

# Re-constructing and Reconciling the ‘Self’: Muslim Women of Bengal through the Performance of the ‘Wedding Sagas’

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**ABSTRACT:** Keeping in mind the present cultural scenario, Muslim community studies have emerged as a cross-disciplinary field that includes sociological, political, economic, literary, and sexuality studies. This wide framework of cross-disciplinary subject position naturally addresses a number of multi-dimensional global issues. One such issue is the rich folk cultural tradition of Bengal that includes one particular strand of songs which is interestingly patronized solely by the Muslim women especially from some areas of Bengal. These women unfold all the stories of their domestic slavery, insults, suppressed desires, disgust against the male folk of their family—the trauma they have to undergo generations after generations, along with all their longings for a better life condition within their songs, in spite of knowing that they are never going to achieve them. Within this paper, I shall try to bring into the forefront how ages of oppression, as Foucault has observed, have led them to form a kind of passionate attachment to the forms of power that oppress them. This is problematic. Unless the oppression is recognized and worked through, no real liberation is possible for the oppressed. As a consequence, all these have remained simply as the instance of their fairytale, ‘wishful thinking’. The fear of being under constant surveillance by the oppressive authority compels them to self-restriction, in every sphere of their lives. Moreover, such a rich tradition has unfortunately never been imparted its due acknowledgment, neither within the family, nor by the greater society. Interestingly, within the whole Muslim world, there are very few instances of such practices of singing by women. Singing, in Islamic Shariyat, has been considered as ‘*nafarmani*’, i.e., against Islamic Shariyat. So the question that naturally engages the socio-political studies on this topic is, where from did such tradition emanate? In this context, the paper will also endeavor to investigate the origins of the emergence of such a rich and rare tradition.

**KEYWORDS:** Wedding sagas, Muslim women, Patriarchal oppression, Cultural trauma, Collective memory

With the rapid disruption of community structure all over the world, Muslim community studies have emerged as a cross-disciplinary field that includes sociological, political, economic, literary, and sexuality studies. This wide framework of cross-disciplinary subject position naturally addresses a number of multi-dimensional global issues. One such issue is the rich folk cultural tradition of Bengal that includes one particular strand of songs which is interestingly patronized solely by Muslim women especially from some areas of Bengal like Burdwan, Birbhum and Murshidabad, Jalpaiguri and also from some districts in Bangladesh. These singers are mostly the women of the Muslim families who are deprived of institutional education. So, these ‘wedding sagas’ hardly have any written form. With a very few exceptions, most of

these singers are not ‘professional’. They are rather the ‘occasional’ ones, the common women from the villages. As these singers are not so-called literate with conventional education, the language of their songs is simple and natural. The exclusivity of such songs is that they are entirely women-centric. The subjects of their songs too, needless to say, revolve around the experiences of the women. Within these songs, we come across abundant uses of metaphors, allegories, rhetoric figures, and frequent references to Ramayana, Mahabharata, Quran, Haadish, and folklores. The range of the themes for these songs is really astounding. Practically, there is hardly any sphere of daily life spared. (They speak of rural and urban lives, social and financial security, and insecurities. They also express the achievements and failures/losses, love and lovelessness, trust and breach of trust, desires, care and anxiety, humor, repentance—a collage of numerous feelings.) This is a kind of song practiced by the rural women within the confinement of the four walls, because Islam doesn’t approve of singing. These are the songs of their innermost emotions too. These are the sagas of the anguish they receive from their own people, from the men within their families—the trauma caused by the patriarchal oppressions they have to undergo generations after generations. These women unfold all these stories of their domestic slavery, insults, suppressed desires, disgust against the male folk of their family, and their longings for a better life condition within their songs, in spite of knowing that they are never going to achieve them. They never expect to. Ages of oppression, as Foucault has observed, have led them to form a kind of passionate attachment to the forms of power that oppress them. This is problematic. Unless the oppression is recognized and worked through, no real liberation is possible for the oppressed. As a consequence, all these have remained simply as the instance of their fairytale, ‘wishful thinking’. Though these are primarily ‘wedding songs’, the major part of it is not restricted to the customs related to a marriage ceremony. Almost ninety percent of these songs are about broader aspects of livelihood. In this way, they have attained the heights of being entitled to life sagas.

