

Prostitution and Perceptiveness: Violated and Aging Bodies in Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood*

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Abstract

This article aims to portray the suffering and trajectories of female prostitutes in Rizia Rahman's novel *Rokter Okkebor* (1978), translated into English as *Letters of Blood* by Arunava Sinha in 2016. By using the radical feminist perspective, the constructive framework of this paper aims to project the social and cultural restraints as well as the hegemonic power relations and male dominance in the lives of female prostitutes portrayed in the novel. Considering neo-abolitionist feminist viewpoints, this paper focuses exclusively on the experience of specific hierarchies, male domination, violence, and old-age problem on the part of the female prostitutes working in an unlicensed brothel in the fictional place of Golapipatti, Bangladesh as depicted in Rahman's novel. Additionally, the paper also seeks to demonstrate how prostitution and the threat of being classified a 'prostitute' work as an impediment to female prostitutes' heterosexual engagement and are used as a tool of female oppression.

Keywords

Female body, sexual violence, male domination, forced prostitution, body shame

Introduction

Prostitution, frequently referred to as "the oldest profession" (Beran 19) entails the exchange of all forms of sexual services for money, and is defined as "offering or agreeing to engage in, or engaging in, a sex act with another person in return for a fee" (Grana 195). Apart from money, a prostitute is also referred to as someone who trades sex or sexually favoured drugs or other valued products (Dalla 344). Simultaneously, prostitution, "perhaps the most

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stigmatised line of work in which women engage” (Peterson-Iyer 19), denigrates women for life, erasing all chances for a promising future in certain communities. Often, prostitutes are commonly viewed as fallen women who exist on the periphery of society and are perceived as consumable commodities by those who seek to exploit them. This leads to consider prostitution as “the absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege” (Kesler 219) that vividly illustrates the dominance and subjugation of women, and their sex work symbolises “an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy” (Overall 724), and men’s dominance.

Neo-abolitionists and radical feminists argue that sex work is inevitably repressive and violent, and that it functions only to reinforce male supremacy and authority over women. They further assert that prostitution is doubly abusive for women, as they are financially and sexually unequal to men (LeBrun 22). They are not only economically dependent on men due to a structure of patriarchal institutions, but they are also valued only for their ability to offer sexual gratification and liberation for men through their bodies. Thus, “the exploitation of female sexuality is a ruling-class privilege, an advantage which allows those socially identified as ‘men’ to perpetuate their economic and cultural hegemony” (Shrage 354). By taking into consideration these perspectives and the pathetic plight of the teen, old, and aging prostitutes as depicted in Rizia Rahman’s novel *Letters of Blood*, this article focuses exclusively on how prostitution exemplifies the ultimate degradation of women to sexual commodities that can be bought, sold, severely tortured, despised, and neglected. The paper demonstrates how prostitution not only worsens the way men are supposed, anticipated, and even urged to oppress women socio-culturally, but also inextricably adheres to the gendered division of power through the commodification of women’s bodies and the denial of their individual agency.

Contextualising Rizia Rahman’s *Letters of Blood*

Rizia Rahman’s plot is based on the situation of women prostitutes in post-independence, 1970s-80s Bangladesh. However, as in many other countries, the situation in Bangladesh has not yet changed and poverty is still one of the main reasons for child and forced prostitution. Rahman in the “Author’s Note” of the English translated edition of this novel admits this sad fact: “I had written the book many years ago, reflecting the situation then. What is disappointing is that their actual condition has not really changed at all” (Rahman xiii). It is important to understand Bangladesh society and its numerous aspects, norms, beliefs, and agencies before attempting to address gender inequality and other types of gender discrimination there (Hasan 4). Thus, before deciphering the intricacies of the stories of female prostitutes in Rahman’s *Letters of Blood*, in what follows, a brief overview of prostitution in Bangladesh is provided.

