

Opressor and the Oppressed: A Postcolonial Reading of Marginalization of Women in Taslima Nasrin's Fiction

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Abstract

The article focuses on fiction of Taslima Nasrin that highlights the hardships faced by women in a third-world orthodox society of Bangladesh. The article explores to establish that Nasrin, quite contrary to the charge of just being a propagandistic writer, is actually an astute social observer. In her writing, she provides solutions, which are in sync with her radical feminist stance. The paper shows that Nasrin challenges the patriarchal society and tries to give the message that submissive women can't create a just society.

Keywords: Feminist writing, patriarchal society, third-world societies, women writers, orthodox Bangladesh, Taslima Nasrin

Post colonialism is an umbrella term which encompasses issues ranging from creation of nations and nationalistic movements, cultural hybridity, (post)colonial discourse analysis, racial identity and gender issues. It gained prominence because of the growing discontentment in the marginalised groups on the count of being left out from the major discourses of the nation building. For centuries women have always been the marginalized other and have been eternally subjugated to an inferior position be it before independence or after independence. In patriarchal setup men have the power while women are the marginalized other. To oppress women concrete as well as abstract measures are taken. Women are not allowed to move out of the four walls of the house, they are not allowed to vote. At the same time the existing system in which women are treated as mere objects of desire having no rights whatsoever, is presented as the accepted norm. This working is in consonance with the working of colonialism wherein the native is not given any right and he is forced to accept the prevalent system as the norm. Thus, women form a subservient group and are doubly colonized. Their domination and colonization have not stopped even after the colonies have attained political freedom. John Mcleod states

“a double colonialism refers to the fact that women are twice colonized—by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too.”
(Mcleod 175)

The voice of the marginalized woman is thus suppressed and muted. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is of the firm view that any attempt of retracing the muted voice is a wrong exercise. The critics should rather try to pay attention to the systems and practices which force women to be the marginalized, oppressed subalterns.

Taslima Nasrin has emerged as one of the prominent voices in the English fiction from South Asia. She is a Bangladeshi novelist, who has highlighted the plight of women in diverse situations. She has garnered rave reviews for her body of work which does not shy away from raising the issues which have been considered taboo by the patriarchal closed society. Some critics have accused her of being propagandistic. But a careful perusal of her literary oeuvre establishes her as a sensitive writer with a keen sense of observation who through her writing strives to show that irrespective of the religious orientation the condition of women has always been that of a second rate citizen. Women in her fiction are ill-treated, snubbed, raped and killed thus clearly portraying the true condition in which they have to survive in the so called modern world. In some of her novels, women do opt for unconventional ways of opposing the patriarchal ideology and she has faced the flak of the traditionalists because of it but the solutions opted for by a suppressed individual depend upon the psyche and world view of the writer. They can't be dictated by select groups of

individuals who are self-proclaimed moral protectors of the culture.

According to Taslima Nasrin, women are far from being empowered in modern day society. Even though on occasions women have been at the helm of political set ups of a country, nothing has been done to bring the majority on equal footing and they have remained ignored, malnourished and oppressed. She is of the firm belief , “that having a female in a position of power does not mean that every woman has won her rights.” (Nasrin Ending Silence).

She is a firm believer that women should stand up for their rights. In fact, she is one of the few women writers who takes a radical feminist stance and believes that women need to fight to subvert the prevailing notions of male superiority and female inferiority. In her article “Ending Silence”, she writes:

“Once the idea of freedom of expression without fear of reprisal becomes universal, the progress of Asian women will no longer be outweighed by talk of their plight. Right now, Asia badly needs more angry women to take up the fight for justice and equality. (Nasrin Ending Silence)

In her fiction, she does not present the detached observation of the narrator all the time, she adopts a fiercely combative first person narration which highlights the suffering of the marginalized women. She also makes the women opt for newer and unconventional ways of

combating the male oppression; a trait which gave an opportunity to the orthodox to criticize and ban her works in her native Bangladesh. In her writing, Nasrin, fixatedly raises the issue of female body as an instrument to combat male oppression. This tendency is a departure from the set norms of Bangladeshi writing wherein the image of self-sacrificing womanhood is celebrated. Nasrin's women do not conform to the stereotype, they want to have a life of their own which is denied to them by the society and they look to assert themselves through unorthodox ways. She invests the female body with the power to subvert and protest. Illicit relations, illegitimate conceptions are eulogized in some of her fiction with the aim of making the women assert themselves to gain an equal footing with men.

