

Nawab Faizunnesa Chowdhurani's *Rupjalal*: An Unabashed Portrayal of Female Sexuality

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Abstract

Rupjalal (1876) is considered to be the first novel by any Muslim woman. Reading this one hundred and forty-one year old novel reveals many buried expressions of women's sexuality. This paper tries to read Nawab Faizunnesa Chowdhurani's Rupjalal in the context of the then Bengal and tries to explore how the author boldly, yet subtly, portrays female sexuality through the aesthetic quality of her craft. Chowdhurani brings in almost every possible sphere of women's sexuality in her narration through the love story of Jalal and Rupbanu. In a time when the Victorian morality imposed on Indians was trying to ban frank sexual expression in literature, Chowdhurani writes about female sexuality, desire, female gaze, and even raises a voice against the patriarchal notion of chastity in women. Chowdhurani also plays with narrative technique and incorporates many genres in her fiction. This paper shows how Rupjalal is a feminist text in many ways. However, the paper does not aim to place Chowdhurani or her text in favor or in opposition to patriarchal or colonial contexts. It tries, instead, to unearth the expression of women's sexuality which is buried by the intervention of Victorian imperialist and reformist culture of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: *sexuality, desire, free sex, female power, Victorian moralities, phallogentric narration, narrative technique*

In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women as well as national and world history.

– Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa* 298

The first full length novel written by any Bengali Muslim woman is Nawab Faizunnesa Chowdhurani's *Rupjalal* (1876). A close reading of *Rupjalal* reveals that it is a groundbreaking feminist literary piece in Bangla where almost all key aspects of feminist discourse about female sexuality are present: female gaze, female desire, female voice, women in marital sexual relationships, and women as angels and monsters. However, this paper will elaborately discuss only a few issues such as female desire, female power, gender role, sexual freedom of women, and female voice as a protest against patriarchal norms. I have chosen these particular aspects of female sexuality because, among many other issues, these aspects of women's expressions have been silenced by Victorian moral values. In *Rupjalal*, Chowdhurani does not limit herself only to women's issues in her narration but also plays with the writing style. This paper will show how Chowdhurani's early modern text, *Rupjalal*, portrays different aspects of female sexuality through both content and narrative technique.

The expression of unabashed female sexuality was buried and tarnished as inappropriate through double oppression by Victorian moral values and the *bhadralok* culture in colonial Bengal. T.B. Macaulay took the initiative to "stop the printing of Arabic and Sanscrit books and abolish the Madrassa and the Sanscrit College at Calcutta ... to form a class of persons

– Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 9). Thirty years after Macaulay, Mary Carpenter narrowed down the focus of education on Indian women. In her book *Six Months in India*, Carpenter condemns vernacular literature to be “replete with superstition” and “ordinary language of lower class is so full of what is essentially coarse” (132), and thus advised that just like the Victorian girls of her school back in Europe, the Indian girls should refrain from singing “coarse songs” (Carpenter 230). Carpenter also mentioned in her book that she had not seen many “Mahometans” and came to a conclusion that “they probably did not sympathise with the object of my visit, not having yet taken any interest in female education” (Carpenter 101). However, the distrust and aversion was mutual. Meer Mosharruf Hossain, the writer, famous for his *Bishad Shindhu* (a contemporary to Nawab Chowdhurani), remarked against learning English and said, “It is a sin to learn English. One becomes a little satan learning English as he will soon forget how to say namaz and will become uncivilized” (Kuddus 14). Remarks of this kind against colonial influence were taken seriously by Hindu reformers as well as by British officers and even Hindu *bhadramohilas*. In her article “Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal,” Mohua Sarkar discusses how “modern” Hindu/Brahmo had to portray Muslim women as “backwarded,” “uneducated,” and how by “advocating purdah” makes the Muslim women of “loose moral” (Sarkar 237) only to justify their situation as enlightened and civilized and thus everything else the Muslim women did “simply [became] invisible to a Hindu-dominated normative historiography” (Sarkar 242). Therefore, in a word, if art and literature work as historical artifacts, they represent women’s history in a censored way. It is in this unfavorable context Nawab Chowdhurani writes her novel, *Rupjalal*.

Interestingly, while reading *Rupjalal*, now one hundred and forty-one years old, one would find an unabashed, free, direct, and strong portrayal of a female world. Chowdhurani was writing at a time when she did not have to conform to W.T. Webb’s advice that “words and subjects, such as adultery, fornication, childbirth, miscarriage, etc., of which mention should not be made in the general intercourse of polite society” (Webb 1888). This advice about hushing sexual expression was already prevalent in the culture of colonial Bengal even before their publication. Yet, Chowdhurani’s *Rupjalal* does not suffer from the lack of passion that is very common in women’s literary tradition that Elaine Showalter complains about in her book *A Literature of Their Own*. “When ... sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, ... – the entire female sexual life cycle – constituted a habit of living that had to be concealed” (Showalter 275), Chowdhurani boldly explores female sexuality throughout her novel, something that was very rebellious for a woman writer writing from a Bangalee Muslim family.

