

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja and French Lover*

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

=====

Abstract

The article **Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novel of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover*** brings out the sufferings of common people under the name of religion and culture of the South Asian Society as picturised by Taslima Nasrin. *Lajja* is an account of the religious and social discrimination and suppression which became more virulent with the outburst against the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India on 6 December, 1992. It is a serious indictment against continuous and sustained subjugation of the minority community. *French Lover* documents the failure of the institution of marriage to protect women in any culture which is based on a concept of women's dependence on the male protector. The paper deals with the various techniques employed by the author in the novels. Taslima Nasrin convinces the readers that the fundamentalist forces can be stopped if all of us who are secular and humanistic join together and fight their malignant influence.

Key words: Taslima Nasrin, colonial society, religion, Babri Masjid, *Lajja*, *French Lover*, failure of marriage institution, feminist writing

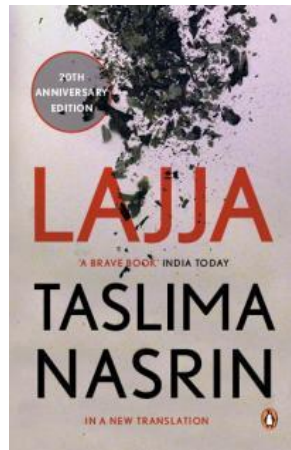
Taslima Nasrin's Feminist Writing

At this juncture the emergence of Taslima Nasrin's feminist writings inaugurates one of the controversial moments in the annals of South Asian literature. Taslima Nasrin, a woman writer of Bangladesh, is an award-winning writer, physician, secular humanist and human rights activist. She is known for her powerful writings on women oppression and unflinching criticism of religious fanaticism.

Focus of This Paper

In this paper, Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* and *French Lover* are chosen for discussion. Through these novels, Nasrin brings out the sufferings of the common people under the name of religious and cultural practice of the society. She elaborately discusses the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society. She has shown that the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society constitute the armour for the contending male rendering the female helpless. By unveiling the patriarchal agenda of subordinating women, and by introducing overt and covert strategies to subvert this agenda, she has pioneered the feminist discourse in South Asian society.

Lajja



Lajja is a moving story of protest, passion, principle and persecution. The novel *Lajja* portrays the horrendous and horrifying experience of a minority family, the Duttas- Sudhamony, Kironmoyee and their two children. Suranjan and Maya have to face so many trials and abuse without any rhyme or reason- just only because of their Hindu identity in Bangladesh.

Sudhamoy and His Family

Sudhamoy an atheist, still believed with a native mix of optimism and idealism that his motherland would not let him down. But the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 triggered a spurt of communal violence in Bangladesh. The Hindus, those like the Duttas, became the victim of religious attack. Sudhamoy's family which is the focal point in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover* 75

the novel depicts the pangs of sorrow and anxiety of their community through the personal suffering of each member of his family.

Sudhamoy's house was completely ravaged and Maya, his grown up daughter was forcefully kidnapped before his very eyes. Helpless Sudhamoy suffered a severe attack of paralysis and his voice became slurred. Kironmoyee, who ran after the kidnappers, was hurt in the head and she fell down unconscious on the road. Suranjan, the son, brought up with his father's idealism was now at the verge of a helpless desperation and complete frustration. He seeks the help of his friend Haider to trace Maya but realizes that he was of no help at all. All attempts to find his sister were fruitless.

Suranjan realizes that he had been a victim of religious discrimination at every step of his life. He recalls how his brief stint with Parveen came to an end because he was a Hindu. Even his last hope to make up for his wasted life by settling down with Ratna, a girl of his community too was thwarted when she accepts a Muslim husband for herself. Blinded by a fury of frustration, he intends to rape a Muslim girl on victory day, the independence day of Bangladesh. But he only ends up bruising, scratching and raping a poor prostitute Shamima who had to trade her body for a little food.

