

# ***UNDER CONSTRUCTION* (2015): A SKETCHY ATTEMPT TO DEPICT FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY**

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the role and representation of the female characters in Rubaiyat Hossain's critically acclaimed feminist film *Under Construction* (2015). This qualitative and explorative study uses textual analysis and approaches to representation by Stuart Hall as the methodology. This study deploys the concept of feminist political economy, women and economics, and subjectivity as the theoretical framework. Findings show that female characters in the film either adhered to traditional gender roles or were financially dependent on others. Hence, they were prone to being exploited by male-dominated systems due to their limited choices and lack of control. This study delves into the experiences of three women characters, examining their behavior in response to societal norms and the perceptions they encounter from others. Its goal is to grasp the fundamental concepts of feminist political economy, women and economics, and subjectivity to assess their relevance in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Under Construction, Feminist Film, Female Subjectivity, Feminist Political Economy, Woman and Economics

## **Introduction**

After arising enormous criticism with her internationally released and awarded debut film *Meherjan* for its discomfoting portrayal of raped survivors and sexuality in the Bangladeshi liberation war in 1971 (Mookherjee, 2011) and in furthering a dialogue around healing and ethical memorialization concerning 1971 in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2015) pulled out of the theatres, Rubaiyat Hossain came with her second film *Under Construction* (2015). Unlike *Meherjan*, *Under Construction* was highly acclaimed by film critics (Ferdous, 2016; Potter, 2015; Wilkinson, 2017) and awarded in the national and international film festivals. The film was first exhibited at the Berlin Film Festival and was released in Dhaka in 2015. In 2017 *Under Construction* was released in France under the title *Les Lauriers-Roses Rouges*. The 88-minute film centers around Indian actress Shahana Goswami (as Roya) alongside influential Kolkata actor Rahul Bose (as Imtiaz), Bangladeshi theater veterans Shahadat Hossain (as Roya's Husband

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Sameer), Tufikul Islam Emon (as Rasel), Rikita Shima (as Moyna) and Mita Rahman (as Roya's Mother). *Under Construction* (2015) investigates the themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations. Set in contemporary Dhaka, Bangladesh, the movie explores the life of Roya, a young woman struggling to find her voice and reconcile her desires with societal pressures. The film employs a nonlinear narrative structure, intertwining Roya's journey with the construction of a building nearby, serving as a metaphor for her self-discovery and the evolving nature of the city. This narrative choice allows for a layered exploration of themes and enables the audience to witness the internal struggles and external influences that shape Roya's character. Roya serves as the central character whose evolution forms the backbone of the film. Initially presented as a dutiful daughter and wife, she grapples with the constraints imposed by societal norms and her unfulfilled aspirations. Throughout the film, Roya challenges these expectations, gradually asserting her independence and seeking her own identity. Her transformation is depicted through her interactions with other characters, such as her mother, husband, and a female filmmaker, who serve as catalysts for her self-reflection.

*Under Construction* provides incisive social commentary on gender roles and the patriarchal structure of Bangladeshi society. The film portrays the various ways in which women's lives are shaped and controlled, highlighting the pervasive influence of societal expectations and norms. It shows the pressures women face to conform to predefined roles while shedding light on the limitations imposed on their personal and professional ambitions. The visual aesthetics (a construction site next to Roya's apartment, a snake lying beside Roya) of *Under Construction* contributes significantly to the film's storytelling. The contrasting shots of the bustling city and female garment workers marching to the factory and Roya's introspective moments create a visual dichotomy, emphasizing the tension between societal demands and individual desires. The use of natural lighting and earthy tones further enhances the film's realism, grounding the story in a specific cultural context. *Under Construction* is a feminist intervention in the Bangladeshi film industry (Biswas, 2022, p. 2). As a feminist filmmaker, the director Rubaiyat Hossain intends to portray the exploitation and interruption imposed by both family and society and tries to establish a degree of female autonomy by the character Roya who ignores all the barriers while pursuing her passion in theatre.

Despite all these attempts, this article argues that the film could not establish female subjectivity which is defined as the significance of recognizing and valuing the autonomy and independence of female opinions and emotions for the

inappropriate portrayal of economic subjugation, futility of thought of characters, and dialectical feminist position of the protagonist in the film.