To celebrate female sexuality, Chowdhurani gives special importance to female desire in *Rupjalal*. Expressions of female desire was not uncommon in *Vatsyana Kamsutram*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and other scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, where female sexuality was celebrated and acknowledged. Following this trajectory, in *Rupjalal*, Chowdhurani also makes the male body a subject of female desire. Jalal’s beauty seems erotic for women characters in the fiction unlike the male gaze that was just beginning to appear in the contemporary art and literature of colonial Bengal. In *Rupjalal* women fall in love with the hero as soon as they see him. There is an interesting stanza where the wives of the monsters

are lamenting the ugliness of their husbands as “another says, ‘If I could get this young man then killing my old husband I would have dedicated my youth to him.’ One says, ‘If I could get this honey-prince, then I would have appointed my heart-bee in his feet forever, leaving behind my crippled husband’” (Chowdhurani 192). Moreover, Chowdhurani makes the beauty of a man an important criterion to get married to a Princess. The Gandharva king, proud of the beauty of their community, refuses to marry his daughter off to a prince from other communities of ugly-looking demons. He tells the messenger demon “Look, messenger! How can this be possible? No demon community other than us, the Gandharvas, are handsome and good-looking. I can never let my daughter marry a demon prince.” But when the messenger convinces him of the prince’s beauty, he writes to the prince’s father, “We would be delighted to behold the beauty of your son. If it is troublesome for you to send your son here, then we will send our messengers to see him” (Chowdhurani 216). In the same way, modern Bangla fiction by Rabindranath Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chatterjee depicts a groom’s family coming to see a bride. Thus, the importance of male beauty is not seen only from the point of view of an individual woman but as a social perspective of women in general.

Secondly, Chowdhurani sounds extremely frank when she portrays the desires of the prince’s women friends as they give him the nuptial bathing ceremony. She narrates:

With heart’s content, they massaged his body.
The maids, mystified by the prince-beauty,
Consoled their own hearts by stroking and tactility.
Though touching him cooled their hearts
Double became the fire inside their guts.
Making chest-cleansing a somber occasion
Pressed her nipples, embracing him, one.
While cleansing his fair face
One failed to steady her gaze.
Rubbing his back, breaking the attachment –
One found her anima leaving the oubliette.
Holding his derrière, one felt spasms of pain
O! Who’d be fortunate to carry this burden! (Chowdhurani 248)

Finally, in accordance with sex norms depicted in *Vatsyayana Kamasutram*, on valuing women’s desire and pleasure in a sexual union between men and women, Chowdhurani gives women’s pleasure much importance and portrays it thus:

The new bride with the prince lover
Passed the day in festive delight
The night passed by making love
At the dawn both took a shower. (Chowdhurani 265)

In another place, Chowdhurani narrates the consummation of Rupbanu’s marriage with Jalal:

Finding the bride alone in the chamber
To rest on the bed with him, he pleads her.

Opening up their hearts to each other,
 Each gratifies the other's sensual desire.
 Lost in the enjoyment of milk and honey
 They relish the pleasure already.
 At last, satiated with multifarious congresses
 In peaceful sleep, they lose consciousness. (Chowdhurani 255)

In these last two verses, wives are not portrayed as coy or just as objects of male desire but rather as sexual partners equally enjoying the pleasure. Thus, women are seen to have power and control over their sexual desire.

Furthermore, it can be seen in *Rupjalal* that Chowdhurani reverses the gender roles to express female power. The depiction of the recurrent abduction of the prince when he is lost in a cave, wood, or hell shows again the overwhelming strength of female power over men. These waywardness and confinements of male heroes are considered by Sanda M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar as a man's defeat by female power. In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they explain:

The womb-shaped cave is also the place of female power, the *umbilicus mundi*, one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation. As herself a cave, every woman might seem to have the cave's metaphorical power of annihilation, the power – as de Beauvoir puts it elsewhere – of “night in the entrails of the earth,” for “in many a legend,” she notes, “we see the hero lost forever as he falls back into the maternal shadows – cave, abyss, hell.” (Gilbert and Gubar 95)

Now, though in most gothic fiction, folklore, and fairytales we see a man as the rescuer of a captive woman, in *Rupjalal* we see that out of four abductions, the prince was rescued thrice by women. First of all, from the fairy, the fairy's mother rescued him. Then the witch's female slave teaches him the chants, which helps him escape from the woods of the witch. And lastly, The Princess of Kayser gives him three magical gifts by the help of which he not only escapes from hell but also rescues Rupbanu from the Fortan Giant. Thus, Chowdhurani makes her male protagonist a perpetual subject of female power from where he cannot escape unless the women themselves allow him to do so.

