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Hasina's Sisters Are Machine Women: Women's Violated Bodies and/in Bangladeshi Garments Factories

By Umme Al-wazedi¹

Abstract

Hasina and Shimu are garment factory workers; Hasina's life is portrayed in Monica Ali's 2003 debut novel, *Brick Lane*. Shimu is the main character of Rubaiyat Hossain's 2020 film *Made in Bangladesh*. Hasina and Shimu suffer from violence enacted on their bodies by both male garment factory workers and their husbands. They suffer from male hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal norms, and discriminatory economic structures. Furthermore, the dominant image of a female garment factory worker as sexually promiscuous enables more violence against them. In addition, economic violence is used to control and limit women's bodies. Their bodies become a site of control as capitalism becomes the controlling factor for a nation-state. Carol Pateman argues that capitalism is virtually a form of patriarchy. Yet, there is resistance as well. Hasina confirms that she is not like her mother or other garment factory workers. Shimu talks to a lawyer, studies the labor laws, and forms a union in her factory. Hasina and Shimu are the "new women" of Bangladesh who defy "the invention of 'third world women' as a category to be 'intervened' upon and 'empowered' by Western experts and technological interventions through global development discourse and practice" (Chowdhury, 2010, p. 302). In this article, I argue, with the help of Trinh T. Minh-ha, that "women must write through their bodies" (1988, p. 258). By looking at how Hasina and Shimu's bodies have been violated, this article depicts what it takes to rebel against the norms of multiple patriarchies with power structures like global capitalism in a society that is changing.

Keywords: Garment Factory, Women, Bangladesh, Violence

Introduction

In Monica Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane*, published in 2003, Hasina writes to her sister, who lives in London, "I am a machine woman and things are different now" (p. 119). She tells her sister how great it is to work in a garment factory. Likewise, Shimu, in Rubaiyat Hossain's 2019 film *Made in Bangladesh*, tells her husband that she is happy to have a job in a factory. As time passes, both Hasina and Shimu realize that even though working in the garment factory brings economic freedom, there are constraints as well. Hasina and Shimu suffer from violence enacted on their bodies by both male garment factory workers and their husbands. They suffer from hegemonic masculinity, patriarchal norms, and discriminatory economic structures. Furthermore, the dominant image of a female garment factory worker as sexually promiscuous enables more violence against them. In addition, economic violence is used to control and limit women's bodies. If a female garment factory worker has to miss a day for illness, she will likely not receive her salary. If she has to work late to make up for the illness, she gets beaten

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by her husband as he is suspicious of her. Her body becomes a site of control as capitalism becomes the controlling factor for a nation-state. Carol Pateman (1988) argues that capitalism is virtually a form of patriarchy. Yet, there is resistance as well. Hasina confirms that she is not like her mother or other garment factory workers. Shimu talks to a lawyer, studies the labor laws, and forms a union in her factory. Hasina and Shimu are the “new women” of Bangladesh who defy “The invention of ‘third world women’ as a category to be ‘intervened’ upon and ‘empowered’ by Western experts and technological interventions through global development discourse and practice” (Chowdhury 2010, p. 302).

In this paper, I argue that through the violated bodies of Hasina and Shimu, we understand what it takes to revolt against the norms of multiple patriarchies (father figures, husbands, male floor assistants, and managers) with such power structures as global capitalism embedded in a transitioning society. I use Dina M. Siddiqui’s scholarship on female garments factory workers in Bangladesh to theorize the violence that is enacted on the female workers in the garment factory. Siddiqui (2009) argues that “women are policed and regulated through a distinct moral regime, separating ‘good’ girls from the ‘immoral’ one” (p. 167) and that the “Disciplinary strategies inside factories invoke women workers as primarily sexualized bodies” (2009, p. 167). In addition, I use Ferdous Azim and Naila Kabeer’s approach to theorizing the garment factory workers—to look beyond the gaze of the West through which garment workers are presented as poor third-world women without agency, and to articulate what kind of feminism or feminist activism will work in the context of Bangladesh.

