yes, even if he were my brother, even if he were my father. (17)

Gradually, the novel depicts harder times for Shabina and also for Bangladesh. March 1971 is a horrific month in Bangladesh history. The novel dedicates a chapter to this month and describes the political events vividly. It refers to the postponement of a cricket match between Pakistan Cricket Board XI and

Commonwealth XI as Mujib called for a non-cooperation movement due to Yahya's postponement of the National Assembly. There is a reference to 7 March when Mujib delivered his historic speech<sup>7</sup> to the nation, wherein with great buoyance he almost declared independence. The chapter even quotes from Mujib's historical speech in Bangla transcript. Haider and Shabina discuss the political situation and the significant events in the national history float across the reader's minds. Details like how the city was decorated with the green flags with a red sun and a golden map of East Pakistan in the centre (the flag initially chosen for the independent country) on 7 March provide a true picture of the nationalistic fervour the Bengalis had during the time. Simultaneously the novel shows the gradual deterioration of the relation between the states as Tikka Khan replaces S.M. Ahsan as the Governor of East Pakistan. The dark night of 25 March 1971 is also described quite vividly. As Shabina lives in Sat Masjid Road, she witnesses the shelling and burning of Peelkhana, the police camp in Dhaka. The sleepless dreadful night of March shows how arbitrarily the West Pakistani leaders took decisions to maim the Bengali nation.

The following months are spent in difficulty as the markets were bereft of provisions, for curfew would be declared every night. The city of Dhaka was unsafe and transportation to the villages was difficult as people were being shot everywhere. On one of these days Shabina tells the original *Ramayana* story of Sita's abduction and rescue to her sons. Indeed, young women were being picked from their homes, raped and tortured, which the mythical story symbolised to some extent. The novel, on the other hand, underscores the idea of female power: women can take up responsibilities in men's absence. The liberation war breaks out and young and physically able men join the war as "muktijoddhas" or freedom fighters. Haider, though young and strong, does not join because of his family. However, he cannot escape arrest as his brother and brother-in-law become freedom fighters. His sister-in-law visits with her daughters, whose safe passage to India (West Bengal) is fraught with concerns for the family. This opens up a new vista of the war: temporary migration. Men were crossing borders to take military training in India and come back as guerrilla fighters, while women were crossing borders to save themselves. Shabina, instead of thinking of her own safety, takes measures to rescue her husband from the military. She gets Saeed's help when Haider is taken by the army for the first time, but the second time he is taken, Saeed has already been killed in a blast for which Haider is held responsible. This part of the story is rather twisted by the employment of the author's imagination, which is an important part of any fiction. Saeed falls in love with Shabina and they have intimate moments before he gets killed. The author tries to make the story credible by introducing events connected with Shabina's

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO included Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech in the Memory of the World Register in 2017.

singing skills. She is introduced to some army officers by her landlord as a singer; one of the officers invites her to his party. There Saeed and the Kababwallah rescue her from the immoral officer, which gives the fiction the quality of a romance. Still, there are elements of truth. The preference of Nazrul songs, songs by Runa Laila, Mehedi Hasan, Shahnaz Begum, songs from Urdu films, etc. by the officers are amazingly real in nature, as history evidences that the Pakistani Government banned Tagore songs and even asked Bengali scholars to replace pure Bengali expressions in Nazrul songs with those in Urdu. After this, Shabina responds to Saeed's love and confesses,

And I still loved him [Haider]. Saeed was his best friend, and yet I responded to his kisses, yes, even though I loved Haider and even though, by loving Saeed, I was violating the bond of marriage, violating every legal and moral code that bound husband and wife. (161)

Shabina's confession strikes at the roots of the traditional/patriarchal idea of the virtuous woman. The author toys with the concept of chastity, which is both vulnerable and valuable in a woman's case. Even though men in the army enjoy women other than their wives, their chastity is not considered defiled. Moreover, these officers have created an unholy nexus with a Pir or sage who is revered for his religiosity that is nothing but a facade. On the other hand, women are labelled as fallen. Subversion in Shabina's case is a revolt, yet she is not completely free of the normative values of patriarchy. She sacrifices her chastity to release her husband, yet after returning home and lying down next to her child she asks herself, "Did I have the right to lie down next to my innocent child?" (204).

The later part of the novel is even more dramatic. Shabina kills the officer who seduced her in return for her husband's release, then flees and takes refuge in old Dhaka with the help of Kababwallah, where she is reunited with her husband. Shabina fails to tell him the story of Sita rescuing Rama and killing Ravana. She reflects, "In the *Ramayana*, Rama had doubted the purity of Sita, but this other Sita was not pure." The author notes the fact that many women actually took weapons against the enemies while the war continued, though the picture of their being raped and killed is highlighted in history.

