

Transcreating the Metaphors of the Wife, Whore and the Lover: Translating the Tale of Female Body in Select Works of Taslima Nasrin

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Over the centuries, feminism has relentlessly worked towards securing an egalitarian space of gender equality. However, there is hardly an iota of doubt that there has been a huge gap in the lived experiences of the Anglo-American women and their coloured sisters across the world, as suggested by their personal as well as collective histories. South Asian Women have not only battled with the demons of their colonial past but even today are struggling with issues that are remotely imaginable in the western parts of the world. Within the larger body of South Asian history, it is quite difficult to trace a point of homogeneity which leads to a further complication in understanding the women's narratives rising from there. To understand an author from a particular country belonging to the geo-political construct of 'South-Asia', it is beyond question that like their valid similarities, their distinct as well as latent dissimilarities have to be taken into account. The issue of violence being an intrinsic part of women's personal history and social context has been addressed before by various feminist scholars but it should also be remembered that each narrative like the experience remains starkly individual by the merit of its socio-cultural context.

Historically, Religion in South Asia has played a serious role in inflicting violence on women. In India, champions of women's rights such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule and several others had to fight for women in order to ensure a humanly existence for them within a social order engulfed in superstitions, religious dogmatism and other patriarchal constructs. The nineteenth century Renaissance and the newly awakened Bengali anti-colonial spree hugely contributed to the education of women in Bengal which at that point of time was undivided. However, after the partition of 1947, as Bengal was brutally divided into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Bengal (now West Bengal), owing to the newly introduced as well as imposed Islamic principles of West Pakistan underwent a visible socio-cultural transition which somewhat made women of East Pakistan commit to orthodox subservience. The anarchy of the regiments of West Pakistan resulted in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 which marked the birth of the new nation that had ideologies of democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism to uphold.

Unfortunately, even after becoming an independent nation, Bangladesh could not uphold those values in the frontline. The steady reduction of Hindu population in the demography of Bangladesh over the years only suggests the presence of fundamentalist

Islamic principles working at the centre of the nation with or without direct governmental support. The unscrupulous growth of Islamic fundamentalism has created a dangerous breach even within the crux of the nation where two antagonistic forces are working against each other. While India after its independence has respected its constitutional status of a secular country, for Bangladesh it has not been the same. While a section of the Bangladeshi society recognises the common Bengali identity for all the inhabitants of the country, irrespective of their religion, the other section exuberantly claims Bangladesh to be an Islamic country. For the fundamentalists, the Islamic tradition carries greater weightage than the ideologies of Bengali nationalism, which had once united the entire nation and led them towards independence. This clash of ideologies within the core of the country has also affected the intellectual communities of Bangladesh and has contributed to its decline to a certain extent since the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. It is been observed that Islamic fundamentalist ideology does not tolerate the critique of Islamic principles and practices. Therefore, following the visible trail of the decline of intellectual communities in Bangladesh, a very powerful South Asian Woman writer had either to bear the lashes of the fundamentalists or run for her life as she had written a book titled *Lajja* (Shame) in 1993, which depicted the narrative a persecution of a Hindu family by the Muslims during the riots after the demolition of Babri Masjid. Taslima Nasrin lost her homeland after he book was published as she started receiving death threats from radical Islamic groups. In spite of being a huge success, her book was banned in Bangladesh after a soaring number of fifty thousand copies were sold. A vocal humanitarian and staunch supporter of women's rights, Nasrin holds a medical degree to her name. However, all her achievements were reduced to an accusation of Nasrin being a woman who was being disrespectful towards Islam and thus needed to be banished from the country that she had known as her own. Nasrin has as her predecessor, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who had also critiqued the issues of gender inequality present within the frames of Islamic education. However as Md. Mahmudul Hasan has pointed out that the point of difference between Nasrin and Sakhawat lies in the fact that the former scathingly attacks Islam instead of furbishing with a covert argument.

“...Nasrin took a different path, detailed most personal and intimate sexual experiences, and explicitly denigrated the religion of the majority in Bangaldesh.” (Hasan, 169)

In the context of understanding Muslim women writers from South Asian countries, one must however also take into account that Islamic fundamentalism is not prevalent in all the nation states and therefore despite being a writer from a former era, Sakhawat's position was much safer partly due to the fact that she was from the then Calcutta, which has always promoted secular principles and ideologies.

