



Gender, Feminism and Modern Literature in the Novels of Taslima Nasreen

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(Received 09 November, 2017, Accepted 02 December, 2017)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

ABSTRACT: Women have been supposed as caring mothers, faithful wives, loving sisters, defensive angels governed by male domination society. India is a society in which the 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 objective of this paper is to explore Gender, feminism and modern literature in the novels of Taslima Nasreen and its critical apprehension. This paper begins with the introduction to the different theories of gender, feminism and the opinions of the people in these fields. It gradually proceeds to the understanding of how Taslima's Lajja were perceived by the people with reasons for such change in her perception about men.

Key words: Gender, feminism, Novels, perception, Lajja

I. INTRODUCTION

The difference of gender revolves around the physical embodiments, performances, and applications or uses of gender. People kept nature and human, man and woman separate and thus easily classify the perceptions and suggestions within these boundaries, even though gender is central to the organization of different nations as separate social and cultural systems. This was never the part of biology only it was reflected in religion and spirituality as well always [1-2].

Taslima Nasrin exemplifies the woman who goes beyond the boundaries and is maltreated. To exemplify, "In 1993, a fundamentalist organization called Soldiers of Islam issued fatwa against her. Rather than supporting her, the government sided with the fundamentalists and confiscated her passport, asked her to cease writing and banned her book Lajja (Shame) in which she depicted atrocities committed by Muslim fundamentalists against Hindus [3-5]. Lajja deals with several feminist issues. In fact, Nasrin demonstrates the ways how patriarchal mindset challenges individuality and self-respect of women. In one of her interviews, she states that "everything she has written is for the oppressed women of Bangladesh." She further stated that "she has wrung her heart out into her words" [6]. One of the most important feminist issues that have been dealt with in the novel of Taslima Nasrin is the treatment of women at the hands of various patriarchal institutions like family, society and state, headed by a patriarch who either looks down upon women or marginalizes them. Gender ideologies inform the very core of most conflicts between cultures, further complicated by race. Gender relations are also key to understanding and developing a national identity. This paper highlights and critical analyses the various ways that different people have responded to cultural contact with Taslima Nasrin novels through the physical, rhetorical, political, and social implications of gender performances.

In her exploration of gender violence, Taslima Nasrin believes that gender violence include racism and inequality, conquest, occupation, colonialism, warfare and civil conflict, economic disruptions and poverty" is due to the male dominance in few societies. Such violence is usually buried within the supremacy of ordinariness, hidden in the routine details of everyday life" often "invisible and normalized" by dominant society. Hence, the objective of this paper is to explore Gender, feminism and modern literature in the novels of Taslima Nasreen and its critical apprehension [3].

II. GENDER AND FEMINISM IN LAJJA

It is sarcastic that the Republic of Bangladesh which accords nationality to its people, ultimately deprives the same countrymen of the basic fundamental rights due to traditional religious beliefs. The demolition of Babri Masjid in India witnessed so many deaths and tortures to the Hindu families in Bangladesh, and particularly the women were inhumanly brutalized, tormented and raped. Even the cruel treatment of Hindu men folks eventually affected the lives of Hindu women more negatively as they were left to the face of malicious Muslim fanatics [5].

A feminist writer denounces conduct of women as objects of lust, physical and psychological violence. Nasrin does the same with tremendous intensity as she depicts in *Lajja* how women are sexually harassed, abducted and subjected to varied kinds of torture that may even result in their deaths. Taslima demonstrates the kidnap of Hindu girls is prevalent in Bangladesh and how the ruffian do not have any kind of fear in *Lajja*. The women are kidnapped according to their whims and fancies and were subjected to various types of cruel treatments. This has compelled most of the Hindus to send their daughters to India for their education and security [5].

Thus, the females as portrayed in *Lajja* are nothing more than objects to be used by the male predators to satiate their lust. *Lajja*, depicts certain men ravishing young Hindu girls for their contentment. The abduction of Maya as a child of six illustrates the same. This incident terribly traumatizes the girl and has such a unenthusiastic effect on the consciousness of the girl child that she is not able to behave normally for two months. She would sleep fitfully and would wake up abruptly in the middle of the night. The family is never secure thereafter as they keep receiving threatening through unidentified extortion letters that aimed at kidnapping Maya again.

