

Feminist Awakening in Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*

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ABSTRACT:

In the last few decades, women writers have moved away from traditional enduring self-sacrificing women toward conflicted characters searching for identity. These women authors incorporate their experience in an attempt to make new, empowering image for women. Rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal, they push these ideal towards the full expression of each woman's potential. Taslima Nasrin focuses on the hidden inner life of a woman, especially the conflicts festering within her mind. In *French Lover* (2002), she probes the depths of the female figure Nila's inner self; she attempts to uncover her mode of behaviour and lays bare the tales of her joys and sorrows, pain and pleasures and success. The institution of marriage, with all its expectations, fails heavily on a woman. Thus marriage is an obligation for womanhood and makes certain conditions on woman. However Through her novels Nasrin seems to give a message to women that life must be preserved at all cost, since one can fight oppression only when one is alive. This paper discusses how female identity is constructed in a patriarchal society which results in the feminist awakening of the female characters.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminist awakening, Identity crisis, Marriage, Female Sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Taslima Nasrin made her mark in the Dhaka literary scene of Bangladesh in the early 1990s. Her bold language of self-expression, stringent critique of patriarchy, religion and fundamentalism formed a powerful performance in favour of claiming a space for women. The Western media labeled her as Bangladeshi ‘female Salman Rushdie’ when an obscure fundamentalist group issued a fatwa (sentence to death) after the publication of her magnum opus *Lajja*. Nasrin’s vivid description of female body and sexuality, marital rape, incest, homosexuality and feminine identity challenge the norms of Bangladesh. Taslima Nasrin focuses on the hidden inner life of a woman, especially the conflicts festering within her mind. She traces the growing up of a woman, torn between the conventional and unconventional attitudes. In *French Lover* (2002), she probes the depths of the female figure Nila’s inner self; she attempts to uncover her mode of behaviour and lays bare the tales of her joys and sorrows, pain and pleasures, failures and success. *French Lover* describes the heroic struggles of Nilanjana Mondal, a young Bengali woman from Kolkata who moves to Paris after her marriage to Kishanlal, a Punjabi restaurant owner in Paris. After the breaking up of her marriage she meets Benoir Dupont, a French man. But later she realized that she was nothing but an exotic taste for him. She moves herself from her family, her husband and her lover because she feels she has an identity of her own that cannot be related to anybody else.

A married woman is expected to go through a long process of learning and what she has to learn is in order to adapt herself to her new environment. The institution of marriage, with all its expectations, fails heavily on a woman. Thus marriage is an obligation for womanhood and makes certain conditions on 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; which 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.

LITERARY ANALYSIS:

Nila proves to be 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, Nasrin portrays the inner struggle of an artist to express her feminine urge for self-expression. The description of the reality of Indian woman's life reminds one of the Victorian concepts of Virginia Woolf's phrase 'The Angel in the House'. Woolf in 'Professions for Women', *A Room of One's Own* describes the muted Victorian woman as 'Angel in the House' and defines her as:

You may know what I mean by the Angel in the house. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult acts of family life. She

sacrificed herself daily. She never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others (538).

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 represents the new Indian women's voice. Her definition of self-identity is a refreshing break from the mythological image of the Indian women in early fiction. The unfamiliar, unknown, untrodden path poses new challenges to Nila as she engages in redefining and restructuring her world through her own eyes, speak her own voice, and apprehend the world through her own experience. Her protest against the female subservience, self-sacrifice, self-denial, is not a new phenomenon. She should have the freedom to decide her own identity, freeing herself from the sex-determined role. In her letter to her husband Kishan, she justifies her action of walking out of her marriage. She says "I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master, you are the boss" (79). In *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, Meena Shirwadkar 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" (60).

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 Danielle is a step towards understanding her own sexual identity. Danielle and her lesbianism represents western freedom, which means she is emancipated, free from all restrictions, social or otherwise, but runs the risk

of moral corruption as it is seen by the society. 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 and asserts her identity. In fact as a consequence of being raped by her father in her childhood, she feels certain repulsion for the male body and becomes a self-indentified lesbian through her "denial of penetration and masculine domination" as stated by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Thus she rejects the 'oppressive heterosexual bondage'. In her *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick argues that in a society dominated by men, women are basically instruments with the help of which men establishes or confirm specific relations. According to her, the structure of a male dominated society is homosocial. Homosocial indicates the true nature of social relationships, not of sexual ones.