Trauma, as it has been defined by Caruth (1995, 150), is: [t]rauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.” She interprets trauma not only as an occasion that happened in the past, but also a traumatic experience which is not realized completely. She attempts to authenticate the fact that trauma is indeed a devastating phenomenon. It is far from a simple memory.

Trauma theory has its root within the early psychoanalytic theory in the late nineteenth century. During that time, hysterical symptoms within women were identified as an aftermath of psychic trauma. The method of hypnosis was employed as treatment for recollecting and transforming traumatic memories. After that, the two world wars happened causing severe traumatic experiences within a huge number of people. This resulted in a kind of resurgence of interest in trauma theory. This newly emerging theory was then used to describe the surfacing evidence of the long-term psychological distress that the surviving soldiers did experience (Courtois 2004). In 1980, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, third edition, the term posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was included for the first time (Courtois 2004). Later, this diagnosis method was applied for the problems associated with women’s mental health, particularly to the issues related to the suffering from child abuse and sexual assault by the feminist therapists. Thus, with the help of trauma theory, the previously undiagnosed problems, especially those related to the social context of gender inequality, could be identified.

Cultural trauma is one of the specialized perceptions of trauma associated with collective memory identity, and with negative alteration which may leave in its wake on the societal groups of the society. Human beings' pursuit for security, order, connection, certainty, meaning, identity, and love. Something that happens unpredictably which emasculates those necessities, shockingly, these people become traumatized as a consequence of traumatic experience. In the same way, if an incident traumatizes not only one individual but also all the members of a collectivity or a group, the trauma will be cultural trauma or collective trauma. Patriarchal system denotes a system or a body in which males possess power and are assigned roles as the head and leader of the family. It is understood that patriarchy is a systematic organization in which men's domination is denoted by different kinds of implications. Postmodern feminist theorists heave on psychoanalysis and poststructuralist concepts in order to imply patriarchy as an ideology infiltrating into every aspect of culture like language. Culture influences patriarchy and consequently cultural trauma respecting patriarchy is created. In this sense, patriarchy does not need to be felt by all the members in a community. We have observed during our interaction with these artisans that the trauma in its cultural form in this group is associated with the change that happened in collective identity and effects their collective memory as has been observed by Ron Eyerman.

Harvey and Herman explicate three levels of trauma memories, based on the experiences of the clients coming for therapy (Harvey and Herman 1994; 1997):

(1) relatively continuous memories or complete recall with changing interpretations over time; (2) partial amnesia with a mixture of delayed recall and delayed understanding of meaning; (3) delayed recall following profound and pervasive amnesia. Rather than dichotomizing trauma memories as either present or absent, Herman and Harvey's classification underscores how memories are recalled in a continuous process with clients entering therapy at different stages in this process.

However, such a rich tradition like the Wedding Sagas has never been imparted its due acknowledgment, neither within the family, nor by the greater society. Their families (the male members, of course) have always opposed to such practices as '*nafarmani*', i.e. against Islamic Shariat. And people of the outer world have ignored its existence till recent past. Interestingly, within the whole Muslim world, there are very few instances of such practices of singing by women. Another example we can find is within the Hausa people of Nigeria. There also we see the tradition of songs and oral poetry carried on by the women of the community. Surprisingly, there is a remarkable similarity of themes between them. Now the question is, where from did such traditions emerge? In Bengal most of the people of the Muslim community were converted into Islam from the lower caste Hindus. The same kind of history can be found within the Hausa people too. Before the traders and missionaries brought Islam to their place, these people were pagans. For Hindus as well as for the pagans, singing and other recreations are an important part of life, and in no way it is *haram*. These people, when converted, had already internalized such cultural practices which they continued even after conversion.

