

Tale of Female Body: A Critical Study of Taslima Nasreen's Novels Shodh and French Lover

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Abstract

Violence against women is an age-old practice which has now become a major issue of concern in today's world. It has been witnessed that in any kind of war whether it is civil strife, communal clashes or World Wars women have been the major victims of violence, torture and humiliation. Women have been supposed as caring mothers, faithful wives, loving sisters, defensive angels governed by male domination society. India is a society in which father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line and as such become vibrant with male female issues especially in joint families. The themes which preoccupy the mind of the writer in the novels Shodh and French Lover are gender bias which eventually result in revenge. Being herself a victim of the patriarchal structures Taslima Nasreen has seen things very closely that how women are given the role of a subordinate where they cannot, in anyway, assert their right to freedom, right to a healthy life and right to equality. Thus, her novel Shodh is a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain. This paper focuses upon the different dimensions of violence and their impact on the female protagonist Jhumur, who eventually takes a stand for establishing her own identity in the patriarchal set up. Nasreen's next novel French Lover tells the story of the patriarchal control exerted on the protagonist Nilanjana by her father, her husband Kishanlal and the domination of friends and lover. This article on French Lover and Shodh focus on the predominant thematic concerns of Nasreen as a feminist. French Lover and Shodh are her medium to convey her views on various sociological, political issues which encompass not only the fate of any nation but also that of women everywhere. The analysis focuses on the failure of marriage in the case of various individuals, especially all the chief characters. Nasreen may be construed as justifying the frustration of Nila at her shabby treatment by Kishanlal and subsequently abandoning her husband. When Nila speaks on behalf of Nasreen, she justifies her liberated escapades as the result of the lack of real love or affection in her husband's attitude towards her and his former French wife.

Keywords: Humiliation, Maltreatment, Oppressed, Subordinate, Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The long exiled author Taslima Nasrin is not just a novelist. She is an equally powerful poet and holds a strong position in global intelligentsia. Her novels in spite of their controversial themes upholds women's issues which formerly were not addressed. Nasrin's representation of her own narrative etched a new path of unabashed laying out of women's personal histories marred by socio-cultural instruments of oppression.

The author's understanding of the women's ground reality is most intensely reflected in almost all her works of fiction and non-fiction. The connection between the biological and the social identities of women, as Nasrin has tried to suggest through her works not only shows her deep empathy for her own gender but also her visible resistance against the brutal paradigms of patriarchy. Her protagonists come from different economic, religious, socio-political, cultural backgrounds and she carefully plods her line of narration by emphasising on both similarities and dissimilarities shown by them in terms of their respective roles and context.

Violence against women is an age old practice which has now become a major issue of concern. Contemporary women poets like Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson and many have endeavoured to bring transformation through their writings by portraying the roles which are assigned to women from time immemorial. Besides these poets, many women novelists have also portrayed the plight of women, their struggle and sufferings due to the perpetrators of violence either, in the name of culture, religion or societal norms. In the history of English literature the writers who belonged to the school of art for art's sake said that the objective of literary piece is to give aesthetic pleasure to the reader but so far as the literary writers are concerned they are the product of the society, thus it is impossible for them to detach themselves from the world they live in. Therefore, the purpose of literature is not only to write for art's sake but also for life's sake so that the hidden truths of life would come in the lime light. Violence is a prominent issue in today's world as the world has witnessed two World Wars and numerous Civil Wars in one or the other country which became a reason of devastation and massive carnage all over the world. Hence, the literary writers are prone to portray the loss and sufferings which they have witnessed in their family, country or the world at large. Thus the most controversial novelist Taslima Nasreen's readings and scrutiny of her major novels viz. *Shodh* (1992) and *Lajja* (1994), clearly reveal that she believes in the theory "Art for life's sake" not art for art's sake. Nasreen does not write to entertain the idle reader, instead she writes with a purpose and this purpose is to oppose and fight against injustice, oppression and gender bias. She became a voice of the marginalized and the victims who endeavour to survive in the cult of violence and anonymous authority which is probably be named as social, religious or patriarchal. The theme which preoccupies the mind of the writer in the novel *Shodh* is gender bias which eventually results in revenge. Being herself a victim of the patriarchal structures she has seen things very closely that how women are given the role of a subordinate where they cannot, in anyway, assert their right to freedom, right to a healthy life and right to equality. Moreover this issue obsesses Nasreen's mind so much that in almost each of her novels she takes up this theme either directly or indirectly. Eventually, it is obvious to say that a woman is the subordinate and man is the other who has all the rights to oppress, subjugate and violate therefore, a woman becomes the victim of violence. It is important to understand the concept of violence which is enforced most frequently now and then by their male counterparts or the other. Violence can be of mental or physical nature, inflicted at subjected, interpersonal or collective levels in the social, political, religious or domestic domain. Usually women have been the greatest sufferers in domestic violence and that is a major problem in the society of every nation. Violence against women is an "act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or sufferings to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty of her occurring in public or private life. Some important causes of violence against women are sexual harassment, forced marriage, victims of rape, son's preference and suspicion." [1] Under such circumstances, women have always been suppressed and tortured. The last few decades have focused much attention on the specific group and its sufferings though the problems are age old. In fact, the Indian epics like the Mahabharata