Although prostitution in hotels and residences is prohibited in Bangladesh, it is in considerable demand in Dhaka. According to the current official statistics, 19,384 women are engaged in prostitution in Dhaka, with 8,238 operating on the streets, 8,798 in residences, and 2,348 in hotels (Shewly et al 501). While some prostitutes operate out of hotels or on the streets, many others have been trafficked into one of Bangladesh's congested and huge brothels, and especially in Daulatdia, a village in Rajbari district, Bangladesh (Rashid & Auer 2015). In such brothels, they are bonded to "madams" (sardarni) and engage in unprotected sexual intercourse ten or more times a day (Clark 1). Hundreds and thousands of Bangladeshi men visit an approximated 200,000 female prostitutes daily, the majority of whom are teens (Clark 1).

The health implications can be catastrophic for female prostitutes and their children, and according to non-governmental agencies, one-third of Bangladesh's female prostitutes have at least one sexually transmitted infection, and 40% have had an unwanted pregnancy and subsequent abortions (Population Council 2015; FHI 360 2014). Deplorable living and working conditions create physical and psychological misery, but the biggest danger to female prostitutes' quality of life is violence, which is largely perpetrated by local gang members and the police, as stated by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, asserts that Sexual violence is reported to street female sex workers on an average of six times per month (UNFPA 2012). While the consequences of poverty and lack of economic opportunities restrict and impede female prostitutes' mobility in Bangladesh (Amin 230), factually and metaphorically, their invisibility is exacerbated by the stigma and prejudices attached to prostitution. At the same time, it should be mentioned that,

the anti-trafficking campaign hardly took notice of a strong campaign mounted by sex workers' groups along with women's and human rights' groups for the right of sex workers to work, their right to living and working in brothels, and their demand for security and protection from the state. (Azim 197)

While these campaigns make use of the human rights-based approach to advocate for prostitutes' recognition as state citizens and authorised professionals, it has been observed that holding sex workers accountable for their actions seems to have little value for the majority of sex workers in Bangladesh (Amin; Azim).

The pathetic plight of female prostitutes in Bangladesh should be addressed by feminist researchers advocating for the welfare of Bangladeshi women. Most importantly, as Hasan argues, "socio-cultural specificities of women in Bangladesh require special considerations in any feminist endeavour to realise gender equity" (9). Rizia Rahman, a feminist and social activist, rises on this occasion to speak on behalf of the prostitutes and incorporates stories

of female sex workers in her novel *Letters of Blood*. She believes that prostitution exposes women to additional health hazards, such as rape and/or other forms of gender-specific bodily violence. These health hazards in prostitution undeniably “raise both the ongoing specter of gendered oppression in patriarchal societies and our often-schizophrenic-part-acknowledged, part-tabooed-passions about sex” (Chancer 146). Rahman recognises that, while female prostitutes are not criminalised in Bangladesh, they are pitifully stigmatised as fallen or immoral, or as psychiatrically troubled individuals.

In her “Author’s Note,” Rahman recounts an anecdote of her adolescent days, particularly a day when she went to the cinema with her mother. She demonstrated how in the cinema auditorium her mother urged her not to look at the bodily performance of a prostitute who was seated only one row ahead of them. Unaware of the meaning of the word “whore” and the accompanying shame and taboo with it, Rahman is perplexed as to why the prostitute takes off “both her sari and her blouse” (Rahman viii) in that cinema hall. But she realises that the word “whore” is a swear word from her mother’s statement: “It’s impossible for civilized folk to go to the cinema these days. Now it’s become a gathering place for all sorts of nasty people, like whores. Tsk! Tsk! They were doing such dirty things” (viii). She even gets a slap from her mother for uttering the word “whore” and her mother exclaims angrily: “You’re just a little child, where did you pick up such a dirty word?” (viii).

Rahman understands the fact that despite widespread recognition of the commercial value of sex, paying for sexual services remains controversial and ostracised (Shiboleth 118) in Bangladesh. This leads her to speak out against the murky side of society and the unendurable lives of female prostitutes along with their miserable plight in her novel *Letters of Blood*. By deciphering stories about impoverished girls such as Piru, Kusum, and Parul who are enticed by job offers or kidnapped and then sold to brothels by brokers, as depicted in the novel, this paper attempts to show how prostitution becomes the foundation of their subjugation and oppression. The paper also addresses the predicament of elderly prostitutes as shown in the novel through the characters of Golapjaan, Rohimon, and Phulmoti.