In order to understand the need for the women characters in Taslima's texts to resort to such actions we need to understand the subaltern position of women in Bangladeshi society. An illiterate poor woman has no rights whatsoever, she is confined to the four walls of the house and is at the receiving end of male violence which is more or less a norm. Even a middle class woman has the status of a subaltern as she does not have equal rights in terms of marriage, property and divorce laws. She does not have the right to income and if divorced and without a son to take care of her she is bound to be a destitute. The dowry system prevalent in the country is the same for women of all classes. Dowry deaths are also reported

though far less than the actual number. All this happens due to lack of proper laws and rules to support women. Saiyeda Khatun in her article, "A Site of Subaltern Articulation The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasrin", writes

"The system of dowry encompassing all classes very effectively sums up the different degrees of subalternity devaluing all women. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 outlaws dowry. But the custom has survived with extraordinary might and resilience. Although nobody calls it dowry, a bride's status in the in-law family is directly related to what she brings from the natal family in terms of money and goods. The value of dowry may vary across classes ranging from a watch and a bicycle to a television and refrigerator, to a car. Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act, dowry has been the cause of gender violence." (Khatun)

In her fiction, Nasrin foregrounds female sexuality outside the marital bond as a medium to subvert the male centered polygamous notions of sexual laws which are governed by religious and socio cultural mechanisms. Through the womb patrilineality is challenged which threatens the very foundation of Muslim society. Through this mechanism, the law of patrilineal inheritance is at stake as the son is an heir to the father's property in a conservative society. Patrilineal descent is rendered weak and vulnerable because of these unsanctioned/unorthodox pregnancies of married women.

Her Novel *Aparpokkho*, traces the life of a woman Jamuna. She has been divorced by her husband Saber on the wrong allegation of having an affair with another man. Reduced to the position of a destitute Jamuna remarries but is not happy even in her second marriage. Now instead of remaining unhappy and ostracized she boldly decides to have an affair with a neighbor and conceives a child. Further she presents the child as her husband's. The story traces Jamuna's changing fortunes and world views. The story chronicles the failure of society and the institution of marriage which cannot give equal rights to women and in which women have to depend on their male counterparts for survival. Saiyeda Khatun in her article, "A Site of Subaltern Articulation The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasrin", writes:

"Finally, Aparpokkho uses the female body and the maternal womb (of Jamuna) as a site of contestation and challenge to the system of patrilineal descent which organizes Bangladeshi patriarchy. By transforming the womb into a material site, Taslima undoes the foundational basis of Bangladeshi patriarchy." (Khatun)

The dominating Patriarchal ideology in Bangladesh, glorifies self-sacrificing woman who suffers a lot for the good of family and society. Further, a chaste woman is the woman who never demands anything and remains at the mercy of her husband according to the orthodox patriarchal view:

"A chaste woman gives up her life for his [master/husband's] devotion/Her one goal is but her devotion/ In sleep, in dreams and when she is awake." (Khatun)

This is the extreme form of subjugation to which women are subjected. A binary opposition is created wherein man is the god and the woman an ardent worshiper. In some orthodox discourses, women's commitment to safeguard the interests of her family has been compared to the glory of Jihad or a holy war. Thus in such a society, a family's honour depends upon the behavior and demeanor of the woman of the house. In order to be a good stereotypical mother goddess (goddess sans powers) her virginity and chastity has to be intact and to realize this aim, she needs to be dependent on her male counterparts for protection. If at all a woman has been divorced, she is no longer under the protection of a man and is treated as a blot on the family honour. At the level of family, she is an economic burden and at the level of society she becomes a sexual threat as she attains the power of subverting the established patrilineal polygamous discourse. Thus, women are ostracized and tortured so as to deny them any right which in turn serves the purpose of confining them to the four walls of the house. Nasrin, in her writing questions the notion of honour and claims that women have all the rights to remain free and lead a relaxed independent life. Saiyeeda Khatun while commenting on Nasrin writes:

“Women can’t go anywhere without a male companion[protector]... If you want to board the bus, the conductor will ask, where is the man ?. . . . In so many spheres of life, women are harassed if they are not accompanied by men. If there is a male companion who is neither a husband nor a near-relative, trouble is inevitable. Who is this man? And if you are alone, the issue is why are you without a man?” (Khatun)

The important point which emerges is that the detractors of Nasrin who contend that she does not develop the women characters properly and is not a true feminist writer are far from being true. Some of them have even gone to the extent of saying that Nasrin is in collaboration with the dominating patriarchal fundamentalist groups as she takes a feminist stance but dwells on the world view of the male characters only. They further state that Nasrin never provides an alternative to the oppressed and is only interested in having cheap popularity. An analysis of her fiction will reveal that she takes fiercely radical feminist stance wherein she believes that women need to uproot and upstage the male supremacy and can survive even without the support of men. Jamuna does not need her husband to be happy even though she has remarried after being divorced by her first husband. On paper she should be dependent on Himayun but on the contrary she finds a way to assert her womanhood. It is only that the unorthodox way chosen by the protagonist might appear unethical to the orthodox and they claim that such an approach will challenge and weaken the societal structure.