Then, Chowdhurani makes a parody of *One Thousand and One Nights* in *Rupjalal* by reversing the gender role. In her narration, she creates a female character who abducts every handsome man around to satisfy her sexual pleasure. One who can make her happy can live, otherwise he will lose his life forever. The way the Persian King Shariyar kills every woman of his country after marrying them for a night in *One Thousand and One Nights*, Chowdhurani's wizard princess too has captured a hundred princes, sleeping with each for just one night.

Let me admit, at midnight
 I would take your leave
 She adds, “each one night
 With a new man I sleep.”

Vast wide suite all ninety-nine
Chambers are here
In each one, lives one man –
Handsome and fair.
Days ninety-nine if pass they well
And the hundredth comes
Keep in mind you would find
Again my entrance. (Chowdhurani 150)

Another example of gender role reversal can be noted when she makes her hero faint almost every time she encounters the beauty of his lover which portrays the vulnerability of the prince:

Curving eyebrows, each cast a glance at the other
Unbearable seemed that touch of the gaze!
Fainted the valiant prince at the feet of the other
She too then fainted, falling on the base. (Chowdhurani 17)

From Carpenter's observation, it is found that "men of influence allow their sons to consider feebleness of body an indication of high social rank" (Carpenter 123). So, in *Rupjalal*, we see that the vulnerability of the abducted prince also portrays his noble birth and thus his masculinity is not questioned but rather is confirmed by his sensitivity. Therefore, it is not the effeminate man who faints, but actually the masculine man of influence who becomes bewitched by women's beauty.

In spite of celebrating female desire, Chowdhurani cannot help showing the difference in sexual freedom enjoyed among women of different classes. Gilbert and Gubar say that male authors have created a myth of the angel/monster dichotomy for women in such a way that many women authors fall in the trap and kill either the monster or the angel in their writings. This expression of angels and monsters is depicted as real characters in Chowdhurani's text, only here the angels are shown as human beings. Chowdhurani shows that free sex can be enjoyed only by female monsters but not by virtuous women. In Chowdhurani's *Rupjalal*, we see women who are non-human, like the giants or fairies or witches, find and seek pleasure in men out of wedlock. But it is only the women of noble birth who feel content in the pleasure from marital sex. When a witch abducts the prince, he gets sexual offers from both the witch and her fairy slave. The witch threatens to kill him if he does not sleep with her. Though he manages to save himself from the witch, he cannot save himself from sleeping with the fairy when she says, "Dare you leave my desire unfulfilled, /Truth is – certainly I will get you killed" (*Rupjalal* 112). Interestingly, the prince does not feel dishonored or captive, and rather finds equal pleasure in these coerced sexual relations:

As if the ill has found the amaranth
Both sunk in the pleasure-river.
Washing hands and face, they went to bed
Rising at dawn both showered again. (Chowdhurani 12)

This stanza shows clearly the sexual consummation with mutual consent between the fairy and the prince.

On the other hand, we see that both the abducted sage-daughter Rupbanu and the Princess Nurbanu remain as pure as Sita even after the abduction. However, this sexual chastity is important not only to fulfill social expectations but for the women themselves. When King Jham Jham decides to kill his second daughter, believing she was misguided by her elder sister, the daughter does not plead for her life but protests the false accusation of defilement by her father. She says:

O! Father, listen to my prayer
 Why kill the innocent heir?
 The Queen has only me and no more
 To address her as a loving mother.
 Sister Nurbanu was unblemished
 She's unjustly doomed and punished.
 The giant abducted her
 Her sin in it can't be anywhere.
 You are my father, I'm your girl
 Your deal to kill me, I won't annul.
 I have no sorrows that I would be killed
 Just my heart breaks to be falsely stigmatized. (Chowdhurani 78)

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says that patriarchy established the rights of the patrilineal family structure and the myth of virtuous women so a man could be sure that the infant his woman is carrying is a part of him. So, King Jham Jham goes to the Queen, and by accusing her of bringing dishonor to his chaste life, he questions her chastity. He says:

Queen, from your womb, taking her birth
 Our daughter has inherited all degeneracy.
 You yourself are fallen so gave birth to another
 Thus, you stigmatized my moral aristocracy. (Chowdhurani 76)

The Queen, like her daughter, protests the accusation but, unlike the daughter, she protests against the patriarchal notion of women's chastity. And this is how Chowdhurani seems to raise a voice against the patriarchal burden of moral values placed on women:

You are the seed-originator being only the bearer
 I am now the perpetrator!
 Sowing a good seed one gets the good deed
 Bad ones result in fruits decayed.
 Your own heir allowing in my center
 I am now as condemned as defamed! (Chowdhurani 77)

Here, the queen is playing with the same patriarchal idea that if a child is born by the father, then he should be responsible for the child's outcome.