## **Literature Review**

A handful of writings investigated female subjectivity and representation in Bangladeshi Films. Female subjectivity in the film has been a critical zone of investigation inside film considers, analyzing the representation and depiction of women's encounters, viewpoints, and agency on-screen (Staab, 2021). Early cinematic depictions of women regularly strengthened conventional gender parts and generalizations, consigning them to inactive, supporting roles. However, feminist film scholars, such as Laura Mulvey, challenged these representations in the 1970s, presenting the concept of the "male gaze" and addressing the objectification and voyeuristic inclinations inside mainstream cinema (Mulvey, 1989).

The portrayal of women in movies often reflects a predominantly masculine viewpoint. Clustering Bangladeshi films over five decades, Shishir & Shams (2017) claimed that from the 70's films *Arunodoyer Agniswamkhi* (1972), *Sangram*(1974), to the contemporary celebrated films *Angee* (2014) or *Aynabaazi* (2016), the roles and representations of women have been revolved in the same passive, submissive, male admirer, the epitome of sexuality, mother and innocent role.

By utilizing language and concepts that reinforce male dominance, we can gain insight into the experiences of women. Numerous current studies analyze public attitudes toward the portrayal of gender and sexuality in popular films (Coyne et al. 2014; Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 2015).

Scholars have investigated the advancement of female subjectivity in film, highlighting the rise of female-centered narratives and the expansion of female characters. This incorporates the examination of films directed by females, which regularly offer nuanced and genuine depictions of women's encounters and challenges. Also, intersectional points of view have shed light on the experiences of women from different racial, ethnic, and social foundations (Naaman, 2000 & Staab. 2021).

Gayen (2015) argues that Mass media serves the objective of either perpetuating prevailing ideologies through the rhetoric of authority figures or generating fresh terminology that drives innovative modes of thinking. Hossain (2011) viewed female subjectivity from the female filmmakers' perspective and highlighted the complexity of female sexuality and the struggle for subjectivity within patriarchal systems.

Wilkinson (2017) argues that by presenting women in a distinct and empowering manner, the film *Under Construction* directly questioned the prevailing notion that men are entitled to superior authority. The female protagonist relishes her independence and the film unveils the intimate aspects of her relationship, which ultimately enhances her life.

Biswas (2022) meticulously examined the film *Under Construction* and found the director's agency in the film. By refusing to have children, the female main character is not only questioning her ability to reproduce but also prioritizing her creative role as a theatre actress that establishes her female agency over absorbing any gender role or "maternal instinct" which is considered an inherent characteristic of women (Biswas, 2022, p.15).

So, prior studies have focused on the women's struggle in a male-dominated society and the female director's agency over portraying independent female protagonists. But no study has been done yet on female subjectivity from a holistic perspective what can be attained through social, physical, and economic agency enabling women to exercise their own choices, have autonomy over their lives, and embrace the opportunity to define their own identities (Kurks, 1992, p.102).

## Methodology

Employing a qualitative approach this study used textual analysis to examine the text of the film as a means of elucidating its structure and material. Textual analysis is a process that looks at and clarifies features of written or recorded texts, paying particular attention to the way the message is structured, what it says, and what its purpose is. (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999, p.225). Frey et al. (1999) further argue that textual analysis involves determining the content, organization, meaning, and intention of a text. According to Brennen (2017), texts are used to generate intended meaning (p.204). Smith (2017) added that when studying text, it is possible to gather information from various sources like papers, movies, news, artworks, websites, and more. The aim of studying this kind of information is to comprehend its significance, value, and conveyed messages. By examining the dialogue, plot, visual elements, audio effects, and different aspects of a film, textual analysis helps to gain insight into the intended messages and ideas conveyed.

Brennen (2017) emphasizes the significance of having a theoretical perspective when studying texts like books or articles since researchers heavily draw upon theory to facilitate their understanding and interpretation of the material (p.208). Considering the film as a language, the concept of representation (Hall, 2020) can be another method to analyze the film. Hall (2020) described the reflexive,

intentional, or constructionist or constructivist approaches to answer ‘Where do come from’ and ‘How can we tell the “true” meaning of a word or image’ (p.10).