Prostitution, male domination, and violated bodies

Neo-abolitionists and radical feminists believe that “prostitution and the wider sex industry serve to underpin and reinforce prostitution as a patriarchal institution that affects all women and gendered relations” (O’Neill 16). Prostitution, according to notable radical feminists like Kathleen Barry, Carole Pateman, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon, is a form of female oppression and sexual exploitation in which women’s bodies are commodified and violated. These feminists are radical in the sense that they view prostitution

as doubly oppressive to women, considering that prostitutes are economically and sexually unequal to men. They firmly believe that,

Prostitution and other sex work are reliant upon men as the client and in many cases as the broker, i.e., the pimp, [and thus], it is regarded as one of the highest forms of female exploitation. (Robinson 27)

Radical feminists further argue that the violation and subjugation of prostitutes exemplify the systemic nature of men's dominance and societal control over women. Thus, they view prostitution as the 'sine qua non' of the female experience under patriarchal framework, where the entrenched gender structure of commercial sex tends to provide a graphic illustration of male superiority enforced through sexuality (Scoular 343). This brutal depiction of male dominance over female prostitutes becomes even more heinous when they are ruthlessly beaten, raped, and murdered at a rate that is significantly higher than that of other women.

Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, well-known radical feminists, contend that patriarchal abuse of women is caused and perpetuated by the sexual double standard and subjugation of women, which includes violent acts such as physical abuse, assault, and murder. They argue that prostitution exhibits this oppression since it demonstrates economic and sexual dependence of women on male authority, and they believe that the prostitute epitomises the worth of women in society, serving as a prototype for women's socio-cultural, sexual, and financial servitude, in that her position functions as the fundamental unit against which the status of all women is evaluated and whereby all women can be lowered (Giobbe 77). Andrea Dworkin asserts that equitable sexual connection between men and women is impossible in an unequal society, and she opines,

Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body. The only analogy I can think of concerning prostitution is that it is more like gang rape than it is like anything else. (Dworkin 3)

Dworkin's notion of gang rape and the sexual violation of prostitutes become explicitly apparent in the narratives of Piru and Golapi, two teen prostitutes in Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, who are seen enduring the heinous brutalities of simultaneously sleeping with multiple customers. The twelve-year-old Piru, a child prostitute younger than Kusum, is sold to Hiru Sardar for "twenty-five taka[s]," and Hiru compels her to sleep with numerous men concurrently for increasing his earnings. Piru utters: "I hate having men. It hurts so much. What can I do? Mashi beats me. I don't get food. I'll run away one day" (Rahman 16). After buying the sixteen-year-old Golapi, Hiru coerces her into sleeping with three to four men, including himself, as if he is there to assess her physical stamina. Marjina, another prostitute in the brothel, remarks despondently as she observes the horrific scenario of Golapi's forceful sleeping with multiple customers at the same time: "It'll be Judgement Day for that girl today. She's

new, and on top of that three or four huge men are in the room with her” (Rahman 135). This practice cannot be an agent of liberation; it is rather a pinnacle of exploitative sexual interactions.

In *Letters of Blood*, teen prostitutes like Piru's pitiful predicament exemplifies how women's sexuality relies on the objectification and commodification by men. MacKinnon, in *Feminism unmodified: Discourses on law and life* (1987), opines in this context: “Women's sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others [those others being males]. Women never own or possess it” (58). In the novel, Hiru's inhuman domination over Piru and Golapi demonstrates the selling of sex as the reason for losing women's liberty because “while, for men, liberty entails that women be prostituted, for women, prostitution entails loss of all that liberty means” (MacKinnon, *Prostitution and Civil Rights* 14). In the novel, Kusum and Piru, sold to the brothel at a very young age, highlight that prostitution is fundamentally a form of sexual abuse and it manifests male supremacy when prostitutes become subjected to sexual violence and merciless beating coupled with their stigmatised and restraint mobility, long term deprivation, and exploitation. Sex work has traditionally been understood as a result of poverty, triggering the conventional welfare response that women must be rescued and rehabilitated into legitimate relationships and employment (Huq 18). In the novel, both Kusum and Piru are seen homeless, helpless, as an acute poverty makes them the soft target in the prostitution market. Out of poverty, insecurity, and helplessness, they become easily subjected to forced prostitution and their “decisions to become prostitutes are never in fact genuine choices: rather, what appears as choices are in fact constrained by both ‘external’ (social) and ‘internal’ (psychological) factors” (Jaggar 3). This forced prostitution shatters Kusum's and Piru's vision of breaking free from oppression, transcending this patriarchally-structured society, and establishing their own definitions of gender, happiness, and sexuality. This forced prostitution highlights the fact that, as Pape explains,

