

## Portrayal of Patriarchal Suffering of Women in Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin

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**Abstract:** literature has been a meticulous medium to project the human psyche, human feelings, desires and ambitions, noticed and unnoticed societal activities in concrete form. A writer presents his or her oeuvre what he or she sees and observes happening around the social atmosphere with a purpose and a prospect. Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladeshi writer being a mature writer puts her experiences, her observation and her views regarding societal norms and practices which are mostly patriarchal. Violence against women is an age old practice and Bangladeshi women are an integral part of it. Since the position of Bangladeshi society is vulnerable, women have endured a tough existence as they came to grips with a double subjugation in the form of patriarchal authority and the oppression emanating from the persistent conditions of the conflict. This present paper studies the vital subject of Bangladeshi women's experience as narrated in the selected novels of Taslima Nasrin. The paper in the light of her selected novels attempts to argue, how the patriarchal subjugation and marginalization and persistent conditions of conflict have multiplied the oppression on women in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Oppression, Maltreatment, Subordinate, Women, Humiliation.

In this paper we study handling of various themes regarding women's life and status in male-dominated society. Through various themes novelist has tried to project various images of women. The novelist is best known for her powerful feminist voices in the contemporary era. She is celebrated internationally as a symbol of intellectual liberty and champion of free speech, and the reputed feminist voice in this present day world to advance women's causes or to speak out loudly against patriarchy, religion, political conflicts, traditions etc to show how oppression and suffering on women have been multiplied in Bangladesh. The focus out of writing her selected novels is to raise her voice vociferously against the patriarchal subjugation and marginalization, injustice done to women and the need to love for saving humanity to bring a change in the world. This study is an attempt to examine the portrayal of women by the contemporary novelist.

### **Patriarchy and Female Atrocity**

Patriarchy is despotism and morally offensive condition wherein husband assumes the role of a ruler, and oppressor while wife, on the other hand, is reduced to a slave, an inferior and submissive creature. Iqbal Mullick, a supporter of patriarchy, writes in *Women in Islam* (2008): "The husband assumes the role of ruler, controller, oppressor and master while the wife, on the other hand, is reduced to a slave, a captive, a low, inferior and submissive creature." (Iqbal Mullick 261-264)

Violence against women according to Taslima Naseen's selected works is an age old practice which has now become a major issue of concern in the contemporary world. It is a continuous process either. Violence against women continues both during the times of peace and war. In any kind of war whether it is civil strife, communal clashes or World Wars, it has been witnessed that women have been the major victims of torture, violence and humiliation. During peace, women still find themselves not free but victim of patriarchal structures. The writer has seen things very closely that how women are given the role of a subordinate where they cannot assert their right to freedom, right to a healthy life and right to equality. Women in both Muslim and Hindu families are demeaned, abused and tortured physically and mentally. Women are mere objects of sexual desire. Women don't have any room and security. They don't either have a power to raise their voice.

Men, in the works of the writer are characterized as naturally active, strong, dominating and rational whereas women are seen as passive, weak, subordinate and foolish. Women in this structure are marginalized as mere objects in religious, social, political and economical discourses. Simon de Beauvoir drew a distinction between gender and sex, postulating the body to be a historical construct: "In actuality, the relation of the sexes is not quite like that of the two electrical poles, for men represents both the positive and the neutral, as it is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general: whereas women represents only the negative defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity." (Quoted in Currie and Raoul 2)

The writer brings to the fore the miserable plight of Bangladeshi women who have lived under the debilitating shadows of poverty and patriarchal oppression. The writer is not writing for the purpose to entertain readers but to turn them against the religious and patriarchal oppression.

### **1. Lajja**

All the male characters in her selected novels have a patriarchal mindset. Here the women protagonists that are Kironmoyee, Maya, and Shammima Begam, all of them were compelled to behave as per the patriarchal norms. Kironmoyee, the wife of Sukumar Dutta, suffers as much as any other women during the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. In addition, she has to endure the ignominy of deleting her Hindu identity as the family goes on exile to escape from Pakistani persecutors. Sudhamoy's daughter, Maya, however pays the highest price of being a minority woman. Maya's double abduction, as a child and as a young woman of twenty one is clear testimony to this fact. Taslima Nasrin's device of Maya's ambiguous fate makes her vulnerability all the more fragile. She suffers more than the Muslim prostitute her brother rapes.