As Hall (1997) emphasizes all texts signify a kind of constructed reality, these approaches help to analyze the meaning of the representation of the characters depicted in films. As argued by Hall (2006), the concepts and societal connotations linked to signs, such as words or pictures, are intertwined with power dynamics and the individuals responsible for shaping media representation (as cited in Bulbul, 2011, p.11). In this study, the approaches of representation helped to understand how female subjectivity was made in the film through the interplay of the characters and how the meanings of texts (or representations) were created in the film, *Under Construction*.

Concerning *Under Construction*, this study inspects the text of the film in the light of the concept of Feminist Political Economy and the Woman and Economics to examine the portrayal of the female characters in the film. Investigating the stylistic and technical features of the film, this study will attempt to uncover the social, personal, political, and economic freedom of the lead female characters to inquire about ‘female subjectivity’.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist political economy is a field of study that examines how gender inequalities and discrimination intersect with economic systems and structures. Feminist political economy explores new ideas about how individuals have control over their actions and society and questions the usual explanations for unfair treatment and financial difficulties (Folbre, 2023). It focuses on analyzing and addressing the gendered dimensions of economic theory, policy, and practice. Feminist political economists emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing unpaid care work, challenging gender biases and stereotypes, promoting equal opportunities and rights for women in the workforce, and advocating for policies that aim to achieve gender equality and social justice within economic systems (Meehan & Riordan, 2002).

In *Women and Economics*, Gilman argued that the financial autonomy and possession of specific skills by women are crucial factors that contribute to stronger marriages, improved motherhood roles, enhanced domestic work, and the consolidation of racial harmony (Gilman, 2022, p.19). and also claimed that the most important aspect of women's freedom and empowerment is their ability to achieve financial independence (Gilman, 2022, p.9).

Huber et al. (2009) argue that women's economic dependence or independence is fundamental to shaping gender inequality in society (p.2). Hobson (1990) focused on economic dependency as the key outcome dimension of women's subordination.

Putting light on the concept of women and economics Williams (2004) argues that family work affects their participation in paid work that restricts the economic security of women (p.415).

All the significant ideas concerning subjectivity in the last three decades of literature and culture studies share a common factor. Their viewpoint contradicts the notion that the subject is solely an autonomous entity that develops in the world according to its distinctive characteristics (Mansfield, 2000.p.13). Lacanian and Foucauldian viewpoints argue against the idea that a person is completely independent and free. Additionally, they perceive the subject as a product of imagination or construction. Subjectivity is a product of the connections that take place within the human environment. To put it more simply, a significant aspect of psychoanalysis revolves around how the interplay of gender and sexuality within family settings influences our actions and cognitions (Mansfield, 2000. p.52). Freud and Lacan attempted to show a model of the nature of the individual subject, and how it is shaped. Foucault argues that the subject's nature is indeterminate and incomprehensible (Mansfield, 2000. p.66). Kristeva (1982), and Mulvey (1975) further contributed to defining subjectivity from patriarchal aspects. Women's and feminist film to which so-called second-wave feminism gave birth in the 1970s, direct attention to the issue of female subjectivity was first drawn in the book *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* in 1984 by Teresa de Lauretis (Ince, 2017, p.1)

Female subjectivity refers to the unique experiences, perspectives, and agency of women, explored in feminist theory, gender studies, and cultural studies. It involves understanding how being a woman influences self-perception and engagement with the world. Film studies emphasize diverse female characters and display individuals in different positions of authority.

The idea of female subjectivity also includes understanding women's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Hoffman (1996) defines subjectivity as the capacity to think and act independently, exercising autonomy in making personal choices.

By applying the concepts of 'women and economics' and 'feminist political economy,' this study aims to evaluate the degree of economic freedom possessed by female characters in the movie and its influence on establishing 'subjectivity'.

## Analysis

### Conflicting stands of the protagonist Roya

In the film *Under Construction*, the main character Roya works in a theater and takes care of her home. Roya comes from a middle-class family. Sameer, her husband, is employed in a large corporation.