Azim notes that the feminist task is very difficult, which is to “constantly hold the critical mirror upto social inequities which keep gender discrimination in place” (p. 195). Yet, Hasina and Shimu’s path towards becoming the new woman can only be summed up through Azim’s (2005) argument:

As feminists we have to struggle from our own positions, and as far as women’s work in Bangladesh goes, the struggle is not only for the better conditions of women’s work, but also to work to keep the work—to make sure that the work remains here, and that more women can enter the labour market....our first struggle is to hold on to our new-found position in the labour market. (2005, p. 196)

Azim refuses to see these women as exploited subjects. While we see a resignation in Hasina’s case to not work in the garment factory, Shimu is the classic example of what Azim is talking about. When Shimu walks out of the government office with a signed copy that will recognize her union, we know that she will be working to keep her job as well as make it possible for others to join her. As Naila Kabeer argues, women do have a degree of autonomy and agency in their lives (2002). Thus, I see Ali and Hussain as feminist theorists themselves as they position their characters against patriarchal ideologies. In addition, I, like Siddiqui (2009) and Chowdhury (2010), do not intend to present these characters as victims or create a narrative that shows that they need saving. Finally, what I critique is that global capitalism has given rise to a class of Bangladeshi male garment factory floor assistants and managers powered by hegemonic masculinity who subscribe to the country’s patriarchal norm of what it means to be a “good” woman and a “good” worker. Along with these individual agents of patriarchy, there are public forms of patriarchy that feign protection for female factory workers but turn on them as “immoral” if the women are sacked from their factory jobs.

Feminist Theoretical Framework and Empirical Research

A feminist theoretical framework that is most useful is to remember that there are many intersectionalities when it comes to writing about the women garment factory workers. The women workers of the garment factory are subject to patriarchal norms, different power

structures within and outside the factory, and social stigma, and are defined by the spatial condition of the factory. Chowdhury (2010) and Siddiqi (2009) caution against considering female factory workers to be a part of the development discourse, which primarily sees them as victims who need to be saved. Then there is also a plethora of research about the less-than-ideal working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories. There are also external conditions that affect the lives of the women who work in these factories. Hasan Ashraf and Rebecca Prentice (2019) argue, with 80% of factory workers being women, “Bangladesh’s comparative advantage as a provider of low-cost, ‘fast fashion’ garments for global brands and retailers is maintained by imposing structural vulnerabilities on workers, including employment insecurity, long working hours, forced and extreme overtime, and low wages” (p. 95). In addition, Siddiqi (2009) contends that studies of garment factories revealed “a striking similarity in the deployment and reification of certain patriarchal modes with entry to the industrial labor. Specific tropes—sexuality, respectability, modesty and self-discipline—tended to be invoked repeatedly [...]” (p. 157). The factors mentioned by Prentice, Ashraf, and Siddiqi all contribute to various types of violence on the bodies of female workers. The spatial condition of the factory itself also controls the female body as “there are considerable continuities in the way *parda* (veiling) and the authority of the *shomaj* (society) underwrite the boundaries of femininity in an urban industrial context” (Siddiqi, 1996, p. 157). Siddiqi (1996) argues that “the street is still marginal territory for women, dangerous spaces with no clear guidelines for behavior. It is still associated with the public woman—the prostitute” (p. 163).

Some empirical research about the approach of the male factory workers towards the female workers significantly influences how I see feminism working in the novel and the film. Taylor et al (2018) found in their survey of 607 subjects, “26.52% admitted being victims of physical assault” and asked the researchers not to share that information with their employers (2018, p. 353). Siddiqi argues that “The positioning of many female garment workers as ‘sex workers,’ provides an enabling environment for male supervisors to sexually harass them, without being considered ‘inappropriate’” (qtd. in Gibbs et al., 2019, 235). Naved et al argue, “men fearful of losing power and control over women, family and community may seek to assert their power and control through imposition of additional restrictions on women and using more violence” (2018, p. 15). As Jordan Mintzer notes about young women working in the factories, “The fact that the laborers in question are predominantly young and female, with older men serving as their overseers, underscores a sexist culture” (2019). In their study, Gibbs et al found that 51.1% of managers were males aged between 29 and 38, and 48% were aged between 39-48 or 49+ (2019, p. 7).