But the point that they ignore is that if a writer only writes about the approved options that are available to the marginalized then it won't have the affect of shaking the reader out of the slumber in which s/he has fallen due to internalization of the dominating ideology. Through the suffering of Maya in *Shame* and assertion of Jamuna in *Aparpokkho*_Nasrin is undoubtedly foregrounding the plight of women and the need for a social awakening wherein everyone should think about the suffering of women and should be convinced to do something for their upliftment.

In yet another novel entitled *Shodh*, Nasrin challenges and subverts patriarchal marriage rites. Illegitimate pregnancy still figures in the story but the main focus is on the transformation of a girl into a wife and a daughter in law wherein she is just expected to keep in mind the interests of the in laws. This inexperienced girl is used, ill-treated and is expected to bear all this in the name of family honour. The novel traces the regulatory structure of surveillance and thus subordination of women in the institution of marriage. Saiyeda Khatun in her article, "A Site of Subaltern Articulation The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasrin", writes:

"Jhumur, the central character in Shodh, subverts the patriarchal agenda of appropriation and effacement of the female by conceiving a child outside of marriage, and passing him off as her husband, Harun's legitimate son. Through her

covert strategies, Jhumur tries to undo the Bangladeshi patrilineal society by planting deceit at its heart." (Khatun)

One of the major themes in Bangladeshi literature is the identity formation of the newly wed girl into a wife and a daughter in law. A girl who stands for free spirit of life is suddenly expected to be a self-sacrificing wife sans any desires and expectations of her own. *Shodh* challenges such marriage rites and highlights the hidden ideology behind such rituals. Naila Kabeer beautifully expresses the expectations from a newlywed in a patriarchal system

"[In marriage] she is sent as a young and inexperienced bride into a stranger's household where her behaviour is viewed with suspicion until she has been successfully integrated into the new household and has learnt to identify with its interests. (Kabeer)

The institution of marriage for Jhumar becomes a site for suffering and trauma because of being a woman. The society functions by different laws for men and women. Men can get away with things while women have to remain under the scrutiny and gaze of preying eyes of the ideologues. If a woman who happens to be Jhumar in this case accepts her subservient position the society will legitimize her social standing as an honourable woman who is a responsible wife and a good daughter in law. Thus, it is through the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 36) of family, religion and patriarchy that women are forced to internalize the dominating ideology

and suffer in the lower most realm of human existence wherein they can only survive sans any rights. Saiyeda Khatun in her article, "A Site of Subaltern Articulation The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasrin", writes:

"Taslima in her denunciatory discourse against such practices has named such patriarchal strategies as sangsartantra (257). Sangsartantra can be translated as domesticism or familiarchy. Sangsar is a very material term, and it has a complex signification. It may mean a family; it also signifies the material world or mundane life. Sometimes it is associated with worldliness which fetters the spirit. It may also mean a wife through her association with the mundane life of the domestic sphere, but never a husband. A sangsari who can postpone or sacrifice immediate satisfaction for future prosperity is prized for her thriftiness. Taslima, in her oppositional discourse, by calling sangsar a "tantra" or "ism" identifies the systematic oppression of women imbricated in the ideology and practices of Bangladeshi marriage "rites." In such a reading, the story of Jhumur's subordination in the Harun family becomes representative of the system rather than an isolated incident. By foregrounding the mechanism of patriarchal supremacy in the family, Taslima brings to scrutiny areas of subjugated knowledges." (Khatun)

The decision to conceive outside the sanctioned marriage is a strategic move on the part of the writer to destabilize and decenter patriarchy. Some might argue that the idea

not to abort a child falls into the category of reproductive rights of women but they fail to comprehend that these options are not available to Bangladeshi women. Thus such an act is an embodiment of the feminist traits to have equal rights as those of men. It highlights the all important question that if polygamy is allowed to men , then why can't polyandry be allowed?

The Muslim society considers females as objects which are to be protected. Before marriage her virginity and after marriage her chastity is to be protected. Thus a Muslim woman does not even have the control over her own body. A western feminist perspective might not apply here fully as a Muslim woman has to fight to have control over her body first. This fact explains the need to challenge the set notions and conceive outside the marriage. Mernissi has very rightly commented:

"while Western women's liberation movements had to repudiate the body in pornographic mass media, Muslim women are likely to claim the right to their bodies as part of their liberation movement."
(Mernissi)

It thus becomes apparent that Nasrin's investing of the power to the womb appropriates and subverts the male domination and is a pioneering mechanism to showcase that women suppressed for long should try to find diverse ways to assert themselves to get back their due. Critics, who claim that such a solution is immoral and propagandistic, approach the entire issue from the male dominated patriarchal ideology which decides the moral

codes of conduct for women. They forget that the watchdogs of patriarchal ideology will brand any challenge to their domination as unethical and immoral because they are interested in maintaining the status quo. Nasrin's writing is like a breath of fresh air in otherwise choking and decaying realm of Bangladeshi literature where only stereotypes are eulogized.

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