The film starts with a montage. Montage is a cinematic technique that helps to shape a narrative (by generating an erroneous perception of time and space or directing the audience's attention between different narratives), to control rhythm, to create metaphors, and to make rhetorical points (Bordwel, 1972, p.9). So, the montage includes visuals of city traffic, vehicle noise, garment workers at work, laborers smashing stones, fish pining in a bowl, and a house help washing dishes. In the following scene, Roya appears rehearsing and dancing at her apartment and a building that is under construction. As a result, the montage informs the audience that the story is taking place in a city which is portrayed by different shots of the city elements. The crowd and vehicle horn create a sense of chaos and disruption, and the narrative is about (A garment worker, a hardworking woman laborer, and a domestic helper cleaning dishes). The fish yearning in the bowl figuratively symbolizes the sufferings of those individuals. But Roya is seen dancing in her apartment followed by an under-construction building which metaphorically singifies Roya as different and who does not belong to those women seen in the montage. This scene also provides the audience with a strong indication that Roya is making or preparing herself for something. And the story evolves.

Roya has a strong desire to pursue a career in the theatre. She desires to create her theatrical productions and assume the role of directing those herself. Roya participates in a play titled 'Raktakarabi', which was authored by the Famous noble laureate writer of the subcontinent Rabindranath Tagore. Filled with excitement as she takes on the character of Nandini and eagerly looks forward to the arrival of her loved one, Ranjan, during the performance. Nandini receives news of Ranjan's arrival through a bird with a blue throat. This news fills Nandini with happiness. After performing in 'Raktakarabi', Roya demonstrates her discontentment with her appearance and growing old. On her way back home, It irritates Roya when the child vending flowers on the street addresses her as 'Auntie'.

Roya considers the character of Nandini as an example of the "perfect Bengali woman" because Nandini is described as beautiful, luxurious, and youthful in Rabindranath's 'Raktakarabi'. In Roya's language, "I feel exhausted while acting in the role of Nandini in such a way. Can such a character truly exist, who desires nothing for herself and is entirely concerned about others?" (Hossain, 2015,



00:46:01). The character no longer appeals to Roya and as a result, Roya refuses to play the role of Nandini in 'Raktakarabi', stating that she is not young and beautiful enough to play the role of Nandini anymore. Upon engaging in a composed and substantial dialogue with the theatre director Rasel, Roya was told to conform to the instructions from the theatre and perform the character of Nandini or leave the theatre and do domestic work. She leaves the place and a noisy vehicle horn is heard as a cinematic sound effect which infers the annoyance and mental disturbance of Roya. In the following shot, Roya is placed in a taxi looking outside through its iron fence. These visual elements signify Roya's sufferings, and helplessness. Then again, from her perspective, a billboard is seen in the film which reads 'New Women'. Roya is mindfully watching that billboard through the iron fence of the taxi which portrays Roya as wishing to become a new person but fences are obstacles to achieving the dream. Roya got demotivated by all these incidents and it was established in the following shot where she is seen scrubbing a sticky frying pan at her home and starts cooking the favorite dishes of her husband. So, she appeared to be too interested in household work. Despite contemplating it, she is uncertain about deciding to exit the theater. After sharing her viewpoint, in a dinner conversation, her husband is seen giving assent to her thought of quitting theatre. Her husband said, "If you think that it's time for you to quit the theatre, then quit" (Hossain. 2015, 00:24:22). Then Roya asked, "For real?" (Hossain. 2015, 00:24:30). Her husband replied, "If you really want to know, we should have a baby" (Hossain. 2015, 00:24:42). This conversation finally made Roya in dilemma and she was unsure what to do next.

Immediately after the conversation, in a metaphoric scene, a dead fish sorted with flowers and ornaments depicts her situation. It reveals, that Roya apparently lives a luxurious life with a decorated home with status and social security but like that dead fish, Roya is also languid. Roya deeply desires to be self-reliant, but that clashes with society's belief that women should rely on men. Even with her husband, mother, and friend urging her to become a parent, she lacks the enthusiasm to embrace motherhood. She believes that having a child will be an obstacle to her aspirations and act as a deterrent. Nevertheless, she experiences uncertainty upon encountering her friend who is both pregnant and holds a doctoral degree.