Today, young people, and especially young women, are directly targeted by the system of prostitution. Rape culture, economic conditions, migration paths and sexual violence in the childhood are part of the root causes which explain the highest vulnerability of youth to the sex industry. (146)

Kusum is one of the youngest prostitutes in that brothel in Golapipatti, and she struggles to find customers regularly because of her famished and lean body. She gets a meal of rice and pulses only on the condition of getting customers enough to satisfy the monetary greed of Kalu, who has bought her and a few other prostitutes. Due to her acute poverty, Kusum steals money from her customer and is caught by Kalu who strikes her stomach with a couple of hard kicks, grabs a handful of her hair, bends and throws her body to the ground,

and slams her resoundingly, making her head reel. For getting food, Kusum even sleeps with a customer who is as old as her father because she knows that not getting a customer means humiliation and merciless beatings from Kalu. For Kusum, “prostitution remains morally undesirable... because it is one of those most graphic examples of men’s domination over women” (Pateman 56). She is constantly under Kalu’s domination and monitoring, which pushes her to seek customers even while she is suffering from high temperatures, coughing illness and great body pain, as she says: “Kalu will kill me if I don’t get a customer tonight. I won’t get to eat. I can’t sleep nights from hunger” (Rahman 36). While Kusum is tortured by her owner Kalu, Bokul is mercilessly beaten by her customer who strips and whips every inch of her body. Bursting into tears, Bokul says: “What do these sons of pigs think we are? Don’t we have the bodies of human beings? Hasn’t Allah sent us to earth as humans?” (Rahman 46). Bokul bleeds profusely as a customer tortures her physically to become sexually stimulated, and her heart wrenching cries turn into the lament of the filthy, decaying, unhygienic boundaries of the entire brothel.

Kusum’s and Bokul’s bodies, in Foucauldian terms, are disciplined by physical torture to assure that their bodies are compelled to fulfil the demands of their owners and customers. Their bodies, subjected to merciless beating and torture, become docile, possessing habits and practices imposed on them in a detrimental and constraining manner, limiting their range of other financial possibilities in the world. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault explains how disciplinary mechanisms of power shape the modern subject, primarily through the body, producing “docile bodies” that are continually penetrated by power. He argues:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defines how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the technique, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (138)

Whenever the twelve-year-old Piru fails to obtain a customer, she hides on the terrace to evade the brunt of Hiru’s thrashing. However, Hiru is always on the lookout for her and delivers hard kicks to her little chest. Landing one kick after another, Hiru puts her lifeless body into her chamber like the corpse of a dog, demonstrating how child prostitutes like Piru have no control over their bodies in a brothel. Kusum’s, Piru’s, and Bokul’s bodies are disciplined and subordinated to their owners and consumers, and the fear of constant surveillance emphasises their obligation to serve the institution with which they are entangled, rather than enhancing their own existence. These prostitutes vividly seek to strive that their “equality, sexual and otherwise, cannot be

achieved so long as prostitution, which is predicated on the sexual subordination of women to men, continues to exist" (Jolin 76). Kusum's, Piru's, and Golapi's surrender to inhuman torture, violation, and savage beating at the hands of their owners and customers sheds light on the most prevalent issue in prostitution: liberty over the body. This liberty over the body brings forth the notion of choice and consent. Rather than being logically absurd, consent is frequently perceived as factually non-existent or inconsequential, as only a small percentage of all women in prostitution do it voluntarily. Melissa Farley asserts:

For most, prostitution is not a real choice because physical safety, equal power with buyers, and real alternatives don't exist. These are the conditions that would permit genuine consent. Most of the 1% who choose prostitution are privileged because of their ethnicity and class and they have escape options. Poor women and women of color don't have these options. (qtd. in Serughetti 84)