However, she also reasons with him, saying:

Lakkhi was the mother Chakrapani, the father
 But Kama was not welcome in nature.

Bishwasrova was calm but the son was a giant –
The Ravana, a horrific and cruel feature.

...

Noah the prophet was the best, his son was the worst
Everyone knows this on the earth
Father was inferior but Ibrahim became superior
Khalil was titled by people's mirth. (Chowdhurani 77)

So, we see the queen's benevolence as she does not accuse her husband for his mistrust and cruelty. These stanzas of reasoning by the queen, however, appears to be Chowdhurani's critique of the earliest text *Ramayana*, where Sita had to prove her *satitta* (purity) through several tests. Thus, the protest in *Rupjalal* against the patriarchal notion of chastity in women is approached from a very rational standpoint.

Chowdhurani also frankly gives expression to female sexuality in her text. She was writing at a time when the Victorian moral values had started to influence the liberal Indian attitude towards sexuality; female sexuality, especially, was gradually dissociated from the historical artifacts of India. An imitation of Victorian moral values emerged in the name of Bangalee *bhadralok* culture, which started to treat women in a more conventional way. Sumanta Banarjee says in "Marginalisation of Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Colonial Bengal" that new books and arts were crafted to show women as the subjects of men's desire. He describes how "Tagore's family's male members, eager to emancipate their women from the influence of the lascivious stories of Radha and Krishna, had barred their doors to the Vishnavite kathakata reciters" (151). *Rupjalal*, however, goes against this norm and shows men under a female gaze. In another article, "Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of 'Obscenity' in 19th Century Bengali Culture," Banarjee explains that colonial *bhadralok* culture gradually caused the disappearance of frank expression of sexuality from literature. The emergence of a patriarchal nationalist *bhadromohila* class also resulted in distancing women of high class and those of the working class; but Chowdhurani's erotic descriptions using both standard and colloquial Bangla in *Rupjalal* seems to be defying the nationalist *bhadralok*'s initiative to separate the two classes of women. Yet, following a tradition that was gradually coming under scrutiny was a bold choice for an aristocratic Nawab, a Muslim woman zamindar.

Chowdhurani, then, makes an intertextual connection between her text and other ancient literary texts. To parody the *One Thousand and One Nights* which was translated into Bangla around 1830 and became a popular source material for Muslim writers cannot be just a coincidence. Chowdhurani has chosen a text that has a very hybrid quality, as the Arabian tales are a collection of stories and folktales from various parts of the world. She also brings in allusions from old Sanskrit epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, also known as historical texts, together with references from the Quran. She imitates the *puthi* and charyapada style too and her presence, as author, is seen in the text sometimes.

Moreover, Chowdhurani also uses many different genres to narrate the love history of *Rupjalal*, such as poems, songs, letters, and prose. Thus, many narrative voices tell the readers the story of Rupbanu and Jalal. Why was Chowdhurani so interested in a multi-faceted narration through a hybrid literary tradition? Women writers, more than male writers, tend to give voice to many

characters and even among women writers. In Chowdhurani's case, it is not only gender but also a deep truth about being a Bangalee writer, as she originates from *Shankar jati*, a mixed cultural nation. Therefore, the Bangla literary tradition has adapted traditions of Buddhist, Hindu, western as well as middle-eastern literature. And Bangalee literature has an ancient tradition of women writers as the first traces of Bengal are found among the verses recited by Buddhist nuns in the Pali language. On the other hand, her perfectly written prose which itself is a complete story with a beginning, climax, and ending seems to be born out of her informed choice of representing a prose text to prove to the contemporary male novelists that she is also capable of writing like male canonical writers. Thus, while Chowdhurani incorporates the myriad literary traditions, she cannot be condemned for following the male tradition as she has a very androgynous approach to the technique she uses for her *Rupjalal*.

Therefore, *Rupjalal* is an eclectically feminist landmark for the readers of Bangla literature and a literary piece by a mother precursor who shows that it is possible to retain the lost lineage of women's artistry while following the new literary terrain and breaking the gender boundary in literature. It was truly inspiring to unearth the artifact of female sexuality from such an ancient text, *Rupjalal* written by a Muslim woman author from the periphery of patriarchal colonial Bengal of Victorian era.

Note

Translations of the excerpts from the original Bangla text of Nawab Faizunnesa Chowdhurani's *Rupjalal* are the author's own.

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