and the Ramayana are also the examples of age old maltreatment, torture, suppression, beatings and humiliation of women. The pathetic condition of women in society is itself an indicator of the low value set on women's lives, and their suffering is very well in tune with the social system and life pattern. Being a close witness of all these sufferings and humiliations Taslima Nasreen could not stop herself from portraying all such themes in her novels. Taslima Nasreen (1962-) is a Bangladeshi doctor, turned author, who has been living in exile since 1994. She works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought, equality for women and human rights by publishing, lecturing and campaigning. Early in her literary career, she wrote mainly poetry with female oppression as the theme. She started publishing prose in the early 1990's, and had produced three collections of essays and four novels before the publication of her controversial novel *Lajja* in 1994. Her other novels are *Oporokho* (1992), *Shodh* (1992), *Nimontron* (1993), *Forashi Premik* (2002), and *Shorom* (2009). *Shodh* is a story of revenge, dealing with a young woman *Jhumur* who is an educated girl and marries the man whom she loves. She breaks the news of her pregnancy to her husband, *Haroon* hoping to make him happy but to her utter dismay he accuses her of cheating on him by saying that it was not easy to conceive in six weeks and he puts an allegation that she wanted to get married to him hurriedly because she was carrying someone else's seed in her womb as he says, "...it's not possible to become pregnant in six weeks." [2] He forces her to get the child aborted which casts a deep psychological impact on *Jhumur*, so that she becomes vindictive and decides to avenge herself. In spite of being an educated, courageous and open minded woman her voice in the house-hold matters is suppressed. *Radhika Coomraswamy* says in her book *Violence Against Women*, "the refusal to recognize women's economic independence and empowerment is one of the main reasons for violence against women, accentuating thereby, their vulnerability and abuse." [3] Similarly, *Jhumur* whose independence, dreams of happiness in marriage and child bearing are shattered when her husband *Haroon* forced her to abort her first offspring. This left a menacing and dark impact on her psyche which was impossible to heal. Usually in the patriarchal society it has been witnessed that "women are terrorized and even killed for being unable to produce a male child. Parental preference for son gives rise to female foeticide." [4] On the contrary *Jhumur's* case is entirely different but the irony occurs when she conceives early and is accused of carrying some other man's child in her womb. This allegation and mental wound kills her spirit to live and shatters all her preconceived notions. Thus, through the character of *Jhumur*, *Taslima Nasreen* exposes the ugly face of sophisticated elites of society and who under the cover of material well being rob their women's happiness and mental peace. *Nasreen* lays emphasis on a woman's perpetual struggle against all odds to create a niche for herself. *Jhumur* cannot cultivate a sense of belongingness to the home of her husband, *Haroon* because there is lack of love, harmony, mental peace and mutual understanding. Through the story of *Jhumur* and *Haroon*, *Nasreen* lays stress on the need for love, harmony and a little freedom in relations, while before marriage *Jhumur* and *Haroon* seem to be a perfect couple, the relationship loses its charm once the egocentric, suspicious and chauvinistic male supersedes the lover *Haroon*. *Nasreen* very closely examines the negative impact that such disharmony in married relationship creates upon the woman concerned. Eventually in order to avenge herself *Jhumur* gets intimate with *Afzal*, a paying guest in her house, and finally gives birth to a son, labelling him as *Haroon's* son. *Haroon's* loving of the baby ardently, thinking him to be his own son is highly ironical and serves the novelist's purpose of casting a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain. *Jhumur* feels happy and doesn't harbor any guilty feelings about bringing *Ananda*, her son into the world of *Haroon* and his family. She adheres to her action and says: I took