Through the voices of Marjina and Huree, two other prostitutes in that same brothel, Rahman poses the following questions: "Are we like dead dogs whose bodies anyone within reach can maul as they please? Aren't we entitled to some control over those bodies?" (Rahman 128). Kusum's, Golapi's, and Piru's unbearable suffering and merciless torture at the hands of men pose a few questions before the world:

Why is it impossible to stop prostitution completely? What if the authorities decide to punish not only those who take part in human trafficking or brokering, but also those who go to brothels as customers? Is it not a violation of human rights to force women into this so-called profession? (Rahman xiii-xiv)

These questions push the novelist to advocate for the abolition of prostitution, either by criminalising prostitution in its totality or by criminalising the purchase because "legalized or decriminalized prostitution industries are one of the root causes of sex trafficking" (Raymond 317). As sex work is intrinsically gendered, prostitution is a reflection of gender oppression and discrimination. As with neo-abolitionists, Rahman believes that the majority of women cannot legitimately consent to sex work since the commercial sale of their bodies exemplifies sexual dominance by men. Rahman's questions indicate that individuals involved in abusing women or misleading them into prostitution should face severe punishment. The toughest penalty possible may be imposed on those who trade in women and force them in antisocial activities, taking advantage of their vulnerability in the process. While Articles 348, 366, 372, 373, 375, 397, 398, and 509 of the Bangladesh Penal Code need to be radically reformed; and the fundamental structure of prostitution can be effectively abolished if the traders and brokers of women are exposed and their nefarious movements are restrained (Hannan 67).

Kusum, Piru, and Bokul eventually lose their identities in the public space of that brothel, which is replete with screams, anguish, suffering, quarrels, bestiality, pimps, and hoodlums. They are constantly questioning patriarchal society, asking: “Can you tell why all of us here, are nothing but whores? We are human beings too. Just like your wives and daughters and sisters” (Rahman 69). Their pitiful predicament refutes the possibility of discriminating between voluntary and forced prostitution, and they highlight the fact that “when the human being is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human being has taken place” (Barry 23). Rahman feels pity for prostitutes such as Kusum, Piru, and Bokul, who not only become victims and end up in brothels, but also become products of a capitalist and patriarchal system that frequently compels them to sleep with men even when they are not interested. These docile and violated female bodies are gradually consumed by commercial agreements every day in the murky and dampened lane of Golapipatti. Rahman, likening these prostitutes to slaves, asserts that this capitalist culture has always treated prostitutes as commodities, who are “like slaves traded thousands of years ago, amidst cruel, ruthless, inhuman behaviour, surviving as creatures of the night” (Rahman 39). The tragic predicament of these teen prostitutes demonstrates the importance of enforcing strict penalties against those who abuse women or deceive them into the forced prostitution. Rahman further believes that the campaign against sexual violence and for the rights of trafficked women has the capacity to fundamentally alter entrenched rules and practices regarding women’s bodies.

Prostitution and aging bodies

In the realm of prostitution, many, particularly women, consider aging as something to be feared and avoided, as female prostitutes are desired primarily for their attractiveness and looks, while aging is viewed unfavourably by their buyers and customers. Often aging female prostitutes are judged on the basis of their physical characteristics, as evidenced by salary discrimination against elderly female sex workers (Lederer 57), and this shows the financial constraints that female prostitutes face in society when they lose their beauty and glamour. Frequently, elderly and former prostitutes fail to counter age discrimination that incorporates the gender perspective of ageism as well as the variety of ways in which it affects older women. The pathetic plight of elderly prostitutes highlights certain “stereotypical beliefs about gender and age [that] combine to form a ‘double jeopardy’ for women,” leading to the “notion that women are valued in accordance to the conditions ascribed to their youth (sexual appeal, reproductive capacity), and “older women have tended to be those more harshly affected” (Walker et al 38-39). The plight of Golapjaan and Rohimon, two elderly prostitutes in the novel, who live in Golapipatti, reveals how the

patriarchal system dictates what women cannot do with their body and beauty when they become aged.