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. The roles that are usually ascribed to women within the frames of patriarchal constructs rigorously promotes the practice of stereotyping them. They are primarily categorised as socially respected or the fallen ones, depending on their moral and social conduct. It has been observed that women's sexual behaviour plays an important role in her social identity; not only in the past but also in contemporary times, casual as well as structured attempts have been made to control women's sexuality. Nasrin's novels uphold's the South Asian Women's question in ways that remarkably addresses pressing issues concerning the female gender. The stereotypes which are being imposed on women such as mother, lover, wife, daughter and whore are all dangerous in terms of the amount of performance pressure that they inflict on subjective individuals, often reducing their potentials to grow into self-confident entities with a voiced opinion of their own and making them mere spectators subject to patriarchal whims and norms. The social conditioning of female individuals within the body of patriarchy enforces in them set norms and values of subservience and submission which only leads them towards larger problems without a clear resolution to them. In most of the cases, such issues are marked as minor events and strategically overlooked or even ignored consciously. Nasrin's works of fiction protests against such oppressive mechanisms that denies the female gender their basic claims of a separate and independent existence.

Nasrin's book *Lajja (Shame)* which had provoked the supporters of Islamic fundamentalists does not merely criticise the prevalent religious hatred between two different communities, but also upholds the women characters in the light of a religious feud across nations over the demolition of a mosque. The author, towards the end of her 'Preface' clearly states her purpose, as she articulates:

"Lajja does not speak of religion, it speaks about humanity. Lajja speaks not of hate but love. Lajja asks for equality, not discrimination. Lajja waits for a time of equality, empathy and freedom." (Nasrin, 10)

It is a fact that the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war had witnessed heinous war crimes being inflicted upon women. They were brutally raped and mutilated, a history which still remains one of the most horrible accounts of criminalities of war. However, in *Lajja*, Nasrin plays upon a different background and pins multiple women characters in a narrative set amidst a turmoil beyond control. The authors concern about the atrocities being committed upon women looms all over the plot of the fiction, however, she also propels the readers to look at the other kinds of oppressive orders women are made to accept and bear with. She brilliantly paints the character of Kironmoyee, who is the wife of Sudhamoy and mother of Maya and Suranjan. Unfortunately she does not succeed in creating a separate identity of her own. Not only that, even within the premise of her own household, her suggestions like her sacrifices are comfortably ignored by the male members. Representation of women within the domestic frames of South Asia often project female characters trapped inside similar situations bereft of their basic respectability and self-identity. Through the character of Kironmoyee, Nasrin deals with the issue of the continuous malpractices being done by patriarchal institutions upon women. Shikha Thakur while commenting on the author's understanding of women within the spheres of patriarchy enforced marital domesticity, articulates:

“One of the most important feminist issues that has been dealt with in the novel 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.” (Thakur, 61)

Kironmoyee is not only marginalised within her family owing to her gender identity, but also in the larger political context, she along with her family are the ones marginalised as they belong to the Hindu community in a country that is largely dominated by the Islamic population. Like a dutiful wife, she follows the lead of Sudhamoy who is impractical and yet aspires to hold on to the position of the alpha male within the paradigms of the household. She also tries to perform all her duties and commitments to the household without much of assistance as well as regard from others. Her motive is simply to keep the members of her household well-fed and safe. Her allegiance to her religion also becomes secondary to her as she accepts a Muslim name to ensure the safety and well-being of her family and also alters the way she would formerly carry herself. Such little acts of stripping herself of everything that was close to her true identity slowly transforms her as a person, yet the saga of her suffering does not come to an end owing to the headstrong principles of her highly educated and liberal husband. Her wish to move to India to find a safer place to live is constantly ignored just like her prolonged contributions to the household. Nasrin projects in Kironmoyee, an image of an ideal woman as demanded by the patriarchal mechanism who would silently serve and obey her male counterparts. As a devoted wife, she slowly succumbs to the pressure of domesticity at first and then to the larger socio-cultural and religious forces that destroys her personal identity that she carefully preserved in her little ways of existence. Her daughter Maya does not wish to be like her and time and again shows her own ways of dealing with the ongoing turmoil. She is abducted more than one time but she manages to cope with it or at least pretends to do so. Her disgust stems from her realisation that in spite of being educated intellectuals, the men of her family actually has no power to save her from the tyrannies that the Hindus must bear with in a nation state like Bangladesh. Her character also shows how women in spite of having a rational consciousness born out of education, training as well as experience are also often deemed as powerless in a wider social scenario for reasons deeply intertwined with each other. The events following Maya's abduction brings before us the character of another woman Shamima, who apparently does not fit into the stereotypical roles of submissive wife or dutiful and obedient daughter. However, in the eyes of Suranjan, Shamima is nothing but a body and the physical violence that he inflicts upon her is the manifestation of his disregard of her as an individual entity. A rather empowered woman, Shamima is miserably treated by Suranjan as he finds in her an agency to redirect his hatred for her community. Shamima is marked as a 'slut' or a whore as she is sexually active and shares physical intimacy with multiple partners. Her conscious sexual choices negates the set norms of patriarchy and in turn reduces her to almost a non-entity in an anthropocentric social order. Also, it must be taken into account that her religion which is Islam, acts against her its laws forbids women from engaging into liberal sexual behaviour. Ironically, her religion unfortunately also contributes to her traumatic encounter with Suranjan. By vandalising her body, Suranjan metaphorically avenges the plight of his family in the hands of people from Shamima's community. It is a two-way tragedy for Shamima as she is not only rejected by her own people but also humiliated in the hands of the representative of another community. Shamima's episode provides the reader with the painful understanding of the fact which the author also intends to represent that, women within