The final episode of the novel marks the end of the war, Niazi's surrender on 16 December 1971 and the shooting in the streets in which Haider and his elder son get killed. For the protagonist it is a hard blow, but then she gathers courage to live for the sake of her younger son and the child she is carrying. The Kababwallah gets killed by the "muktijodhdhas," as he was suspected of spying and treason. Altogether, the novel is a complete picture of a woman's life and struggle during the liberation war. The author tries to give minute details of her days, with special emphasis on food. Food testifies to three things: firstly, a mother's concern for the children's nutrition; secondly, food is a cultural signifier,

signifying the culinary tastes of the Bengalis, especially of those accustomed to the food of old Dhaka; thirdly, scarcity of food signifies wartime crisis. According to Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, "Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions" (1). Importantly, Counihan and Esterik also mention that women across cultures often "speak through food and appetite" (1). Therefore, food is a strong cultural signifier in many ways, which has a greater narrative importance in the last novel, *The Baromashi Tapes* (2011).

### ***The Baromashi Tapes* and Bangladeshi Culture**

*The Baromashi Tapes* can be translated as 'The Twelve-month Tapes'. Its temporal setting may be between the nineteen eighties till date, because a large number of Bangladeshi workers have been migrating to Malaysia as wage earners every year since the eighties. The novel may claim a special position among Bangladeshi writings in English for its specific take on the folk genre of the twelve-month song *baromashi* in which the story of a newly-wed couple is narrated. Khokon, the husband, goes to Malaysia and records his voice on a tape and sends it with a recorder and blank tapes to his wife, Sakina, who is left back in his village with his parents. Sakina reads and writes a little, but Khokon thinks that it will be easier for her to record her thoughts on the tapes and send them to him instead of writing letters. Khokon starts recording his voice in April and ends in March the following year. On the other hand, Sakina starts recording her voice in "Baishakh," the first month of the Bangla calendar and the book displays its twelve months in its twelve chapters ending in "Chaitra," the last Bengali month. Each chapter is preceded by the recipe of a rice dish. The chapters also describe different types of food prepared on different occasions. For example, in Chapter Ten Sakina describes the *pitba utsav*<sup>8</sup> at Syed Bari on the occasion of their son-in-law's visit after many years, which clearly shows that Bengalis are naturally inclined towards food and festivity. Counihan and Esterik's comment that "Food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food" (1) is applicable in this case. Bengalis are hospitable by nature and love to make dishes that need a lot of preparation. Roland Barthes claims that food is a strong cultural signifier for some nations (1997). He gives the example of the French people, but the same is applicable for the Bangladeshis. Thus, the book can also be looked upon as a treatise on Bengali *hante cuisine*.

In the first chapter there are two parts; the first, titled "April," transcribes Khokon's recorded voice narrating his journey to Malaysia. Khokon's tape runs quite long, talking about the airport in Dhaka and his passage to Kuala Lumpur.

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<sup>8</sup> A festival that is observed by making different types of cakes. This usually takes place in the winter in Bangladesh.

From the check-in process at Dhaka airport to his arrival in Kuala Lumpur, everything has been minutely described in the chapter. The novel hints at the fact that manpower exporters of the country change the passports of many workers and push them towards an insecure future. It was a huge problem in Bangladesh in the 1980s before the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment started taking special care to have a proper deal for the workers who earn remittance for the country. In a study Petra Dannecker shows that in the '80s, because of the Gulf War, there was a decline of wages and competition among the labour-providing countries; many Bangladeshi workers therefore started migrating to Malaysia while earlier the attraction of the workers was towards the Gulf countries. In 2001, according to the article, the number of Bangladeshi male migrant workers in Malaysia was between 100,000 and 300,000 (249). In 2011 the number was much higher. However, the novel does not show that a higher number of female workers also migrated to Malaysia around the time the novel was set. Several memoranda of understanding were signed between the Malaysian and Bangladesh governments since the 1980s that promised to recruit workers from Bangladesh without harassment and exploitation. Yet, the picture has remained dark and ambiguous, the aftermath of which is several mutinies, arrests and seizures of passports, the news of which is posted regularly. One example of the media coverage of such events is the news of a Bangladeshi workers' mutiny in Malaysia broadcast on TV, mentioned in the last chapter of the text. There is no record of such mutiny in academic writing, but there are several newspaper reports about the corruption in the manpower business in Bangladesh, in which a syndicate is actively existent. According to these, people in high positions of the government are also involved in this human trafficking. The first chapter has a second part titled "Baisakh" in which Sakina narrates her story. Hers is an intimate description of Bengali village life. Each of Sakina's twelve narratives, having the Bengali months as their titles in the twelve chapters of the novel, starts with an extract from *Kamolar Baromashi*, the folk song in which Sakina becomes the modern folk heroine. The epigraphs describe the distinctive characteristics of the Bengali months and the narrative of Sakina following each epigraph elaborates the month's features. In this way the novel represents rural Bangladesh. Though Sakina's is a narration of an almost illiterate village girl, the description of months and household activities is never inadequate. Her description has authenticity and aestheticism. Sensuousness is an extra quality in the description. For example, when Sakina describes the "kalbaisakhi"<sup>9</sup> blowing down the green mangoes which are relished with red chillies and salt, or when she describes the green jute fields, the beautiful Kash<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Kalbaisakhi is a tropical storm named after the month of Baisakh.

