

A Feminist Study on Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*

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ABSTRACT

Taslima Nasrin brings in a different aspect of her writing in *French Lover*. Known for her radical writings, Nasrin hold up to her nature by bringing in the east and west in contrast where she discusses the issues even to the extent of lesbianism which is not appreciated by general people to be openly discussed. The difference in culture of the east and the west is blended in the text to shape the protagonist. Nila is exposed to the world of the developed Paris where the people can do anything they like. However, the freedom that the people exercise can also be of distain for some and destructive element. The protagonist is uprooted from Calcutta to Paris but her identity as a dependent woman remains the same.

Keywords: marginalization, homosexuality, marriage, emancipation, feminism

Feminism as we know of today traces back to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft who talked about education to women. She opines that women should also be given education so that they can take decision like men with reason. The writings of Wollstonecraft still inspire women writers across the globe and her argument is proved right by many upcoming and established women writers. Taslima Nasrin also adhered to her writings by writing about women issue not based on emotions but reason. She is not bias but brings forth prevalent situation in her novel. Feminism today is active not only in urban areas but it has spread to rural areas also. Activists work to bring attention to rural women who comprises majority of women population specially in third world countries which is highly uplifted by United Nations who gives the theme for International Women’s Day 2018 as “Time is Now: Rural and Urban activists transforming women’s life.” This shows that women and common no matter where they live. They suffer in the hands of patriarchy though some of the enlightened families give opportunity to women like that of men.

Some decades back women were ashamed to speak about the ill-treatment or abuses but today we see women being vocal about being a victim. Society instead of emphasizing towards the victim blamed her and supported the oppressor. However, with education and reason women speak boldly asking for justice. Social media is also playing an important role in demanding justice and bringing to the world the clarity. For instance, the Me Too Movement (**#me too movement**) which became viral in the late 2017 is becoming more effective to break the silence of many women who were sexual harassed or raped in work place. It was started long back in 2006 but has gained popularity recently. The movement is sprouting its shoots all over and has spread its wings to many other countries including India and Bangladesh. Before the platform of social media, literature took the arena to bring in

the injustice and hence forth, *French Lover* is one such to show the struggle of being a woman.

Taslima Nasrin is an award-winning writer and human rights activist. She is widely known for her powerful writings on the oppression of women and her criticism on religious fundamentalism. Her writings are considered anti-Muslim and she was exiled from Bangladesh and issued multiple fatwas calling for her death. After being forced to leave Bangladesh she settled in India and USA. In many of her novels, Nasrin has discussed the issue of patriarchy and criticized religious fundamentalists. Nasrin's 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. When Nila speaks on behalf of Nasrin, she justifies her liberated escapades as the result of the lack of real love or affection in her husband's attitude towards her. The protagonist also reflects Nasrin's unsuccessful love life. When we speak of feminism in Bangladesh one cannot ignore the name of Taslima Nasrin as she is popularly known for her outspoken writings about the issues of women.

Nasrin through the journey of Nila shows to the readers the confluence between the east and the west. It becomes so hard for Nila to cope with the western culture since the world she knew in Calcutta is totally different from the world she is now. She faces a cultural shock. She leaves for Paris with full of dreams about her prince charming (Kishanlal) with full of expectations which later was failed. After landing on Paris she was held and kept in other room. She became a victim of racism and her friends and husband view it to be because she came from poor country (India). She was not introduced to harsh reality but kept confined to fantasy and imagination without allowing her reasoning thinking to develop that is why she married without second thought. The sole motive rested upon her was to get married as no one in Calcutta will marry her after knowing that she had intimate relationship with her boyfriend who later abandoned her because of her caste.

Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* is of the opinion that patriarchy creates foreground which is lead by games and this games in the novel can be in the form of materialistic standards

before the protagonist. On reaching her husband's house, she is informed that the place is all set. There were machines to dust, wash, dry and even to beat the eggs, whip it, boil it and then cut into pieces. This reflects her situation where she is transported from her father's house to husband's care. In her husband's house she is more of a maid and a decorative piece than a wife. Her husband shows her off to his friends. Simone de Beauvoir in her "Introduction" to *The Second Sex* says men have always and everywhere paraded their satisfaction of feeling that they are kings of creation. She continuously cite an example of Jews Morning Prayer, "Blessed be the Lord our God, and the Lord of all worlds that has not made me a woman," meanwhile, the wives resignedly murmur: "Blessed be the Lord for creating me according to his will" (Millet, 2000, p 31). This shows the hypocrisy of patriarchy where they constantly remind the female figure as inferior to them. A role of a dutiful wife as expected of Nila was to cook, clean and make her husband happy. A woman's role is like fluid which gets mixed with whatever situation she is placed. Here Nila becomes a living robot for her husband. When she was standing by the window in jeans, Kishan scolded her that a bride cannot dress like this. People will come to see her and that she should wear Sari and jewellery. This shows of how the marriage which was an escape from her house in Calcutta turned to be another house of suffocation. From the day she entered the house she is seen to be controlled by her husband. She is left on the foreground of the patriarchy where she is denied to free herself into what Daly would say 'realm of ecstasy'.

Nila's lifestyle was compelled to change after marriage. When Kishanlal reminds her of the dishes lying dirty of the previous night, she remembers Calcutta where she never had to give second glance. They were maids who would take and wipe it immediately after they finish. Her husband reminded her that the luxurious of Calcutta will not be available in Paris and that they have to even clean the toilet by themselves. Nila was confined to the walls of the house. She was not allowed to go anywhere. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* writes that a woman who exercises and strengthens her mind becomes a companion to her husband rather than a humble dependent. Here, Nila is projected as more of a dependent than free woman.

When the word 'marginalization' is applied in any discussion it can mean to direct several meaning. However in the case of Nila, she is at the edge where she is not allowed to mentally exercise herself. She has to ask permission from her husband even to go out of the house. She is seen as a child who is dependent and not a companion in their marriage. It is a stereotype attachment that a woman's goal is achieved when a husband is acquired but Taslima Nasrin shows that marriage is not the ultimate goal. Nila after marriage goes through transformation when she comes to a realization searching for the 'real her'. Suffocated in her husband's world, Nila tries to break the foreground and spins to what Daly would say 'background' to discover herself. On the process of her 'A-Mazing' journey she is faced with different circumstances. She comes across a young boy wearing earrings; a girl with brown lips, and tongue pierced, young boys and girls with their hair dyed and raised high and stiff as a sort of protest as many of the people did not like society's rule. Nila's sort of protest against her marriage was to leave her husband's house and shifted to her friend Danielle's house. Mary Daly says that patriarchy takes control over us when we give them access. Here, Nila cuts off the access so that she can 'exorcise' patriarchy of her life.

The journey towards her emancipation did not turn out easy even after cutting off the access of patriarchy. She is introduced to the world of homosexuality which she cannot even think of. India is still not open to free talk of Homosexual and Nila is astonished to see such people openly. Above all she was shocked to know that Danielle is also homosexual. She stayed with Danielle to escape the archetypal housewife who would cook, clean and who talks only to few people but she finds that she cannot fit in to a culture which is new to her. She had not only ever heard of sex between two women, she could not even stretch her imagination as far. In her journey to find herself she becomes the partner of Danielle. She leaves her husband but was again caught up in homosexual relationship. As we read through the text we can perhaps comment that homosexuality is not natural in Nila but was a result of social influence or insecurity towards men folk after her marriage failed.

The ill-treatment of women does not happen only in the third world countries but Nasrin has shown the readers that it happens even to the developed people. Through the life of Danielle, she writes shows the bitter experience of young Danielle where she was raped by her own father when her mother was out and she was playing. This can be one factor why Danielle chose to be homosexual. We can see one common nature in Nila and Danielle that they distain men in their lives because of their oppressive nature. It can perhaps be the one reason why they chose to build physical relationship with same sex. Nasrin through Danielle brings in the view that men use love as a web to trap women and continues “Women think they can’t live without men. That’s not true. Look at me. I don’t need a man” (Nasrin, 2002, p 118). Nasrin in her life also faces several trust issues towards men. In her autobiographical book *Split: A Life* she exposes her failed affairs and the names of men who used her or sexually abused her. Some of the incidents mentioned in the book are seen in the story of Danielle who was raped by her own father. Nasrin was also raped by her own uncle when she was young. Failed marriage of Nila can also be seen as the failed marriage of the author itself.