Beyond the harassment of these men, the other issue that impacts how I see feminist activism regarding women garment workers is the recent work of women who want to create a union. Rubaiyat Hossain’s (2019) focus on the importance of creating unions is a part of the larger conversation on the overall environmental improvement in the garment factories. Labor unions have existed in Bangladesh since the British colonial period. A report by Human Rights Watchers notes that “Many Bangladeshi garment workers involved in setting up trade unions—‘a fundamental right’ protected by the Bangladesh constitution—face violence, intimidation, threats and loss of employment” (2015, p. 30). Throughout the Global South, garment factory workers are rarely unionized. There are negative perceptions of labor unions among both the workers and the owners (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019, p. 97). Ashraf and Prentice argue that “Union membership among Bangladeshi garment workers is low, with estimates ranging from 5 to 10%, while unionization is banned entirely in the few export processing zones” (2019, p. 97). Prentice and Ashraf maintain that there are labor movements in Bangladesh. For example, in 2016 1600 garments factory workers in Ashulia led to the temporary closing of 60 garment factories. But these are not organized movements. The workers had asked for better wages and better conditions. Factory owners began suspending the troublemakers en masse. Based on this

example, Ashraf and Prentice conclude that the “widening gap between formal labor unions and workers’ everyday experiences and protests leaves workers exposed to a continuing erosion of labor rights” (2019, p. 25). The existing labor unions do not address the precarity itself, and so militant labor movements like the one in Ashulia leave the workers stranded with little power to effect any change. Thus, what Hussain suggests in her film is a new way to think about how women workers think and act about creating unions.

Hasina, the Machine Woman

When we are first introduced to Hasina in *Brick Lane* (2003), we know from the letter that she writes to her sister, Nazneen, that she has eloped with a man named Malek, that they are married, that she faces domestic violence, and that she is sexually exploited by an elderly man. The next time we hear from Hasina, we see her fleeing from her husband as she no longer endures the abuse. She moves to Naraynaganj and begins to live in a rented apartment owned by Mr. Chowdhury, the brother-in-law of the woman who helped Hasina escape from her husband. Mr. Chowdhury’s tenants include men who work in the jute factory. Mr. Chowdhury takes a keen interest in Hasina as he tells her that he looks at her as his daughter. However, when Hasina writes to Nazneen, we see a different picture, “Sister can Mr. Chowdhury mean to take for wife” (Ali, 2003, p. 120). He proposes that perhaps she could come and live with him as his servant. Hasina daydreams about that because she lacks security, and Mr. Chowdhury is the perfect father figure to give her such security.

While living in this apartment, Hasina finds a job in the garment factory. She writes to Nazneen, “I tell you about garment factory. Only half hour walk from here and it fine place. Eight o’clock is the start time. All must come few minutes before and eight o’clock exact they unlock the gate. If you come late it is trouble they lock gates after to keep safe” (Ali 2003, p. 119). Without saying much, Hasina talks about the invisible laws that apply to women in such factories. Hasina talks about her relationship with the other women, and they all “stick like sisters” (2003, p. 119). We hear about Aleya, whose husband is reluctant to let her work in a garment factory because he is afraid that it will reflect badly upon him. Yet, Aleya never gives up, so her husband walks with her to the garment factory and then walks back with her. He also buys a burkha for her. This attitude of the husband is reflective of what Siddiqui (2009) has said about the surveillance of the Shomaj over these newly minted workers.