Moreover, the tradition has not even been recognized as one of the diverge traditions of Bengali folk songs. One reason behind it may be the inaccessibility of the outsiders to these songs. Almost all the women bearing the flag of this tradition keep 'purdah'. Not only that, it is practiced so secretly, carefully hiding them from the knowledge of the male of the family (in fear of being discarded as '*nafarmani*') that it is really difficult to reach them. The fear of being under constant surveillance by the oppressive authority compels them to self-restriction, in every sphere of their lives. Moreover, the most unfortunate part of the story is that these songs are gradually dying

out. One major reason for this is the oral nature of the songs. Another reason is the mandatory secrecy it has to maintain for its existence. The continuous suppression has led most of its practitioners to abscond from it. Very few of these artisans are still struggling with their art. The realization of belonging and being understood aids mend the impacts of trauma, oftentimes strengthening resilience. I find this in my work with these singers. Diminishing cultural isolation is crucial to increasing the sense of belonging. I've observed that when the experience of trauma is shared in common with other individuals, this commonality often escorts the person to their sense of cultural belonging. For many people, cultural practice turns out to be their way to conquer traumas and increase their resilience. Every culture has norms, belief systems and values that distinguish its cultural practices. Cultural practice can be correlated to traditional ceremonies, child-rearing practices and cultural activities such as engaging in traditional arts. Music—with specific instruments and songs—is also inconceivably culturally relevant.

Now, the first printed book available dealing with the age-old tradition of the songs sung by the Muslim women of Bengal is *Musalman Samajer Biyer Geet* (written in Bengali) (*The Wedding Songs of Muslim Society*) by Shaktinath Jha (1996). Before that mention of this rich tradition was made by Muhammed Ayoob Hossain (1982) in his article "Musalman Bibahe Lokachar" ("Folk Traditions at Muslim Marriages") a part of the collection of essays *Bibahe Lokachar (Folk Traditions at Marriages)* edited by Dinendrekumar Sarkar. Jha, for the first-time ever, attempted to search for a folk tradition enacted in ritual-laden, socio-religious wedding ceremonies of a particular religious community. Later this book was re-published as an enlarged volume under the title *Musalman Samajer Biyer Geet ebonge Gope Biyer Gaan (Wedding Songs of the Muslim and Gope Community)* Jha (2016), incorporating another similar tradition of wedding songs of the Gope community. Afterwards, the legacy was carried on by Manoyara Khatun and Sahinur Khatun. Manoyara Khatun's volume *Muslim Biyer Gaane Bangali Musalman Samaj (Bengali Muslim Society as found within the Wedding Songs)* was published in 2004. In 2009 came out the monograph entitled *Muslim Biyer Gaan: Roop O Aparoop* by Sahinur Khatun. The authors of all these books chiefly concentrated on collecting these wedding songs sporadically and recording them under printed form. Sahinur Khatun used to perform such songs herself along with other members of her family. Along with documenting them, she accumulated many of the old songs during her search for them. A large portion of it was a part of her family possession, handed down after generations. These songs possess great historical and documentary value. Sahinur Khatun also observes that the tradition of creating new songs had been diminished since 1995. The reason behind it may lie within its losing dignity with the advancement of modern education and the changed social fabric with more and more interest in the lustre of urban modernity. Sahinur Khatun has endeavored to document some of these songs within her book and thus protect them from the grasp of oblivion. But the most remarkable job in this arena has been done by Ratna Rashid (2003) within her book *Muslim Biyer Geet* published in 2003. Here Rashid has weaved her extensive collection of these songs along with the narration of the life-story of an ordinary Muslim girl called Jaigun. One more work, which is created on digital media in the form of a documentary film on this particular subject is available. The title of the film is *Banglar Muslim Bibahe Gaan* that is authored by Amol Ghosh and published by Eastern Zone Cultural centre, Kolkata. Within this film available only some glimpses of the performances and the conversations with the artisans have been shown in its almost forty-five minutes of duration. No in-depth study either of the background of such magnificent heritage, or about the present condition of its practitioners has been attempted through it.