Her hesitation comes to an end in the following scene, Roya is seen walking towards a door and opens it. There was light outside the door. Roya steps into the light and wears the costume of Nandini, pokes a flagging fish which then starts playing in the aquarium. In this mise-en-scene, light signifies the entrance for the emancipation of Roya and the flagging fish turning into lively depicts the revival of her aspirations for being back to independence. In the background, the under-construction building symbolizes the ongoing reconstruction of Roya's life steps.



Mise-en-scene encompasses all the visual elements that are arranged in front of the camera in a film (Bordewell and Thompson, 2003, p.137). So this scene reveals the inner desires of Roya to go back to the theatre again. After that in another metaphoric dream scene, Roya is lying with her husband, Sameer and suddenly Sameer is turned into a python. This scene metaphorically signifies Sameer/Patriarchy as Python as it swallows. Like a Python, Sameer is swallowing her identity, and freedom and trying to bind her with socially imposed gender roles. So after this, Despite contemplating leaving the theater, Roya ultimately chooses to return to the theatre receiving praise from renowned curator Imtiaz Ilahi for her role as Nandini in the play 'Roktokorobi'. Imtiaz Ilahi's influence sparks Roya's thoughts on the possibility of making a new version of 'Raktakarabi'. Roya decided to remake 'Raktakarabi' and the character Nandini of her own where Nandini is not a symbol of 'beauty, luxury, and youth'. Rather Nandini undergoes a transformation where she is a pregnant garment worker who works in the clothing industry and yearns to give birth to her child despite all the suffering and exploitation she experiences. A child that metaphorically represents the ray of hope for emancipation and freedom in a threshed garments industry with exploitation and simultaneously signifies the struggle and spirit of working class passive women thriving for liberation.

The construction Building as a visual element and metaphor is again seen for the second time in the film, followed by Roya rehearsing her version of Nandini saying "I will reap open the ugly net so that I can take human spirit....." (Hossain. 2015, 00:29:38) Roya desires to remake herself and make herself into a strong human who has the spirit to surpass the gender role of having a baby, obeying her husband, and getting out of the socially imposed net. Repeated representation of the under-construction building as a metaphor provides a strong cue on this point of the film.

So, Roya plans to shift the portrayal of a Nandini from being passive and lacking personal agency to becoming proactive and holding independent thoughts and feelings. On the contrary, Sameer does not support Roya's choice to continue her commitment to theater. Subsequently, Roya got closer to Imtiaz. In her dreams, Roya longed for the companionship of Imtiaz. Gradually, Roya and Imtiaz grew closer and their relationship evolved into a romantic one.

On the contrary, in another scene, Moyna says to Roya that she is pregnant and wants Roya to get her married off to Sabuz. But Roya got furious and denied it. here the under-construction building is again seen getting drenched in rain and construction work is stopped. So, Roya got disturbed, and her making of a Nandini who thrives for emancipation was disrupted by the act of Moyna.

In another scene, Roya expressed her dissent about the conventional portrayal of Nandini to Imtiaz, an international theatre curator. Imtiaz got convinced with her