and also outside the domestic spheres are stripped of everything that they possess or hold on to, at the whim and mercy of the surrounding patriarchal systems. It feeds on their personal space, destroys their authority over their body and mind, and also uses them as patriarchal instruments as per the demands of the occasion.

In this novel, the trope of revenge circles around the violation of physical as well as psychological space of women characters within and beyond domestic purviews. It shows the uneven ways in which the gender equation within a society operates while negotiating with intense human emotions such as love, desire, fear or even revenge. The author exploits the historical backdrop at its best while constructing the narrative, but we must take into account the individual concerns of her which she lays threadbare throughout her work of fiction.

Nasrin uses the theme of revenge in an inverted manner in another novel titled *Shodh or Revenge* (2003) which probably is one of the most powerful work of literature composed by a South Asian female author. In *Revenge*, Nasrin dismantles the set ideas of gender roles within the structure of domestic hierarchy and turns every constructed code of patriarchy upside down. The tale apparently is not violent but carries within in its crux several layers of complexities that slowly unfolds the latent power that lies within a woman. The structure of families in most of the South Asian countries does not allow women the privileges of privacy in most of the time. Nasrin introduces to the readers the character of Jhumur, an educated and beautiful wife of Haroon who had married him for the sake of love, hoping to work out a marriage based of mutual respect and affection for each other. To her sheer disbelief, nothing of that sort happens and she becomes confined within a patriarchal structure that she identifies as her in-laws' house where she is constantly being guarded and miserably tutored by her overbearing mother-in-law.

“...I was standing looking out the window when Amma, my mother-in-law walked in, “It doesn't become a housewife to stare at people,” she said sternly. “Step back Jhumur, or the neighbors will talk.” (*Revenge*, 10)

Trapped in a loveless marriage where she is unable to realise her worth, Jhumur's life had become a site of oppression where her individuality was slowly being stripped of her existence. Feminist critics have commented on the issue of marriage and how as an ever growing institution manipulates women to accept a life of subservience across generations. Clare Chambers in her spectacular lecture titled “Feminism, Liberalism and Marriage” had asserted:

“Historically, it has been a fundamental site of women's oppression, with married women having few independent rights in law.”

The laws in Bangladesh like many other countries does not allow enough agency to the women. Although as a newborn country in 1971, Bangladesh has made several legal reforms to support women against domestic violence, however not much has been done about issues related to marriage, property rights as well as divorce. As the majority of the Bangladeshi population practices Islam, so the Shariyat laws are highly revered over there. Women can only seek divorce if her wedding contract carries the permission of her husband, and this as a law is fatal.

Literature, as one must understand has a serious role in shaping the society. It often mirrors its reality with all its major and minor limitations, while at times it also shows the ideal representation of it harping on its future possibilities for the maximum benefit and progress of the society. Nasrin's *Revenge* does not suggest any kind of means to

transform an existing order of domesticity for in case of a failure of such a plan, the subject or character involved might be in serious trouble. In *Lajja* or *Shame*, we see the subservient Kironmoyee whose voice literally is unheard even when it has more reason than the male members of the house. In *Revenge*, Jhumur's voice is heard, purposefully misunderstood and misdirected to make situations complicated for her even to the extent of disturbing her conjugal relationship with Haroon. Jhumur's little moments of solitude are also looked upon with disdain and vehemently sneered at for such acts were deemed 'un-womanly' by her mother-in-law and also her husband.

"...You have no sense at all. You forget you are the daughter-in-law, the *bou* of this house...What on earth are you up to? Why are you making such a racket? 'I was just laughing, I said. 'Don't you know that the people next door can hear you?'" (*Revenge*, 10)

Strangely enough, we come to gather that her husband Haroon, who was once her devoted lover had found her sense of humour of truly spontaneous and brilliant, a perception that eventually changed when she became his wife. The change in the behaviour of Haroon suggests that when a woman is perceived as a lover, she is not bound to conform to the patriarchal laws operating within a marriage contract and hence the subject is allowed a certain amount of freedom. Of course, when a woman is unmarried and is amorously involved with members of the opposite sex, she has the risk of being categorised as a whore which further puts her personal as well as social security in danger as we can see in the case of Shamima in *Lajja*. However, the trope of marriage comes with an external façade of social security that is being imposed upon women which also demands them to sacrifice their individual choices, ambitions and also accept a life of unequal labour and cultural bondage which as identified by Pierre Bourdieu gives birth to a derogatory 'symbolic violence' that the women subjects are forced to live with. It has been historically observed that such constructs are fed to women from their early days of childhood through several means of communication ranging from advice from senior women members of the family, peer groups or even the men members around them which contributes to the shaping of their perceptions to a certain level. But Nasrin shows a different picture of retaliation and resistance through the character of Jhumur who not only defies the normative ethicalities celebrated by patriarchy but destroys them completely without compromising her own survival.