From the very beginning of the story, old Golapjaan is seen constantly coughing and dumping herself immediately before going somewhere, and “today, she’s a lump of flesh outside the door of Rupa, Amina and Moti’s house, lying on the bricks where the cement has worn off” (Rahman 4). This elderly woman, who was a former prostitute in Golapipatti, now has nothing except her ribs and withered body. As soon as the day begins, she crawls around other prostitutes’ doors, staring longingly at them “with their glasses of tea and *dalpuris*” (Rahman 4). When she begs for food from others, she is not only humiliated by Sakina, but also cursed for remaining alive even after becoming toothless and haggard. Her famished body yearns for food and this forces her to crawl up and gather the packet of puffed rice that Kalu tosses into the drain. Upon observing the old Golapjaan desperately seeking shelter on a rainy day, Kusum fears and laments that the old woman may not be able to endure the dreary and stormy weather. Kusum’s concern is followed by Zarina’s account of Golapjaan’s miserable plight: “You think she’ll die so easily. She has nowhere to live. Her legs are crippled. She can barely crawl about [with] no food. Still the hag is alive” (Rahman 96).

The deplorable state of seventy-year-old Goplajaan and her emaciated body, which gets drenched in the rain and is only partially protected by the roof of Mannan’s shop on a rainy day. This exemplifies how blatant ignorance of “the pervasiveness of structural inequalities in this society directly results in poverty and prostitution” (Monroe 81). Kusum, Shanti, and Zarina can foresee their future in Old Golapjaan, who was once like them but is now old, blind, unable to communicate and walk properly, and will one day be located lifeless by the drain. Golapjaan’s tragic end brings out the fact that,

the Planning Commission, the Ministry of Rehabilitation and the Ministry of Social Welfare of the government seem indifferent to the thousands of rootless women who live on the streets of big cities as well as small towns in Bangladesh. (63)

A substantial rehabilitation programme for elderly and homeless prostitutes, such as Golapjaan, must be implemented. Rohimon, like Golapjaan, is an elderly prostitute living in Golapipatti, Bangladesh. Rohimon’s lack of income and acute poverty drive her insane and leave her with a skeletal body. While her breasts and back are indistinguishable, her nose has been severely damaged by a terrible disease and two of her front teeth have been knocked out by someone a long time ago. While the awful wound on her gravely injured nose drips pus and her eyelid muscles are abnormally swollen, “she has a hole on her right cheek,” and no one knows “when she last bathed” (Rahman 13). However, in her old age, she is disdained by everyone, which forces her to beg for a living, crouching

at the lane's entrance each evening and extending her hand out to anyone who walks by.

This discrimination in Rohimon's instance is undesirable, unfavourable, and unacceptable. Sandra Lee Bartky argues that when one is subjected to ridicule due to old age, and when this embarrassment is noticed or singled out, one often wants to be free of them. This old age discrimination symbolises feminine contentment, tolerance, and female subjugation. Bartky further states that the misogynistic nature of society and also one's own role in perpetuating discrimination against aged women "involves the experience of a profound personal transformation" (11). This transition not only reflects the changes in the beauty and shape of the body as women grow old, but also reflects society's changing attitude towards them as they become aged. During such a phase of transformation "shame may be augmented, not diminished, as more and more instances and situations now are revealed as denigrating, threatening, and shameful, evoking painful memories of how one used to accept, even enjoy, 'compliments'" (Lehtinen 73). Rohimon, under this kind of embarrassing circumstance, recalls how she was in high demand during her youth and received considerable attention from a very wealthy contractor who gave her a gold chain and earrings. She has no business now and spends the money she collects from begging on hooch, since she prefers to stay intoxicated to forget about her glorious past and miserable present. Nobody appreciates being forced to stand close to dirty, smelling Rohimon and seeing her ribs and disgusting nostrils. She passes out at the drain as soon as she sips hooch and "flies buzz around her open mouth and the wound in her nose" (Rahman 14).