Kironmoyee suffers mainly from communal violence and due to the superior attitude of males especially that of her husband, is expected to make every sacrifice to keep the pot boiling. She is polite, selfless, sacrificing wife-mother who has never learnt to assert herself and is submissive to the demands of her husband and son, for her primary concern is only the well being of her family. She is willing to sacrifice anything to keep her family together. She keenly observes everything at home like a dumb person and has no voice to raise an argument. She is willing to accept her son's girlfriend Parveen as her daughter-in-law though she is a Muslim. She with all pleasure cooks meat in her house when she is asked to do it by

her husband though it is prohibited in her religion. She is often busy with the household chores- cooking, cleaning, and seeing to her husband's ablutions. During the time of communal violence, Kironmoyee is forced to take up Muslim pseudo names. She had stopped using *sindur* in the parting of her hair and *loha* and *sankha* on her wrists as was expected of every married Hindu women. But she found it quite difficult to give up her bridal bangles and vermillion.

Kironmoyee's thirty five years of wedlock are of no value at all. Her opinions are not in the least respected. Finally, Sudhamoy and Suranjan decided to leave Bangladesh and so Kironmoyee had no alternative but to abide by their decision. Thus, proved what John Stuart Mill says that every man is a tyrant in his own household. Thus, proved either what Sara Jeannette Duncan, the Canadian journalist and writer had said: "That most of the ills that women suffer from are due to the superior attitudes of males." (Vimal 71-79)

## 2. Shodh

Feministic approach of Taslima Nasrin, to a large extent, is expressed in her novel *Shodh* in which she tells us the story of a woman named Jhumur, an educated wife who had done M.Sc. in physics. She registers her protest against the domestic violence inflicted upon her by her husband, Haroon. Jhumur without any solid ground is accused of infidelity by her husband, who thinks it impossible for a woman to become pregnant in six weeks of the wedding and cynically compels her to abort the child. This kind of physical and emotional torture casts a deep psychological impact on Jhumur and develops the seeds of hatred in her heart. In spite of Jhumur's being an educated, courageous and open-minded woman her voice in the household matters is suppressed. Thus, proved what Dr Abdul Hakim Sarkar has said of Bangladeshi women in these words:

Women in Bangladesh are traditionally placed in a lower status, deprived of much of opportunities in education, employment and access to essential services. They are denied of human rights, most often. A woman normally lives behind shadow of her father during her childhood and of her husband after marriage. Household remains male dominated all through; women have no or little role in decision making. But they are largely engaged in non-earning domestic work, which has traditionally no recognition, no power, no honour. Moreover, observance of *purdah* (seclusion) stands as bottlenecks to women's freedom of movement. (Abdul Hakim 41)

The pattern of life in male dominated families is such that if any family member gets indisposed all of sudden, the whole family keep themselves at his or her beck and call, thinking of his speedy recovery, keep themselves busy all the time looking, caring, nursing etc but when the wife of the family gets indisposed, everybody gets irritated at her being in the sick-list. The other members of the household are allowed to be indisposed; the wife has to remain forever healthy so as to be able to shoulder all the responsibilities in the house especially in daily household chores. This is a fit case for Jhumur at her In-laws.

Jhumur in the novel has to show due respect to the elders by touching their feet, covering on her head, house-imprisonment sort of living arrangement, escorting while moving out and various other restrictions imposed on her. These are an expression of basic trust. Jhumur was not used to of these things in her parent's house. She in her parent's house was

very rarely required to touch anyone's feet by way of reverence. After her marriage, there was left no option for her than to carry out these dictations.

Sebati Jhumur's friend is a doctor. All her patients that Taslima here refers are victims of a female's biological fate. Taslima brand of feminism does not leave any space for happiness. Even good things start looking bad. For a pregnant woman, our sub-continent has various ceremonies. To mark different stages of her pregnancy so many celebrations are held. Taslima here is angry and full of criticism that all the caring is actually not for the pregnant woman but for the child inside her. Jhumur in the novel says, "But I know for certain that the amulet and the darud are not to wish me well; they are for the well-being of Haroon's child." (Taslima *Shodh* 203)

It looks as if the women in the novel have even no right over her body, their womb and over their children. No matter how much a woman suffers physical and mental agony it is the man who decides whether the child has to see the world or not and she is not required to be the decision maker about reproductive system. The baby was not only of Haroon but also hers yet she was his wife and therefore contracted to do what the husband commanded to, no matter the accusation held no ground of truth consequently the mental trauma that she passes through due to forced abortion is revealed pathetically. Haroon's relationship with his wife more or less directs towards the relationship between master and slave where the former inclines to rule over the latter.