Muslim women writers from the subcontinent had a long tradition of oppression, subjugation due to a lot of restrictions, resulting from the assumptions about religion, religious culture, gender or religion that often stops us from knowing or seeing group of women producing every challenging stereotypes of literature. As women are associated with the myths and stories, they are always seen as the other of the male self thereby depicting themselves them in the form of immanence in comparison to transcendence. Moreover, since marriage is the destiny conventionally offered to women by the traditional society, women are forced to acquire forced marital status, role of a wife and hence subjected to the notion of forced motherhood, subsequently making a compromise with her desires and diverse desires. Thus within such a highly orthodoxical, patriarchal, religious, unequal society a Muslim female writer like

Taslima Nasrin worked around in resisting compulsory heterosexuality within the society that strictly base itself on heterosexuality.

Nila's actions seems strange and unusual to her upbringing in Indian society. Nila doesn't need a man for identity or status. It was in Paris that Simon de Beauvoir had fought for abortion in the fifties. Her battle resulted in the legalization of abortion. Nila feels happy that she is enjoying the fruits of the revolution in the same city. Nila's behavior sums up what Beauvoir has to say, "She does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society, and yet she does not repudiate it completely. Thus she is divided against herself" (330). Whatever kink may be formed by the hereditary or environmental factor in the personality of a woman, her biological role is the crux of her problem. Her married life may prove a great help or hindrance; it may lead to the realization of her identity, what Nila looks for in life. In K.K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary History*, the sense of:

Being a woman is not pre-constructed. It is merely the product of encoding process of acculturation which comes over a female child with her exposure to cultural lore and myth of the society in which she is borne. (8)

Women are usually defined not in themselves, but as female relations of a man. Only after she breaks out of these stereotypical roles of mother, wife, and daughter, she will find her true self and recreate a definite positive identity for her and discover her individual role in the society. At a certain point when the superiority of all men becomes annoying for Nila, she

prefers not to struggle with men and rather chooses to become a lesbian as homosexuality can be for woman a mode of flight from her situation or a way of accepting it. After embracing homosexuality, Nila no longer given into men's desire and hence from a sense of "Virile inferiority"rejects her lover Benoir from her life" through arrogance and exhibitionism" as a lesbian(Beauvoir 1997). Nila didn't fail; it was a learning experience for her. By making wrong decisions she reached the right one. After her break up with Benoir she called Danielle - as she knows Danielle was the only person who clearly understands her body and mind. Because this is the only relation she had,which rather either something more than expressing desired genital sexual experience with another woman, and instead expands to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, and the behaviour associated with marriage resistance.

CONCLUSION

The adventures made by the new woman, their physical and mental capacity and their social freedom have become the fresh stuff of woman writers. Taslima Nasrin perceives the character of Nila not as a stereotype but as a real woman trying to find real solutions to real problems. Though she is emotional and sentimental, she is still capable of taking rational choices. We are surprised by her resilience; strength and ability to survive in a hostile, male-centered world. The bitterness and resentment gradually recede and give place to self-affirmation. Being a victim of the established socio-economic pressure, she determines to vanquish the victors with her self-confidence, self-reliance and self-dependence. In her

individual capacity, she is placed in the traditional socio-cultural milieu of a conventional society wherein she is projected and recognized, but her vital self remains unrealized, caged and humiliated beyond repair. Her plight becomes the plight of hundreds of women similarly circumstanced. In this process Nila had to struggle a lot to achieve. The revolt is not born of romantic ideas but because of an inbuilt protest, “I fell into the trap of love and came out of it myself ... Time is never wasted. This time was spent in acquiring wisdom and I needed it.” (291)

Nila through her approach of ousting men from her life and taking a radical step to abort the unborn child aim to assert power in some way in the process of challenging some of the methods by which male power is manifested and maintained which ultimately implies to Nasrin's message of overthrow of the patriarchy. Nila is not only conscious of her desires, but also eagerly assert her independence by handling all types of situations. She goes to the extreme level to satiate her desires; she does not hesitate to take any revolutionary steps in her journey towards freedom and female identity as she realizes that a meaningful change can happen only within the inner self. As Nasrin's heroines move in and out of marriage through multiple sexual involvements they observe their own attitudes and try to understand their own motives. Through her novels Nasrin seems to give a message to women that life must be preserved at all cost, since one can fight oppression only when one is alive. The inevitable theme of feminism is the theme of survival, not just physical survival but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others.

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