The surveillance of the Shomaj verges on violent verbal harassment when Hasina tells us what people say when the women workers walk to the garment factory: “Some people come making trouble outside factory. They shout to us. ‘Here come the garment girls. Choose the one you like’” (Ali, 2003, p. 120). Later, the Judge’s wife also hurls abusive words towards Hasina, “Let the jute men find out a garment girl here and then it is trouble” (Ali, 2003, p. 121). This verbal harassment confirms Siddiqui’s (2009) argument that “women are policed and regulated through a distinct moral regime, separating ‘good’ girls from the ‘immoral’ one” (p. 167). Siddiqui adds that female workers seem “primarily sexualized bodies” (2003, p. 167).

That Hasina is primarily a sexualized body can be seen when we hear that Abdul wants to help Hasina. One of the workers cautions Hasina about Abdul, but Hasina says that he is her brother. Abdul begins to come and teach her things. Meanwhile, word gets around that Hasina is taking advantage of the landlord, Mr. Chowdhury. Hasina tells us that he looks at her like a daughter and he takes whatever rent she can give him. Yet this relationship is interpreted differently as she is a single woman (she doesn’t tell anyone about her first husband) giving service to Mr. Chowdhury. The other female garment workers don’t know how Hasina makes her living beyond the garment factory work. Hasina writes to her sister, “I get a little money cook for jute men. I make breakfast and dinner and they give portion for my meal and little money also” (Ali 2003, p. 129). While the other girls keep their distance from her after hearing the public opinion about how she has become the “immoral one,” Abdul advances closer to

her. He walks with her to the factory and then walks back to the apartment. Then one day, she is called to the manager's office, and Hasina can guess something is wrong. When she reaches the office, she sees Abdul standing there. The manager says to her, "You have behaved in lewd manner. You have show no regard for reputation of the factory. I am not running a brothel. Do I look like brothel keeper to you?" All that she hears from the manager after she asks about her faults is that Abdul has confessed to everything. The manager says, "Don't tell me your shameless lie. Go before I beat shame into you" (Ali, 2003, p. 128). Such verbal abuse verges on violating the worker's body, which confirms Siddiqui's finding that "Verbal abuse and coercion...is a widely accepted mode of labor discipline" (2009, p. 168). However, what makes this discipline violent is the use of "the highly sexual vocabulary and body language" (2009, p. 168). While Hasina leaves, she overhears the manager making a lewd comment about how Abdul needs to have some fun before he gets married, thus making Hasina's body seem naked to her own eyes. Here we see the patriarchal camaraderie between the manager and Abdul, who finds pleasure in sexualizing the body of the female worker.

This is not the last time that Hasina faces verbal abuse that sexualizes her body, even though she knows in her mind that she is pure at heart. When Mr. Chowdhury, her benefactor and the father figure in her life, hears about this, he calls her a "whore" and also abuses her verbally and sexually: "You screwing every motherfucker in the factory? [...] He put lamp down and he starting to take off shirt. [...] Then he takes off trousers. I say nothing and then it done and he sit in the chair" (Ali 2003, p. 131). Hasina doesn't tell anyone about this violence but decides to run away once again proving the findings of Taylor et al (2018) that women do not want to share their sexual assaults (p. 356). Mr. Chowdhury exploits Hasina sexually because he has concluded that she is an "immoral" woman. He sets the parameters for her behavior as a patriarch who needs to safeguard the family structure. Such violence is critiqued by Siddiqi (1996) as a "public form of patriarchy" that some female garment workers face (1996, p. 160). The force of this patriarchy, powered by the accusation that one is a "bad" and immoral woman, follows Hasina and she is unable to find any jobs in any other factories. The other reason is that she has been trained to run a machine and there are not enough openings for a woman to do the machine job.

Betrayed by the man who she considered as a friend and betrayed by the man who looked upon her as a daughter, Hasina roams around Dhaka city and ends up in front of the factory again. She writes, "I walk around the factory gates around the walls. Is it possible to hate bricks I hating them? This factory has ruined me" (Ali, 2003, p. 134). Amidst this situation, Hussain, one of the men who used to work at the jute mill, comes to help her. Hussain is a pimp, which is never explicitly mentioned in the novel. The issue of prostitution is controversial as many critics tend to deny the fact that women like Hasina have no other option. It is not a profession they choose because it is easy, but because it is the only one available. Predators like Hussain are always available as well. However, Hussain doesn't coerce Hasina to do this job; he protects her all the time and lets her go when she gets an offer of marriage from a man named Ahmed. But what Hussain says confirms the way Hasina has been characterized, "You are damaged past repair. What chance you has also?" (Ali 2003, p. 136). He tells her to marry Ahmed and begin another new life.