Men, as described in her selected works, can have as many intimate relations with other women other than their wives as they like. They can move freely and stay outside without questioning but women are not allowed to move freely outside with their friends. They are bound within patriarchal structures. Jhumur is suspected because she used to move freely with her friends Subhash and Arju. Shubhash was just like a brother to her and Jhumur's mother always considered him more than a blood relation. However, Haroon was in love with a girl before Jhumur became his wife. He even enjoyed sex with her and then rejected her saying that she was unworthy of him.

### C) French Lover

The novel *French Lover* also tells us the story of the patriarchal control over Molina by her husband Anirban, over Chaitali by her husband Sunilda, and over protagonist Nilanjana by her husband Kishanlal, by her father Anirban, and the domination of her friends and lover especially Benoir. *French Lover* is her medium to convey her views on various sociological, political issues that encompass not only the fate of any nation but also that of women everywhere. Taslima through her novel *French Lover* brings out the sufferings of women characters under the name of religious, traditions, codes, and cultural practice of the society. She discusses elaborately the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society. While talking about her mother Molina, Taslima tells us about her father's patriarchal control over her in the family: "It was always Anirban who decided where the sofa or the beds would be and even what was to be cooked that day in the kitchen. Molina was there only to execute his wishes. Anirban made it amply clear that the house was not Molina's and he was the lord and master. That is how it was until Nila left the country and Molina this world." (Taslima *French Lover* 215)

Thus, Taslima uses daily events and happenings as evidence for the conclusion that subordination and economic exploitation of women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationship.

The institution of marriage, quite 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 survival of the fittest, but 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 but the brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union. Taslima's protagonist in the novel *French Lover* 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. Even Mithu in *French Lover*, suffers for not being married, sacrificing herself at the altar of family's honour, commits suicide by hanging herself.

Female characters of Taslima Nasrin fly from East to West and West and East, with the hope of enjoying bliss through marriage, which is not to be. Almost all the women characters suffer sexual atrocity. It may not be 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, Nasrin 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 her friends. 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.

The life of Nila after her marriage undergoes a massive change. Her free will gets curbed, her independence broken and her very life squeezed out. This all generally happens to a woman after her marriage. Nila's overall transformation has been brought about by the compulsions of her married life, more particularly by the domineering behaviour of her husband. In the novel *French Lover*, the kind of life expected of Nila, as she herself says is: "I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master, you are the boss, without you my life is pointless and I am a mere servant who will clean your house, cook, serve and provide sexual gratification at night. (Taslima *French Lover* 79)

The novel *French Lover* is about an important theme of male-female relationship. Emphasising the importance of such a relationship Lawrence points out: "The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary." (D.H. Lawrence 130)

The relationship between man and woman assumes a rare depth and validity. In other words, it may be summed up as man-woman relationship in the context of marital and extra-marital relationships. We find the disharmony between Nilanjana and Kishanlal the two individuals of different tastes and feelings as in the family of Sunilda and his wife Chaitali. Benoir and his wife tell us 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 husband forever. But destiny decides differently, she gets divorce. Destiny snatches Molina away from Anirban in their relationship. Molina has been neglected for long and there is no treatment for her disease which results she dies. Danielle, a French citizen, has a very bitter childhood to recall. Her father had raped her. She has suffered many times because of the sexual vulgarity of the people around her which results she turns Lesbian. Nila's relation with Sushanta, exposes the infidelity of a love that fails before marriage.

Women are subjected to extreme brutalities. No place is safe, not the home, the campus, the workplace or the street. No age is safe, little girls, young women and even old women can be the victims of rape. The enormity of the offence can be gauged from the Amnesty International report which was released on the eve of 8<sup>th</sup> March 1991 and submitted to the United Nations Commissions on women's Status which declares that: "Rape continues to be a phenomenon prevailing in every region of the world and under every system of government. The victims have included babies, teenagers, pregnant women and even older women above sixty." (Sethe 144)

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