As mentioned earlier, it has been seen that women are stereotyped on the basis of their social as well as moral position. Following the analogy therefore, Jhumur has been given the sanctioned position of the *bou* or the wife of the house and it is apparently beyond her to transcend the limitations that comes with the identity being imposed on her by the construct of her marriage. In a situation such as hers, resistance usually comes with a price which in her case could have been the end of her marriage, a closure for which she was not prepared.

"Haroon now placed on me, I might find myself divorced, a condition no thinking woman would enter unless there was absolutely no alternative. (*Revenge*, 66)

Jhumur's physical and emotional needs were not at all satiated by her husband and also, she was been accused of infidelity for no reason by her husband.

"Haroon had made up his mind that I'd had affairs with Arzu and Subhash, and there was no way I could free his mind of that...I was a prisoner in my own house, forbidden to step outside to see friends, and forbidden to seek a job, even though I was more than qualified. (*Revenge*, 66)

Held captive in a claustrophobic situation like this, as her final blow Jhumur does not go out of the house but slyly explores her physical needs within the periphery of the house itself. In the flat below their house she found the man to whom she could finally open up her pent up emotions. Tired of the daily abuses of Haroon who constantly kept on referring to her former pregnancy just after their marriage, which out of distrust and disbelief he had made her abort, Jhumur carefully plans her revenge. Without a dash of guilt, she engages into a sexual liason with Afzal in such a way that she would be pregnant by his seed and not her husband.

“What if I became pregnant by Afzal, not by Haroon? My child would be the fruit of my independence.” (*Revenge*, 66)

Jhumur succeeds in her plan and is eventually impregnated by Afzal. Her pregnancy fulfils her revenge. Her unborn first child did belong to Haroon and was ripped off from her owing to his chauvinistic jealousy. And now, he will forever call his own a child of another man.

““Why are you so anxious?” I felt like asking. “This isn’t your child I’m carrying. You destroyed what was yours with your own hands—now you are showering your love on a creature who has no relation to you, in whose conception you played no part!” (*Revenge*, 115)

Nasrin through the character of Jhumur shows how women can retaliate in their own way and claim their sense of dignity.

“Haroon brought all sorts of journals and newspapers home, and he placed a new television set in our bedroom. Now all I did was lie in bed all day and read and watch ridiculous TV shows. My room was fragrant with flowers, and I ate whatever Amma or Ranu cooked for me...It shocked me how the precious burden in my womb altered my position in the household. Amma was forever running into my room to make sure I was well or to bring me something scrumptious to eat. She liked to be able to tell Haroon that she was taking special care of me.” (*Revenge*, 106)

Just a pregnancy and the world around Jhumur changed overnight. She gives birth to a boy in a posh clinic of Gulshan, Dhaka which not only heightens her status in the family but also stabilises her social position. Nasrin does not depict happy women usually, but in Jhumur the readers can sense a tinge of satisfaction and contentment to have downright beaten the oppressive patriarchal structure and perceived life in her own terms, in her own way.

Taslima Nasrin clearly states while introducing her book *Lajja* or *Shame* that she was not attacked for writing the book but such reactions had long histories behind them. If we for a moment overlook the backdrop of religious terrorism in *Lajja*, we can see a picture of a Bengali Hindu family where a woman’s voice is not given its due weightage or importance. Like a mute follower, she is made to obey her husband even if her ideas are way more reasonable as they favour survival over socio-political ideologies. Thus, in the book Kironmoyee is a helpless housewife who has no control over the doings of her husband and son which to a certain extent even contributes to the plight of her daughter. She represents every single housewife who is denied of their deserved dignity and importance in domestic households and has no say in the decision makings of the house that she runs in several ways. From this unending cycle of unpaid domestic labour, there is no emancipation and no recognition as well. In *Shodh* or *Revenge*, Nasrin shows another canvas and narrates a different story that allows woman the space to strategize their own

battle plan and defeat patriarchy in their own terms. After all, to break the stereotypes and other oppressive instruments of patriarchy, it is important to keep a close watch and offer resistance every single time gender equality is threatened.

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