idea of making her version of 'Raktakarabi'. Here under construction site appears in the film again as metaphors. After that, Roya started working with Imtiaz making her version of 'Raktakarabi' when the construction site was shown again but this time it was defocused behind a flower. The story of the film progresses, with the repeated presentation of a construction site right next to Roya's house with Roya's attempt to create a new Raktakarabi or Nandini and her effort to make herself or the working woman free as in her version of 'Raktakarabi', Nandini, a pregnant garment worker signifies the emancipation of working-class women. Roya was breaking societal expectations and unwritten rules of being an obedient, honest wife and daughter. She started an intimate relationship with curator Imtiaz, and Roya refused to go with her mother to take care of her. So Roya's success toward setting herself free from the gender role of having a baby, being obedient and honest to her husband, and creating her version of Nandini who is a symbol of emancipation of women as a whole was symbolized with that construction site repeatedly in the film. So this 'Intentional Approach' is when an author uses their special language to give meaning to the world (Hall, 2020, p.10). Since the beginning of the film, Roya has been encountering continuous internal and interpersonal conflicts and throughout the film, Roya continuously attempted to get herself free from the clutches of societal and male dominance and perpetually questioned her liberation. Roya rejected the conventional expectations placed on women's behavior in society. She refused to comply with the expectations set by her husband, family, or society. She lacked trust in the notion of marriage, institutions, and the responsibilities of motherhood. Regardless of this, she continued to prioritize her appearance, health, and the effects of aging. Roya exerted immense effort to defy the social norms and expectations typically imposed on women. Nonetheless, she was unwilling for Moyna, her housekeeper, to depart from her home. Roya longed for freedom, yet she unconsciously upheld the conventional customs that bolster male dominance over females in Moyna. Roya had no desire to become a mother and take on the responsibilities that come with raising a child and caring for her family. In her version of 'Raktakarabi', she portrayed the challenges faced by a pregnant woman while giving birth metaphorized the child as a symbol of freedom and liberation. Moyna, Roya's domestic help, is in love with Sobuz, the building's elevator man. Consequently, Moyna gets pregnant with Sobuz's child. So, helpless Moyna requests Roya to marry her off to Sobuz. This request greatly annoys Roya. Moyna asked for freedom, "Let me go, I want to have my own home" (Hossain, 2015, 00:41:08), Roya denied. She tried to stop Moyna from living her desired life. In a metaphoric shot after that, Moyna is seen behind a confined window portraying her captiveness and helplessness. After a heated argument, when Moyna was leaving Roya's house with Shabuj, a stairway was seen that went downward. This metaphoric shot signifies the decay of Moyna's life from Roya's viewpoint.

Another instance of the 'Intentional Approach'. However, Roya did what she desired. She got engaged to Imtiaz but did not permit Moyna to get married to the liftman. So, with its narrative, *Under Construction* aimed to facilitate female characters with the freedom to be autonomous and capable of supporting themselves. However, Roya's conflicting feminist position and futility of thoughts in the film went against that as she desires freedom and restricts that of Moyna.

### **When 'Economic Independence' is the central instrument for Emancipation**

Roya's mom, another pivotal female character in the film, was portrayed as being isolated without much social support. Roya's father abandoned her mother for another woman, yet her mother remains hopeful for his return. Roya consistently advises her mother not to wait for him. Here, the film focuses on depicting the limitations of a typical woman. As per Smelik (1998), films serve as a medium for showcasing and reinforcing cultural perceptions of women, femininity, men, masculinity, and sexual differences and play a crucial role in crafting and disseminating these narratives and beliefs. Through movies, these ideas are created, reiterated, and exhibited (p.7). Considering Roya and her mother in terms of autonomy, and economic independence, Roya's mother was found persistent. Every time Roya comes to her mother, she tells her to take a child and Roya gets frustrated by her mother's words, Roya says, "Girls have no other work besides getting married and having children, haven't they?" (Hossain. 2015, 00:37:55). In response, her mother vindictively says, "Roya, I don't live on my husband's money. I earn my living. These girls, with their sewing work, I manage my living and theirs. What have you done? You are so educated. So, why didn't you pursue any job?" (Hossain. 2015, 00:38:20). So, here the film encountered another issue. It is apparent that Roya, the central figure in the film, lacks the autonomy to make her own financial choices. Despite her extensive studies, she does not earn a substantial income. Her reliance on her husband for financial stability is evident in a different scene of the movie. In a scene, Sameer hands his wife a check before heading off to work. Consequently, a woman involved in theatrical acts strives for artistic freedom and bodily autonomy but encounters financial limitations. Whereas, women's economic freedom is the key component in their emancipation (Gilman, 2022, p.9).

On the other hand, Roya's mother adheres to traditional notions of motherhood and being a wife. She adheres to a religious faith and patiently anticipates her husband's return. What catches the attention is her ability to sustain herself financially without needing assistance from others. She has a job and other women work for her. Hobson (1990) studied how women's subordination is mainly caused by their economic dependency. Roya's mother stands firm against being controlled or dominated by others. She possesses a specific level of autonomy and power to

determine her actions. Nonetheless, does her capability to act independently encompass the full extent of her freedom? It will be discussed next.