"You have become a leader by reading a few pages of the labor law book?"

When we leave Hasina's world to enter *Made in Bangladesh* (2019), we witness the still fresh memory of the fire in Tazreen Fashion garments factory in November of 2012 and the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 as the film opens with the horrible sound of the fire alarm. This film is based on a true story of the life of Daliya Akhter, who was one of the first women to start a garment factory union in 2013. A bit later, a group of female workers gather together

to mourn the death of their friend Mayna and decide to go to the factory to ask for their salary. But the factory is closed due to the fire incident. Rubayat Hossain, as if by holding Ali's hand, brings to us the story of Shimu, a mature and educated girl, who longs to see her work only as work and tries not to situate herself as a prisoner held by both the owner and the foreign investors. However, Shimu and her friends suffer at the hands of the manager and the floor assistant in the same way that Hasina and her friends have suffered. After the fire incident in the factory, Shimu is interviewed by a journalist who tells her about how to protect one's rights through creating unions. Thus, equally vulnerable, precarious, sexualized, and violated bodies are presented to us in *Made in Bangladesh* (2019).

Shimu convinces her friends to sign forms so that they can register a union with the ministry of labor. Her husband cautions her that many people have gone to jail while trying to create a union. Shimu faces violence both from her husband and the floor assistant. The floor assistant pushes her by touching her body when she asks for the overtime payment. Her husband, on the other hand, physically assaults her when he thinks that she is having an affair. What Shimu was doing was talking to the journalist Nasima Appa about the video that she had taken of the owner of the factory who was negotiating with the foreign dealers. Sohel apologizes to her and asks her to wear a headscarf when she goes to the factory. When she tells Nasima Appa that her husband wants her to quit her job, Nasima Appa says that she should not listen to her husband. In reply, Shimu says, "We're screwed if we're married and screwed if we aren't" thus implying the sexist culture that forces men like Sohel to control her through her body. Sohel asks her to control her body by saying "dhik dhak thakish" which roughly translates to "keep yourself preserved" by maintaining parda through physically covering the body as well as one's mind. She begins wearing the hijab because that was the quickest way to convince her husband that she was a good woman.

As Shimu progresses towards her goal of creating a union, there is unrest among her group of friends. Daliya has been having an affair with Reza, the floor assistant. Just like Hasina in Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), the manager catches Reza, who tells him that Daliya has been seducing her. Daliya, here, is the prototype of the sexual body—young, unmarried—that Reza dreams of having an affair with, to pass time, and when it comes to saving himself, he throws her out as a violated sexualized body. Although Daliya tells Shimu and others that Reza has promised to marry her, Daliya is turned out of the factory as she is an "immoral" woman. The scene that portrays Daliya later on—wearing colorful clothes and heavy make-up and smoking a cigarette—tells us that she has chosen the path of a prostitute, a fate which many Bangladeshi feminist critics doubt. But we know that even if we can not generalize as to what happens to these women, Daliya critiques our society that is bound by the invisible laws of purity. After losing her job, Daliya wanted to stay one night with Shimu as her aunt had thrown her out of the house. Shimu's husband is equally violent with her as he has heard that she is an "immoral" woman. When Daliya says to Sohel that he wants to touch her, Shimu turns on her friend and accuses her of misunderstanding Sohel. The manager, in this case, takes on the role of the protective man who must save other women in the factory from the likes of Daliya while Reza walks free.