All the books and other resources which have been done on this topic are done at the local level. The few books that are available upon this issue are written in the Bengali language only. The only documentary that has been broadcasted is in the Bengali language. So, for the vast range of scholars interested in this field who don't have access to this particular language, such a rich tradition has remained completely unknown. Under the proposed project we intend to translate these songs into English to reach out to the academicians scattered globally. I have already started the job of translating some of these songs into English under the guidance of Dr. Ratna Rashid Bandyopadhyaya, one of the renowned authors upon this subject.

These works are chiefly the sporadic and random collection of the songs. None of the authors have tried to capture the whole range of the phenomenon within a single work. This project would endeavor to create a wholesome/complete archive of such songs still extant within the memories of the artisans.

The authors of these books have chiefly concentrated upon collecting the songs and recording them through print. None of them has tried to delve deep into scopes of extensive social research work interrelated with the origin of the oppression and the resultant trauma which is the chief driving source behind these masterpieces. Only Ratna Rashid Bandyopadhyaya has endeavored to situate these songs within different stages of life of a conventional Muslim girl. But that too has been presented through the format of a story. She has not attempted to specify/come out with any kind of scholarly investigation into the socio-economic or socio-psychological aspects of the whole phenomenon. Neither any full-fledged project has till been undertaken to search for all the aspects related to the phenomenon—social, political, economic, religio-political, socio-psychological. So, it seems clear that there is still ample scope of an extensive academic research upon this extremely significant and most rare tradition of folk art.

Some of the Bengali movies showcase the songs and dances being performed within the marriage ceremonies of Muslim families. But these songs and dance performances are far from the authentic wedding songs that are performed by the original practitioners of the tradition. They are the signs of the mixed culture, mostly influenced by the contemporary movie culture. The minimum amount of purity is not even maintained while making such songs for the films.

The importance of this study lies within generating certain significant issues relating to Bengali Muslim community's specific history and identity. It may look at Muslim women as having established a rigorous cultural presence in its own community. In order to ensure sustainable societal impact, it may help build up services competent legal agencies to preserve future autonomy and self-determination and give advanced directives for further decision making in the event of incapacitation. Within the present paper, I have tried to provide only a glimpse of the potential of the study of these songs in the field of identifying the traumatic experience that the women, especially the Muslim women of Bengal, have to bear with under patriarchy. In the last segment of my paper, an interpretation of one of the numerous wedding songs has been demonstrated just as an example of the huge scopes of the study in this arena.

Jaigun my dear daughter  
Why did you take birth as a girl  
Being a girl causes much suffering  
Why did you not come as the son  
Jaigun my dear daughter...

Jaigun my dear daughter  
How will you be married off dear

The wedding of a daughter is not that easy  
 It costs a lot  
 Hundred rupees for the feast  
 Hundred rupees for buying the bed  
 Hundred rupees for the costume of the new groom  
 Hundred rupees for the ornaments  
 Hundred rupees to be given for the household expenses  
 Hundred rupees for the musician  
 And such many more things are there dear  
 There is no end to the list  
 Jaigun my dear daughter

This song clearly shows the difficulties posed by society upon a girl child. It never welcomes her the way it does welcome a baby boy. One of the apparent reasons for this unwelcoming attitude towards the baby girl is obviously the inevitable future expenses for paying the dowry at the time of marrying off the girl. This particular song narrates that particular facet through its lyrics. Jaigun is the name of the baby girl. And the moment she takes birth, the women of the family sing this song. From the very moment of her birth, her guardians start repenting it. They become worried about the huge expenses they would have to bear during the time of her marriage. The newborn baby, in this case, fails to bring about any joy for the family.

So, this song shows the mother and the other women of the family welcoming the baby with the account of the probable cost of her marriage in the distant future. They provide a long list of the various types of expenses associated with the wedding of a girl. Apart from the spending on the feast, the costume and other arrangements for the wedding ceremony, there are even more which are exclusively to be borne by the father of the bride. These include buying the bed, the ornaments, and most disgracefully, the household expenditure of the groom's house to be paid by the bride's father.