In *Lajja* too, this aspect comes to light as there are women framed as good or bad by the patriarchal setup. One who happily accepts patriarchal norms and adapts in accordance with its demands is labeled as 'good' as in case of Kironmoyee. At every step in the novel, she is portrayed as an ideal wife who serves the family and makes all possible sacrifices to keep the family going. As discussed above, another female character namely Shamima Begum is termed as a 'slut' and looked down upon as she sleeps with several men thereby violating/ transgressing the patriarchal code. She is, in fact, viewed as a bad or fallen girl. Islam mandates purity and virginity as virtues. Likewise in certain folk cultures too obsession with purity/ virginity is romanticized [2, 5].

"In folk culture, tales, stories, and fables, mostly in the oral tradition, always romanticize the physical purity of the female body. Numerous tales of heroic women killing themselves rather than succumbing to sexual assault are very much a part of Bangladeshi folk culture. Thus, when a girl attains puberty, her parents immediately begin to suffer from a social anxiety about how to save their daughter's purity so that she can be regarded as a marriageable 'good girl.' This can be ensured by marrying daughters off as soon as possible" [2,7].

The vindictive attitude of men, where they tend to ravish women on the basis of the latter's religious background, and then reducing them by terming them as 'good' or 'bad' according to their suitability gets reflected in the novel. The society depicted in *Lajja*, is deeply patriarchal. Here, discrimination on the basis of sex or one's gender identity is a norm. To discriminate, it is necessary to first 'otherise' women (as Simon De Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*). There are innumerable examples of gender discrimination in the novel. For, Nasrin's own life narrative stands as an evidence to prove how woman is discriminated against and how attempts are made to gag her voice by those who cannot see women articulating their thoughts and resisting injustice done to them by those who are stuck with patriarchal mindset. Nasrin powerfully makes her point in one of her interviews challenging fundamentalists with closed mindset [8].

"They issue fat was to try to stop people speaking against them? They can kill anyone in the name of God. They want to kill me, they demand my death only for the reason that I am alone, I am afraid, so I must be afraid of them and stop my writing. If I stop my writing, women will lose conscience because the fundamentalists like to oppress women to show their power. So they are not used to seeing that women can protest and are surprised if they do. They want to keep them down. So I think for women, protesting is more dangerous." [6].

Thus, it is not easy to protest in a country like Bangladesh simply because it may provoke the ire of the mullahs representing a closed, patriarchal mindset. At one point in time, even Taslima Nasrin was proud of her beautiful country Bangladesh and felt privileged on account of its rich heritage and culture. However, she eventually became victim of the vindictiveness of the Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh who deprived her of nationality by issuing fatwa against her and banished her from her own country simply because she exposed the "Islamic republic of Bangladesh" which Bangladesh actually has become on account of religion-centricity, rather than its pseudo-official counterpart "People's Republic of Bangladesh" (*Lajja* 207) recorded in the national annals as a camouflage. Towards the end of the novel, however, Maya is killed and the Hindu Dutta family eventually decides to move to India—a decision that has the narrative of pain, humiliation, insecurity, fear, and mindless killings embedded in it [5].