recourse to that to avenge the indignity I suffered. I'm not so insignificant, or of no account, that I'll swallow my utter humiliation in the hands of my husband and remain forever beholden to him.”[5] She goes on to say, “my heart swells with happiness when Haroon cuddles Ananda and calls him „Baba”. I have doused the fire of suspicion that had raged ferociously in Haroon;s heart and left mine charred, with waters from the fountain of joy that has bedewed me from within.[6] There are several witnesses of women’s oppression and torture, they have been the prime victims of violence in every communal strife, riots and wars. It is aptly said by Dr. Archana Sinha, “it has been quite distressing experience all over the world that in any conflict, a war, civil strife, communal riots or disturbances women and children became the prime victims of violence. Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victims of rape.”[7] Like Taslima Nasreen some other literary writers have explored this issue of violence against women in their works. During the cataclysmic event i.e. the partition of India, women were abducted, raped and killed brutally. Therefore, the partition and post partition writers like Khushwant Singh, Amrita Pritam , Bapsi Sidhwa, and Amitava Ghosh have portrayed the plight of women and their unimaginable sufferings in their novels. Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan is a vivid portrayal of women’s misery and savage killings whereas Amrita Pritam’s Pinjar is a revenge story set in the wake of partition. Pritam has shown how women become the prime victim of violence and prone to unimaginable torture and humiliation at the hands of the people belonging to the other community.

Taslima Nasreen combines both fancy and reality to weave the novel which is more or less precise painting of the world at large with pictures of human beings who live to suffer under the sun. It may also be noted that in this novel the author pursues the theme of male-female encounter, which assumes a rare depth and validity. It may be concisely summed up as man-woman relationship in the context of marital and extra marital relationships. In the marriage of Nilanjana and Kishnlal we find the disharmony between two individuals of different tastes and feelings as in the family of Sunilda and his wife. Chaitali, Benoir and his wife tells about a woman who is willing to give her husband to another woman for the sake of love. Monique Mathew, the French citizen turned Indian, after marrying an Indian, travels from France to India in the hope of living with her loving husband forever. But destiny decides differently. Though she is a lovely and vigorous person and has married a Bengali much younger than her she gets a divorce. In the relationship between Nilanjana’s mother Molina and Anirban, Destiny snatches Molina away from Anirban. Nilanjana’s mother has been neglected for long and there is no treatment for her disease though her father Anirban is a doctor. In Nilanjana’s opinion whatever treatment Anirban might have given to his wife was a pretence to she was getting treated by doctors.

Danielle, a French citizen, has a very bitter childhood to recall. Her father had raped her; she has suffered bitterly many times because of the sexual vulgarity of the people around and, ultimately, she turns into a homosexual. Nila’s relationship with Sushanta, the high caste Brahmin of Calcutta, exposes the infidelity of a love that fails before marriage and also the pre-marital illegitimate sexual life of an Indian girl on Indian soil. The girl marries Kishanlal with thousands of hopes and dreams: “Nila had her share of dreams about hard life sustained only on love. Perhaps every Bengali was born with that desire”

On her first trip to Paris, Nila meets the Dutch lady Gabriella; she is forty three and has been buying fabric from India and taking it back to sell in her country. She makes a good profit in her trade of selling plate, jewellery, incense etc. In the Western culture the woman takes her relation ship with a man perhaps in a very light way and there is nobody to talk about her. But, in Calcutta, if a woman flirts with a man her life is considered to be doomed and there will be no man to marry her and that is why a man like Kishanlal has had to travel from France to marry the girl Nila when Sushanta jilted her. On her second trip to Paris,

on board the flight, Nila meets Benoir Dupont, who is two years younger than her. Benoir can sense that Nila is like a reckless refugee. He is very cautious about his every move towards this newfound comfort. In Nila's Indian tradition, sex is admissible only in the context of love and affection. But, in Benoir's culture, one can have sex with someone without loving her, depending on the circumstances. Benoir has just happened in Nila's life. After studying all these relationships one can simply say that these are not relationships. According to the Indian tradition, a relationship is deemed to last for ever and to keep the concerned people happy, while encounters, where a man and a woman meet each other and find themselves indulging in certain actions (sexual) end only in unhappiness, regret and reproach, with no possibility of a compromise and happy solution. Because Nasreen's women characters are all dominated by emotions, they are not ready to tune themselves to the domestic sphere ruled by man. Nasreen wants to show that her women characters have liberated themselves from their subordinate status. Baker Jean Miller, in *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, says: Most women do have a much greater sense of the emotional components of all human activity than most men. This is, in part, a result of their training as subordinates; for any one in a subordinated position must learn to be attuned to the vicissitudes of mood, pleasure and displeasure of the dominant group.