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* states “Needless to say there was and is no penalty imposed upon the male correspondent. Save in recent times or exceptional cases, adultery was not generally recognized in males except as an offense one male commit against another’s property interest (Millet, 2000, p 43). This can be clearly applied to Nila’s circumstances where her lover Sushanta had sexual relationship with but married someone whom his parents chose for him. Men get away with such situation as they maintain the upper hand but women are the ones who suffer the pain. Since she was not virgin she was looked down with contempt and concluded that no men in Calcutta will marry her. The view of Millet and the situations in the novels ally as we see the women being punished while the men not even questioned. No penalty was imposed on Sushanta while the female victim was tagged as immoral.

Nila’s mother is another character who bears the wrong doings of her husband silently. She did not retaliate to her position but shifted her attention to her children. Elaine Showalter in her essay, “Towards a

Feminist Poetics” views that a woman can best portray the suffering of another woman as she had or has similar experiences. Hence, Nasrin in this novel brings her best to bring the hardships of different sections of women. The women characters in the novel are not just mere individuals but they are the archetypes of different Indian women. Molina (Nila's mother) can be compared to Ganthari in Mahabharata who stayed devoted to his husband even to the extent of living her life blindfolded. Devotion towards husband is good but the devotion that Molina harnessed towards Anirban can be seen as drowning her life into sorrow. She had opportunity to start her journey towards the realm of ecstasy but she chose to remain dutiful. Society brainwashes women that they are inferior to men and that they cannot survive without a male member in their life.

Patriarchy takes control of a woman in the form of father when she is at her father's place, husband after marriage and son after the husband dies. The cycle continues and thus she is not free to think beyond male figure in her life. Molina's devotion was so much so that she did not question to her husband having extra marital affair. Instead society applauded her husband of not divorcing his dark skinned wife. Indians have fascination towards fair complexion and this is one tool used by patriarchy to build low esteem of women. She has money acquired after selling her share from her father's inheritance but she did not use that money to keep her happy. She is one character who is hallucinated by the foreground spread by patriarchy. Nila says that her mother wasted all her life trying to please other people. In her duty to be a good daughter, good wife and good mother she forgot everything about herself. She lost her identity of being Molina. Patriarchy controls a woman's life even to the extent that she cannot laugh heartily because "...some stupid man somewhere has said that if you laugh too much you'll pay for it with tears" (Nasrin, 2002, p 54). Nila advises her mother to laugh without fear as life is not forever. However, Molina's life ended before she could live a life for herself: a life free from male maze.

Another character portrayed by Nasrin is Mithu, one of Nila's relative. Many men rejected her because of dark skinned and it is seen as her crime. Patriarchy instills in the minds that a woman should not

stay unmarried at her father's place. Mithu desperately wanted to get married even to the extent that she does not have problem if treated like a servant. Wollstonecraft's argument about marriage being a bond of compatibility and companionship is questioned through the character of Mithu. For her marriage is getting out of her father's place to escape being disgraced by the society. Society controls the lives of people specially women when it is about marriage: the certain criteria that a bride should possess neglecting 'love' which is essential between two individuals. Unable to cope with situation we see her committing suicide. The author writes that Mithu's family mourned but deep inside there was tinge of relief as they can now marry their son for a huge dowry. When it comes to dowry, the parents want male child so that they can acquire. The society and place in which the novel is based is such that they are relieved at the death of a dark unmarried daughter and excited to welcome someone else's daughter to their house.

Taslima Nasrin in her novel implies impressive narrative technique of novel-writing giving a vivid description of women's wretched condition in Indian society. She explores women's agony and at the same time suggests ways to fight back against these agonies. Through the character of Molina and Mithu we see how many Indian women fail to fight back against the oppressor and end their end without living for themselves. However, Nila represents a modern woman who wants to be psychologically and economically independent. She has seen her mother and Mithu's life ending without an individual identity. She is one character who does not want to be confined by the rules of the society. Being a woman in the world of dominated man was not easy but we see her overcoming and becoming one of an individual. The novel presents the plight of Indian women no matter where they live. Nasrin through the novel presents the myriad ways of how different women live their lives. The conclusion lies in the hands of the readers as each individual has different perspectives.

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