<sup>10</sup> An autumnal flower.

fields in Kartik<sup>11</sup> or payesh<sup>12</sup> made out of freshly harvested binni rice<sup>13</sup> and khejurergur<sup>14</sup> in the month of Poush,<sup>15</sup> readers almost visualise or relish those.

Towards the end of her narration Sakina hints at her sister-in-law's wish to go to the capital city to work in a garment factory, which also marks a revolutionary event in the economic sector of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has become one of the topmost exporters of garments to foreign countries. The industrial boom in the garment sector requires a large number of workers migrating from the villages to different parts of Dhaka city, most of whom are young women. Many of the girls remain unmarried till very late, some of them are sexually exploited and some others get married and live happily. However, the novel concentrates more on the village women, especially wives left at home whose husbands are living in foreign countries as wage earners. Sometimes, these women have illicit affairs in their husbands' absence; Jhunukhala in the novel is an example of that. She is punished heavily as her husband breaks her neck after learning the truth. The feminist nature of Sakina, the uneducated village girl, is revealed in her comments: "It is sad that Khala had to die but the man who was responsible is roaming around freely in the village" (88). A stronger feminist approach is found in Chapter Seven in which Sakina watches the jatra<sup>16</sup> of *Behula* arranged by the Mahila Kalyan Samity on the premises of Syed Bari. After watching how Behula, the heroine of the play, fights all evil and gets back the life of her dead husband, Sakina muses: "In the same way, women have to be strong and fight everything that stands in their way and takes away their rights" (80). She looks at her mother-in-law and thinks that she is also a strong woman like Behula who 'holds everything together.' The Mahila Kalyan Samity is another important entity in the novel, which looks after the welfare of women, especially the illiterate village women. It arranges for training in handwork, sewing, weaving, cooking, etc. that would be financially profitable for women.

The villages of Bangladesh are developing – such an idea is expressed in the novel. The village people are becoming familiar with electricity, tape recorders, television, mobile phones, etc. In the last chapter there is a reference to Grameen Bank's micro credit programme<sup>17</sup> which has helped a village woman buy a mobile phone and make money with it. The eleven-digit mobile number is also given at the end of the novel. On the other hand, the novel ends with a suspension regarding the crisis in a Malaysian oil plantation in which Bangladeshi workers

<sup>11</sup> The seventh month of the Bengali calendar.

<sup>12</sup> Rice pudding made with sap from the date palm plant and rice.

<sup>13</sup> One kind of red sticky rice produced in Southeast and East Asia.

<sup>14</sup> Jaggery made from the date palm sap.

<sup>15</sup> The ninth month of the Bengali calendar.

<sup>16</sup> A popular form of Indian folk theatre.

<sup>17</sup> A small scale loan programme of a microfinance organisation in Bangladesh called the Grameen Bank. The Nobel Peace Prize for 2006 was awarded jointly to the Bank and its founder, Muhammad Yunus. Detailed information can be accessed at <http://www.grameen.com/what-is-microcredit/>.

were involved. Sakina watches the TV news at the Syed Bari and tries to track her husband in the crowd shown in the news.

The novel ends with a note of hope that Khokon is alright and he will continue to send money. Altogether the novel is representative of Bangladeshi village life. Perhaps that is why the village's name or the year are not mentioned, so that the locale can act as prototype, since such events can happen in any village of Bangladesh and the cycle of months is almost the same everywhere. The novel's power lies in its accuracy in tracing the changes of the seasons with their various delicacies.

### Conclusion

Niaz Zaman's novels do not fall under the category of what is generally understood as women's fiction, because women's fictions are usually written by women to tell stories about women and the target readers are women. Though women are protagonists in her fictional works and there is a strong feminist approach in them, her target audience may not be women only. As she writes in English, a large section of her national readership would comprise of men, who by default constitute a large part of the population educated in English. Zaman has displayed a range of male characters too, though men are often passive actors in the women's networks in her novels. Haider and Khokon are under the shadows of their wives; Khalid is comparatively an aggressive young man, but he is also submissive to his emotionally charged wife. The author may have intended to show that women have their roles in domestic and national crises, and women are not as passive as they are sketched to be in traditional male literature. Her depiction of an emerging Bangladesh is, undoubtedly, beyond any gender consideration. She has ardently described the phases through which the people of the country went before and after the Liberation War. She has devotedly narrated the cultural elements and her representation is a sincere account of the country's progress.

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