The surprising fact is that in Islam there is no provision for any kind of dowry to be paid by the bride's side. Rather, Muslim marriages involve the tradition of *Mahr* to be paid to the bride by the groom. The concept of *Mahr* is, indeed, a very wise custom to secure the bride's future. *Mahr* is actually a financial deal which the Muslim groom commits to the prospective wife before the commencement of their marriage. The money received thus is completely own by the wife. She can spend it as she wishes. The reason behind such a custom is very significant. Even if the bride has no property of her own at the time of her marriage, she can at least have some possession through it when she enters her new life. The amount of the *Mahr* is decided by the elders of the society, keeping in mind the financial position of the groom. So, this insightful custom is originally meant to impart an equal status to the bride at par with that of the groom so that they can start their new life from a uniform economical level. Then, the question is, even after the prevalence of such an excellent custom how can the family members of a little Muslim baby girl be so anxious about the probable expenses of her marriage? In fact, in present day Muslim societies, especially in Bengal, the custom of *Mahr* has been turned into mere formality. In most of the cases, no *Mahr* is disbursed to the bride, only a promise of a certain amount is made, which is to be given to her at the time of their *talaaq*, if there is any. Thus, the actual purpose behind such a beautiful and wise custom is completely undermined by patriarchy.

Besides, if we carefully study the list of the expenditures mentioned within the song, we can see the inclusion of the costs like buying a bed, lavish costumes for the groom, and above all, the amount to be paid as the household expenses for the groom's family and such many more things. Now, where did such things come from? As we

have previously mentioned, Islam never mentions any such things which are in fact kind of indirect dowry. These are actually the impositions of the society which in no way is ready to accept the concept of 'equal status' towards the women in the family. That is why they have converted the tradition of Mahr into just a formality, a token which in most cases are never paid off. Instead, traditions endorsing different kinds of dowry have been introduced, just to undermine the real value of the women, no matter whether Islam approves it or not.

These newly incorporated customs are in reality the reflections of the patriarchal attitude of the society which is indeed much reluctant to receive women as equals. They always have considered women as sub-human and a burden of society. These customs are introduced just to impart the feeling of inferiority and humiliation within women. And this practice is continuing generations after generations with the dividend of the expected result. After the years, rather ages of suppression, now most of the women have started believing in themselves as the burden of the family, of the society. This attitude is clearly visible within the song under present discussion. Here we see the women of the house are visibly disappointed at the birth of the baby girl. This is in reality the consequence of the trauma of continuous humiliation they are incessantly enduring. It's not that they don't feel any emotional attachment with the newborn. Of course, they love her. The justification for such claim can be viewed through the use of the endearing, affectionate term 'Jaigun my dear daughter' (in original Bengali it is 'Jaigun amar ma lo' which is actually a very affectionate expression) repeatedly. But at the same time, they feel for her too. Their own traumatic experiences of the journey from girlhood to womanhood make them afraid of the future of this little baby girl. Therefore, a close study of the lyrics of the song makes it quite evident that the singers are more concerned about the upcoming sufferings that this little one would have to go through than the apparent issue of the expenses of the future wedding. The fourth line of the song ("Why did you not come as the son") is then not about preferring a baby boy over the girl. Rather it shows the anxiety of her predecessors expressed at the ill fate of the newborn which she could have avoided if she took birth as a boy.

It seems that Muslim Wedding Songs has always suffered from an anxiety of subservience. Through Bengali cultural and political history can be traced from centuries back in terms of having played a significant role in socio-cultural framework of Bengal Community (West Bengal and Bangladesh). Bengali Muslims and their cultural politics remained peripheral in the context of Bengal's cultural history. It seems that Bengali Muslims have always tried to discover their appropriate space within the rubric of Bengal. It is really urgent these days to explore the multi-façade aspects of Muslim Wedding Songs sung exclusively by women (its nature, obviously, is oral) and its culture and cultural politics.

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