Rohimon's decaying body looks so unpleasant that people attempt to push her closer to the drain in order to avoid seeing her wounds, which result in her "chronic body shame," a term coined by Luna Dolezal. This chronic body shame is a different kind of body shame that arises "because of some stigma or deformity, such as a scar or disability" and this shame "is often linked to the body's functions and anxieties around commonplace occurrences such as acne, illness, bowel movements, aging, and so forth" (Dolezal 10). Additionally, it may develop in connection with impairments of behaviour or bodily control, such as stammering or persistent clumsiness. This chronic shame of Rohimon compels her to believe that her body is deformed and socially inferior, causing her to suffer perpetually. Dolezal goes on to suggest that prolonged body shaming has a detrimental impact:

Chronic body shame is oppressive and compromising. It can lead to a diminished bodily experience where a constant preoccupation with the body affects one's self esteem and sense of self-worth. (11)

Rohimon's old age, combined with a frail body riddled with deep wounds, not only undermines her self-esteem, but also subjects her to constant humiliation. When she is caught red-handed stealing hooch from Chheru's shop out of dire

necessity, Bachhir complains in rage: “This fucking bitch has nine lives, like a cat. Gets knocked around all day, still doesn’t die” (Rahman 49). Rohimon’s realisation of her inability to purchase food and liquor exacerbates her chronic shame, constantly hampers her social relationships, compels her to use abusive words, and plunges her into a condition of extreme powerlessness.

Rohimon’s perceptions as a result of a socially humiliated individual’s chronic shame “often breed a stagnant self-obsession [that] is unconstructive and self-destructive” and this serves as reassurances of what she has already known—that she is an aged woman of lesser importance (Lehtinen 62). She even reminds Yasmin that nobody can be happy in a whore home and tells her: “Not even a dog will look at you when you grow old. Your nose will rot away. You’ll go mad and hang yourself or starve to death. No one will care” (Rahman 50). This notion of age discrimination is reiterated by Itzin and Phillipson, who coined the term “gendered ageism” to refer to the intersection and interplay of ageism and sexism where “it would appear that ageism is in fact significantly gendered and that sexism operates always with a dimension of ageism” (Itzin and Phillipson 92). Itzin and Phillipson further argue that “the ‘gendered ageism’ operates in the culture of organizations, and the combined effects of age and gender and in particular ageism and sexism on the organizational status and opportunities of women” (92). In the case of aged prostitutes, customer perceptions of them constantly include a sexual connotation due to the stereotypical gender roles of women at various stages of their lives. Old Golapjaan’s and Rohimon’s pitiful existence not only vividly portrays the deplorable condition of the aging bodies of female prostitutes but also emphasises how only women face age discrimination in this society.

Prostitutes who become mothers due to an unwanted pregnancy are likely to face significant difficulties, as they must look after their children while still finding customers to feed them. Inside the realm of prostitution, pregnant bodies are frequently seen as social taboos that must be kept hidden, and the post-pregnant body must bear no evidence of pregnancy or birth (O’Donohoe 4). Through the character Phulmoti, Rahman highlights the problems that a prostitute faces when she becomes a mother in *Letters of Blood*. As soon as Phulmoti becomes a mother as a result of an unwanted pregnancy, customers begin to despise and neglect her, feeling that she has lost her charm. Age discrimination became the primary factor for Phulmoti’s subsequent decline in sex work; and due to her inability to make money, she even fails to consult a doctor and buy some medicine for her child who catches a cold and cries all night. Being helpless, she tells Kusum: “Even those homoeopathy pills cost four taka[s]. Tell me what to do” (Rahman 17). Her condition exposes the bare truth that it is a crime to be the mother of a child in a brothel, and staring at Phulmoti’s skinny worm-like infant, Kusum assures herself that she must never become a mother.

Phulmoti's agony reaches a zenith when Kazi Shaheb forces her to evacuate her room because she has not paid her rent for a month. Her starving and destitute appearance, her dishevelled and unruly hair, devoid of even a drop of oil, and her dusty fading saree fail to elicit any pity from Kazi Shaheb, for whom every prostitute is merely a commodity. Explaining her baby's poor health, she begs for an extension of a few days from Kazi Shaheb, but that man becomes even more enraged and tells her that a prostitute cannot have a baby. Weeping continuously, she laments: "What can I do? The baby just won't get well. I don't get enough to eat. I can't feed her. Can't give her a drop of medicine. Take her with you, chacha, give her away to someone" (Rahman 81). Kazi Shaheb even threatens her, telling her that he will send Hiru to insert a knife into her stomach and that of her baby to extract his dues. Here Phulmoti is reduced to a sexual object that can be humiliated and tortured, and she becomes a symbol of sexual slavery for Kazi Shaheb and Hiru.