Shimu takes the papers signed by female workers and submits them to the Ministry of Labor. The woman at the table tells her that it will take time for the registration. Shimu does not hear anything back, so she goes to visit her again, but the woman has no answer for her. Meanwhile, Shimu gets called by the manager. He tells Shimu to take a break. He tries to give her money in advance and tells her to rest. Shimu refuses the offer, and then we see the real picture of the manager. He gets angry and verbally abuses her, saying, "You have become a leader by reading a few pages of the labor law book?" He says that he has been informed by a person from the ministry that she is trying to register a union. He threatens to take everyone's jobs away if she does not retract her path. He calls her husband because he knows that Sohel

will control her. When her husband and she try to see the manager, the guard at the gate tells Soheli to control his wife. Soheli is only worried about what *shomaj* (society) would say. Soheli is an example of the many intimate partner violence cases that go unreported.

Shimu, desperate to protect her job as well as her friends, goes to see the officer who has her file. She tells him that she will lose her job and so will many other women who have signed the forms. Reshma, one of the other girls in the factory, has already lost her job for keeping the pamphlets that encourage opening a union. Reshma and Shimu face many such intimidations. The officer tells her that there are some problems. Shimu confirms that she has submitted all the papers, in addition to 30% of the workers' signatures, which are needed to register a union. Still, the officer tells her that she should go and that he will not be able to do anything. She begs the man and tells her that her friends have families. Then Shimu gets up, closes the door, and threatens the man with a recorded video of the man confessing that he had to listen to the owner of the factory. Shimu then orders the man to sign the form. When he tries to get the phone from her, she tells him that she will scream and will send the video to the news media. Hussain criticizes the patriarchal gaze by pointing out how Shimu blackmails the government officer with her body at the end of her movie. The officer signs the form, and Shimu walks out of the office. At this time, we don't see Shimu wearing the hijab, which she wore when Soheli told her to "dhik dhak thakish." I see no correlation between the discarding of the hijab, the *parda*, and Shimu's action. Like Hasina, Shimu feels that purity is in the heart and that no external *parda* (veiling) can prove or take that away from them.

Conclusion

From 2003 to 2019, from Ali to Hussain, precarious and violated bodies have been at the center of protests over female garment factory workers' rights. Hasina doesn't continue to work in the garment factory, and she asserts, "Amma always say we are women what can we do? Is he here now I know what she say I know it too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around" (Ali, 2003, p. 365). In creating Hasina, Ali draws inspiration from Naila Kabeer's book *The Power to Choose* (2000), and we clearly see here that Hasina is not defeated. After her marriage to Ahmed does not work out, she decides to leave him. Eventually, she takes up a job looking after the young children of a family. Shimu, on the other hand, takes recourse to the stereotypical way of solving her problem. Shimu, "in the absence of any mechanism to correct an abusive situation [...] resort[s] to actions" that may seem counter to what she is fighting for. She certainly blackmails the officer to sign the paper so that she can register a union, and this is a type of "oblique resistance" that "for many women... may be the only means of expressing their anger or helplessness" (Siddiqi, 2009, p. 171). While Shimu's attempt to create a union was peaceful and informal, we learn from Hasina that the Jute mill workers used militant ways to protest injustices. The Jute mill workers belonged to trade unions. It seems that men could unite more successfully during the time Ali was writing the book. However, we also know that women can organize too, since Shimu collected all those signatures, and we see the support of other women garment factory workers. This in and of itself shows that we need to acknowledge that there is fragility and precariousness, yet the power of the collective can change many things.

We definitely see a cultural shift in matters of what rights women have in the garment factory as well as in the public sphere, as represented through Ali's novel and Hussain's film. Yet a greater change can only come about through critiquing masculinity by taking patriarchy seriously and thinking intersectionally. In the age of the #MeTooMovement, this type of resistance is more important as countless studies have shown that female factory workers experience sexual harassment. The #MeToo movement may inspire scholars to reconsider their perspectives on violence against women. There is a greater need for intersectional analysis and education about the violence that female garment factory workers face, exploring the

intersections between Bangladesh's constitutional laws about workers' rights, corruption in government offices, lack of positive thinking about unions, and the concept of a woman's position in the family as a working woman (in garment factories).

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