Moyna, the domestic help of Roya falls in love with the liftman of the apartment Shabuj. They got married and started living in a slum. Moyna started working in the garments. Roya visits her and requests her to come back to her home as domestic help. Moyna denied it and said, “Will I spend my whole life as a servant in someone else's house?” (Hossain. 2015, 00:53:43). Williams (2004) argues that family work affects their participation in paid work and restricts the economic security of women (p.415). Despite being paid, Moyna is not free by any means. Moyna loved her husband, married him, and started living with her husband in a slum but was later exploited by her husband and could not manage to protest. Shabuj said to Moyna, “You will live with me on my terms” (Hossain. 2015, 00:41:21). Moyna had to conceal her ornaments so that Shabuj could not take them from her. So, Moyna is another female character who had earnings but hardly enjoyed freedom and agency. Being dominated and obeyed by the husband and followed by the dominant patriarchal rule of society, Moyna represents the marginal woman of society.

### **In search for ‘Female Subjectivity’**

Subjectivity enables women to exercise their own choices, have autonomy over their lives, and embrace the opportunity to define their own identities (Kurks, 1992, p.102). It includes understanding the thoughts of women, their feelings, and experiences. The ability of women to think and engage in autonomous actions varies, as it is influenced by their specific conditions. Moreover, it addresses the aspects of women's self-perception, their interactions with the world, and the ways they construct their identities.

Roya, the protagonist of the film, embarks on a voyage to explore her inner self which is metaphorically depicted several times in the film with a construction building right next to her residence. Roya, a resourceful woman from a middle-class background, derives great satisfaction from her affiliation with a theater group. She is making an effort to defy the primary societal standard imposed on females. She resisted the pressure to conform to the traditional ideals of being a perfect wife and ideal daughter. However, she engaged in disputes with her husband, family, and society as a whole to assert her pursuit of personal and artistic freedom. Her ambition was to emerge as a celebrated individual in the field of theater, reaching remarkable accomplishments with her adopted ‘Raktakarabi’ worldwide. Roya symbolizes the concept of elegance and autonomy for women personifying aspirations, desires, and the determination to defy societal gender norms. However, she lacked the autonomy to manage her financial affairs. Roya’s

financial support depended on her husband. In the interim, she is attempting to persuade her husband to reject conventional gender norms, expressing her reluctance to become a mother and giving utmost importance to her artistic independence. So, Roya was unsuccessful in establishing her autonomy. Without economic independence, achieving agency and autonomy is impossible. Huber et al. (2009) argue that understanding gender inequality in society requires considering whether women are financially reliant on others or capable of financially supporting themselves (p.2). In a scene, Sameer was curious if they had broached the topic of having a child. Roya stated her lack of interest in pursuing her previous plans. Reacting with frustration, Sameer angrily declared that Roya is mature enough and should not be able to unexpectedly alter their plans. Roya wanted to challenge the predominant patriarchal social norms, rejected typical gender roles, refused to conceive, and did not attend her mother to perform in the theatre show. When her mother was going to London for cancer treatment, Sameer bought a flight ticket for Roya, as he thought she as a daughter would prefer to be with her mother at this time but surprisingly, she refused to go with her. Sameer said, "Will you choose the show over your mother?" (Hossain. 2015, 01:22:25). Roya replied, "You know I am directing" (Hossain. 2015, 01:22:29). These are all portrayed as the denial of gender roles either as an 'Ideal Wife' or a 'Dutiful Daughter' imposed on the woman by the society. When Roya was showing her version of 'Raktakarbi' to Imtiaz, Upon seeing the set of the modified 'Raktakarbi' and encountering Nandini, a pregnant garment worker, the theater director, Rasel, grew annoyed due to his belief and stated that the set lacked good design and considered Nandini unappealing. But Roya replied, "This is how I want it" (Hossain. 2015, 01:16:05). Roya made the theatre set in the form of a garment factory, converted the character Nandini from a beautiful, luxurious, and youthful woman to a pregnant garment worker aspiring for emancipation and freedom in a worn-out garments industry with exploitation. She negated to become pregnant and went for an intimate relationship with Imtiaz without considering the societal structure of commitment towards marriage and family. Thus, Roya demonstrated her creative prowess and defied the societal expectations imposed on women. Roya reached a point of liberation within the film, granting her the power to independently shape her creative choices. By escaping from the conventional roles of being an obedient daughter and an ideal spouse, she subsequently appeared 'selfish' in her husband's eyes. When Roya informed Sameer that she would not be going with her mother for cancer treatment, Sameer replied "Sometimes, you are so selfish Roya" (Hossain. 2015, 01:23:03). Roya hardly conformed to her husband and didn't carry any interest to comply with the concept of 'Ideal Wife' but seen to take bank checks when her husband was leaving home for office work. Roya's mother advised her to take jobs and become financially independent. So it is evident that Roya had no economic independence. On the other hand, Roya