According to prostitute abusers like Kazi Shaheb and Hiru, when a prostitute becomes a mother, she eventually loses her beauty and appears significantly older than other prostitutes. The argument being made here is that "the younger the woman, the more paid work she is likely to have done and the better qualified in formal terms she is likely to be" (Groves 43). Phulmoti not only curses Kazi Shaheb upon hearing this but also aggressively dashes her infant to the floor. She screams, cries, and utters: "Die! Die! Die now, you bitch! Why did Allah send you to me? What did you come to a whore's womb for? What will I do now?" (Rahman 82). By presenting old Golapjaan, Rohimon, and aging Phulmoti's pitiful existence, Rahman not only educates her readers about the maltreatment elderly and often working prostitutes receive due to age discrimination, but also highlights that their experiences should not go ignored and underrepresented on television, in films, academic writings, and other kinds of mainstream media in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Letters of Blood questions the maltreatment of female prostitutes in all over the globe. As Shah Abdul Hannan rightly asserts that prostitution, or the sex trade, is another significant source of violence and oppression against women. Women abduction networks are growing over the world, and under no circumstances can it be ethical to endanger women's lives and livelihoods in the name of liberty in sex work (60). The portrayal of hardships of prostitutes such as Kusum, Piru, Parul, and Goplai in this novel implicitly enquire into the role of state parties in taking necessary steps and legal actions to combat all forms of women trafficking. Child and forced prostitution, exploitation of them in patriarchal society, and their struggles illustrate that law enforcement authorities have failed to understand sex workers as common citizens and safeguard their interests and rights. The plight of aged and elderly prostitutes such as

Golapjaan, Rohimon, and Phulmoti highlights the lack of healthcare, hygiene practices, social assistance, and community services for prostitutes and their offspring. Rahman understands that when shame becomes a significant indication of female prostitutes' socio-cultural discourse, it is not enough to counteract shame independently; it can perhaps be accomplished collectively. Rahman's depiction of prostitutes' struggle can invalidate established rules and practices, reinterpreting the boundaries of female empowerment. While numerous NGOs are attempting to create a more balanced society for female prostitutes in Bangladesh, Rahman laments that, in reality, their actual situation has not improved in the slightest and their dismal position is only being re-wrapped.

Deeply embedded in capitalism and commodification, patriarchal frameworks of domination involve profoundly ingrained male violence against women. In this novel, Rahman emphasises the injustices, inequalities, and abuses of human rights she observes in all forms of prostitution and sex trafficking. She believes that prostitutes should not be blamed; rather, those who engage in sex trafficking and pay visits to prostitutes must be held accountable. Judicial policy should be directed at brothel owners, not at the women working in brothels. The miserable predicament of prostitutes, in Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, demonstrates the limitations on their freedom that they experience in their interactions with customers, brothel owners, and sex industry authorities. This concept of the limitations on their freedom is grounded in an assessment of the systemic inequalities of capitalism, including the socio-economic, legal, cultural, and gender dimensions. By capturing the sexist capitalist sex trade, Rahman's *Letters of Blood* demonstrates how prostitutes lose their autonomy and how sex work and aging exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalised women. The forces at work in the sex trade are vicious and savage; deception is the way in which it thrives. A ludicrous equilibrium is maintained in order to thwart any rebellious activity (Manzoor 2017). Given society's unequal distribution of power, there is limited room for transformative change on the part of prostitutes and their loss of sexual liberty. Their future is gloomy as far as transformative social progress is concerned, and sexual and social disparities on an individual and communal level persist. Their bodies are commodified on the basis of commercial power relationships and the objectification of women. Like labour capability, women's sexuality is deemed a commodity under capitalism. As a result, prostitutes are treated as wage slaves and become dehumanised, as their worth as individuals is determined by their market value.

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