Nila's decision to break away from the mismatched marriage and her refusal to accept the life offered by Benoir and her self discovery as an individual reveals that a female self can discover as an individual if it really wills so. Nasreen introduces Nila as an apostle of the liberation movement, advocating freedom from the tradition bound Indian woman. Nasreen generalizes her opinion and makes the reading public aware that the liberation of women should start from one's own mind. It is a universal fact that the tradition and custom of any nation demands marriage as the legitimate institution to organize a family, the core part of which is centralized in a man and his wife. Love and affection seem to be the password for emotional attachment and adjustment for a happy married life. A couple of two different temperaments, if united in marriage, find it a difficult relationship wherein the mutual adjustments and tolerance towards each other get dissolved in an atmosphere of bleak disheartedness. Though there is much talk about woman's liberation it is a truth that society expects a woman to make compromises to keep the family intact and happy. Meena Shirwadkar, in *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, says: "Marriage is an obligation for womanhood but it makes a demand on woman. She is expected to go through a long process of learning what she has to learn in order to adapt herself to her new environment"

The institution of marriage, with all its expectations, falls heavily on a woman. However, when it becomes a battlefield between two egoistic individuals who are not ready for compromise, it proves that the fittest can survive; the strategy of survival varies from woman to woman; when she succumbs to the internal pressure of her own self and the external pressure from the society she either commits suicide or loses her identity. The brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union. Nasreen's protagonist Nila proves a brave character and she wants to retain her individuality against the destructive forces that threaten her identity as an individual and as a woman since marriage subjugates her. Through the character of Nila, Nasreen portrays the inner struggle of an artist to express her feminine urge for self-expression. Even a causal reading of the novel makes one conscious that Nasreen is not only writing about her female protagonist Nila, who is a victim of the institution of marriage and identity crisis, but through Nila, also about other women who are subjugated and enslaved. Kishan never understands the identity of Nila. Women have faced identity crisis, but the crisis seems to occur mostly because of the control men exercise over women. A crisis in one's identity leads to a heightened sense of alienation. Nila leaves Kishan's home. Nasreen generalizes Nila's experiences as a subjugated woman and the subsequent

trauma she undergoes and her successful exit as an individual to raise consciousness among women in general. But in Consciousness Raising, the point of sharing information about personal life and personal experience was to connect these into something that could transcend the personal. A crucial function of CR was to connect the personal with the political. Once shared in a small group with other women, individual pain and suffering appeared in a different light.

Danielle and her lesbianism represent western freedom, which means she is emancipated, free from all restrictions, social or otherwise, but runs the risk of moral corruption and hence is negatively emancipated. The society at large is still ignorant of such vulgar and gruesome assaults on women though it is a land of “equality”, but she revolts against these atrocities by transforming herself into a lesbian to get a female identity. To sum up, in *French Lover* the story revolves not only round the Indian bride how becomes a liberated woman afterwards, but also on the less fortunate women who are considered objects of sex and gratification as many women in the developing countries. The indiscriminate sexual subjugation under different men and the frustration and the self pity at the inability of her own self to avert such pathetic situations and at the selfish nature of the men in her sexual encounters, the betrayal of her beloved husband, friend and lover enlighten Nila, the innocent and ignorant dreamy bride into a hardcore feminist. Nasreen’s strength as an analytical writer is revealed as she speaks sometimes through the characters within the frame and many times like an objective chorus. She wails from the periphery of the entire string of incidents. The author makes her characters live and suffer at various places of the world, kindling the imagination of the sensible readers to recognize that the plight of women is the same throughout the world. Her characters fly from East to West and West to East, with the hope of enjoying bliss through marriage, which is not to be. Almost all the women characters suffer sexual atrocity. It may be not necessarily from unknown men but the men of their own family and men who happened to be their friends. Pathetically enough, sex does not distinguish a daughter or a friend, Nasreen generalizes the plight of women by introducing various women characters in parallel situations where in the experience of one woman happens to be that of other women. Ultimately the culmination becomes the liberation or emancipation of women from men. This may be like Nilanjana leaving her husband to live with her friend or like Danielle leaving her father to live alone in the company of friends of her own. The heroine removes herself from her family and her husband because she feels she has an identity of her own that cannot be related to anybody else.

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