wanted to live a free life and did not want to be confined by societal gender roles and expectations. She wanted to make herself and working-class woman free which was the message of her version of 'Raktakarabi', but surprisingly she wanted Moyna to continue working in her house and did not want Moyna to marry and start her own family illustrating conflicting feminist stands of Roya. So, I argue that Roya hardly could achieve 'subjectivity' for not having economic independence and practicing opposing feminist stands.

Then, Roya's mother was an independent woman by all means. She earns and lives on her own and alone. Later in the film, we get to know that she is a cancer patient. Roya's brother wanted to take her to London for treatment. Roya requested her mother to go to her house before going to London. But her mother refused to go and replied, "I don't need anyone" (Hossain. 2015, 01:20:01). So, in contrast, despite having economic independence and agency, Roya's mother is the symbol of an 'Ideal Wife' who waits for her husband despite being neglected, obeys the social gender role. Williams (2004) argues that for numerous women, having employment is not a prerequisite for feeling financially confident. Instead of self-sufficiency, they count on their family for benefits or resources. (pp. 417-418). So, despite having economic freedom, and self-sufficiency, Roya's mother ended up with nothing.

Lastly, Moyna exemplifies the multitude of difficulties experienced by a woman of her age, conforming to Bengali stereotypes. Moyna, a working woman, suffers from the oppressive treatment of male-dominated and capitalist systems. Moyna had a strong desire to build a life together with the person she deeply loved. Instead of being a domestic helper anymore, Moyna decided to switch careers and began working at a clothing factory, leaving her previous work with Roya. Moyna achieved what she desired. Roya tried to impose her wish on Moyna but became unsuccessful. Moyna's character symbolizes the struggles, hurdles, and minor triumphs in their reality, even if they lack individual significance. To liberate themselves, female directors must reject the pervasive notion that women are always perfect and instead capture the authentic experiences of women in their films (Smelik, 1998, p.8).

Roya's endeavor to challenge the societal gender roles and practice creative choice, her mother's economic independence, autonomy and Moyna's inclination to earn and to lead a life of her own, jointly could establish the 'Subjectivity' which is defined as social, physical, and economic agency enabling women to exercise their own choices, have autonomy over their lives, and embrace the opportunity to define their own identities. However, Roya's economic dependence which made her stay with her husband despite frequent dissensions regarding conceiving, quitting theatre, and being a responsible daughter and wife, Roya's mother's



religious faith, and best effort to stay as an ideal homemaker despite being let off by her husband and Moyna's way of being an ideal wife, serving all of her Husband's wishes couldn't make *Under Construction* a successful illustration of female Subjectivity in this film.

## Conclusion

*Under Construction*, introduces us to the lives of other women around Roya, portraying their struggles, aspirations, and frustrations. Each character in the narrative contributes to the central concept of women desiring empowerment and liberation, thereby expressing their true selves. The main emphasis lies on the challenges encountered by women in a conventional setting. The film encourages introspection regarding our identity, self-perception, and the societal pressures that influence us. The narrative and its protagonists are intriguing, inciting deep pondering on these themes. Rubaiyat Hossain guides the story while the actors deliver performances, collectively exploring the complexities of balancing individual desires with societal constraints. *Under Construction* sheds light on the obstacles women confront when attempting to stay true to themselves and assert their autonomy but the portrayal of characters either confined by gender roles and lack of exercising free will or Economic subjugation impeded the depiction of female subjectivity. It is indeed a thought-provoking film that delves into the complexities of gender dynamics and societal expectations, highlighting the resilience and determination of women striving to find their own identity and voice.

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