Through the foregoing discussion, an attempt has been made to analyze marginalization of women along with that of the religious minority as depicted in *Lajja*. Evidently a protest novel, Nasrin situates it in the context of religious fanaticism that reared its ugly head in Bangladesh in the wake of the demolition of Babri Masjid in India in 1992. Nevertheless, the novel also exhibits immense potential to be studied from a feminist perspective. The representation of the female characters, their treatment at the hands of Muslim male fundamentalists as well as Hindu males at the level of family, society or religion/ nation, and the fate they eventually meet are some points of discussion which make the text worth feminist analyses. The feminist thrust of Nasrin in view of the issues pertaining to women, the problems faced by the marginalized Hindus in Bangladesh, and the notions of nation and religion have been intricately woven together in *Lajja*. As nation is a geo-political entity, so is the body of the woman which is marauded, tortured and abused simply because the narrow nationalistic and fanatic mindset views it as an extension of the former thereby causing what has been discussed above as double marginalization of the women [5, 8]. Further, the boundaries of feminism are not limited to the cause of women as they can be extended to the cause of underprivileged ones. Thus, the anti-fundamentalism stance of the novel also envelops anti-patriarchal resistance wherein gender identity is privileged over religion particularly when Nasrin delineates atrocities against women in the same way as religion (Islam) supersedes nationalism when it comes to the abuse of the religious minority (Hindus). Thus, the gender extremism and religious fundamentalism go hand in hand throughout the text subjecting the female characters like Maya to inhuman torture until she dies. Hers is not only the death of a woman but also of that inner assurance of survival on the part of the Hindus in their 'very own' country as Sudhamoy would believe at one point in the text prior to when his daughter breathes her last.

III. CRITICAL APPREHENSION OF TASLIMA

The grimy male nature has been discussed by many feminist writers and Taslima is no exception. However, what differentiates her from the rest is that she dares to express this, despite living in a male-dominated, orthodox, and radical society like Bangladesh. Her novel *Lajja* provides an explicit testimony of this intrinsic male nature [1,5].

Taslima Nasreen in defense of his criticism in one of his interviews said that laws should be based on equality, not on religion; women should have equal rights in marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. I said we must stop stoning women to death in the name of religion. Is that provocation? Every civilized state has questioned the relationship of the state with religion, eventually disentangling and distancing the two. Islam should not be exempt from the critical scrutiny that other religions have gone through. My opinion is based on my belief in secular humanism. If that is provocative, then it is absolutely necessary to provoke (The Hindu).

This sadistic nature of men is not only limited to their interaction with women but also with other men. All it needs is a chance to come out in the open. However, women became an easy target to bring out this trait during the 1992-93 riots in Bangladesh as Taslima documents the rape of thousands of Hindu women by Muslim rioters [1]. Nasreen concludes that a man establishes his unfathomable might by practicing such sadism on other weaker human beings. This sadism does not merely involve physical abuse but also comes in the form of psychological suppression, social exclusion and so on. Caste system practiced by Hindus as well as Muslims is another way for sadism where men from the upper strata of the society find a customary way to deny certain fundamental rights to life. Nasreen also emphasizes that sadism is almost an exclusive male characteristic targeting other weaker sections of society, men as well as women.

Despite many scientific innovations credited to men, Taslima's observations and depictions find men to be socially regressive. She denotes that a truly progressive society is one which has got equal opportunities, respect, and treatment to women. Spending her youth in an Islamic nation makes her belief even stronger and it enforces her to believe that men are responsible for socially regressive position of women. Lack of education, healthcare, nutrition, and fundamental right to expression for women, observed by Taslima made her a rebel author. As she wrote about this regressive male nature, the hardliners wrote her of as anti-Islamic. At the same time, the ruthlessness with which she attacked the orthodox, suppressive, male dominance in a nation driven by religion is inexplicable. Many critics compare her with another exiled and celebrated author 'Salman Rushdie' (Bodman and Tohidi). While talking about the regressive mind-set of men, Taslima emphasizes that religious conformity is the most important cause for this. According to her, Islamic world could not match the western progress as the Muslim clerics focus on establishing an environment dominated by religion rather than rational thoughts [1,6-7].

With this novel, Taslima Nasreen too becomes an home-grown feminist, unwilling to give up even in the face of separation from his own people and literary critics. Several critics accuse him of negatively portraying Native people to gain familiarity. Taslima was part of discussion, possibility, and new perspectives in all the news channels, debates and palimentary affairs. Furthermore, the novel forces readers to question the status and security of that are in confined boundaries and binaries. Thus, reading the novel of Taslima Nasreen with an Indigenous

feminist consciousness and gender bias that allows and encourages critical discussion and demonstrates the hopes and values of achieving balance in the society if such things that are barriers to female empowerment.

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