During all these moments of crisis, Kironmoyee remains poised and nurse her husband as she had done earlier. The mass exodus of 1947 was being repeated once again. Yet she is undaunted and courageous enough to reply to Aleya Begum's suggestion to migrate to India that she wouldn't do so because this was her own identity. Aleya was surprised at her reply but Sudhamoy lying on the bed realizes that the two women can never be equal citizens in this country.

Still further, to his utter dismay, Sudhamoy finds his youthful son burning all the books of Lenin, Marx, Dostoevsky, Nehru and Azad and many more. One more realization descends on him that his idealist secular minded son has already been forced to the brink of religious fanaticism. He was wounded and full of pain. He had been hurt by his family, society and above all his country and today he was burning himself in the surging flames of an inferiority complex which is typical of every ethnic community striving to survive.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover* 76

Suranjan was determined now not to cling to his father's empty idealism anymore. The inhuman cruelty and violence that had been heaped on his community at the wake of every national disturbance must bring sense to his father. He implores him to leave such a nation that has betrayed them again and again

However much we call ourselves atheists, however much we call ourselves humanists, these people out there will call us Hindus. They'll call us bastards. The more we love this country, the more we think of it as our own, the more we'll be forced into a corner. The more we love the people of this country, the more they will isolate us **(Laj 213)**.

Sudhamoy replies with concern

It will be a rootless existence [. . .] **(Laj 214)**.

To which his son's question is emotionally charged.

What will you do with your roots, Baba? If your roots are so powerful then why are you hiding behind locked doors and windows? Will you stay this way all your life? **(Laj 214)**.

Sudhamoy's replay was a firm "No" at the moment:

Is India your father's home or your grandfather's? From your family, who the hell stays in India? Do you want to run away from your own homeland [. . .] doesn't it make you feel ashamed? **(Laj 213)**.

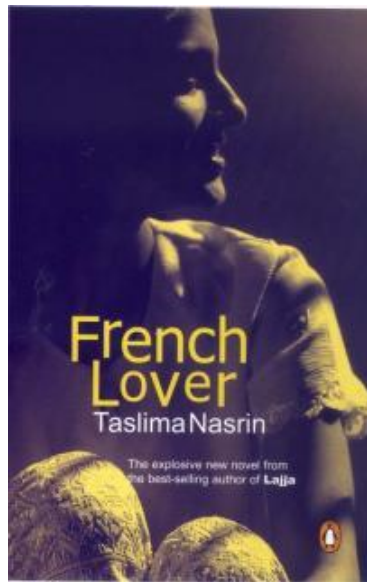
Later in the darkness of the night awakening of a sinister kind rises inside him and fills his heart with fear and apprehension. Before his very eyes ivory tower of his lifelong idealism and sacrifice had crumbled to pieces. The nation of his blood and hope has let him down. Now he must leave with his wife and son for a life free from worries and anxieties, insecurity, torture and death. He must deliver his battered and bruised family from the clutch of this ever-hunting nightmare. Sudhamoy's decides to migrate to India.

Thus, the story of Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee and their two children Maya and Suranjan may be the fictional story of these fictional characters but it may reflect the story of thousands of Sudhamoys, Kironmoyees, Suranjans and Mayas in Bangladesh.

Nasrin's Narrative and the Goal

Taslina Nasrin deals with the universal problem of fanaticism and fundamentalism. Though it is not a very well-structured novel, it gives voice to the bold belief of Taslima Nasrin in her own kind of secularism which tells us that if the Hindu and the Muslims are true followers of their respective religions, the communal violence can never, never take place. Her aim is never to exclude religion from her discourse of secularism, but to relate it to the shared cultural and national identity. She seems to believe in Asghar Ali Engineer's words that "Religion, if properly understood and interpreted cannot be antagonistic to healthy secularism".(qtd.in Naikar 155) Taslima makes a positive authorial intervention to bring about reconciliation between the two warring communities, the Muslims and the Hindus - of Bangladesh.

French Lover



In *French Lover*, the story revolves around an Indian bride and how she becomes a liberated woman afterwards. The novel focuses also on the less fortunate women who are considered objects of sex and gratification as many women in the developing countries. This

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover*

novel describes how the indiscriminate sexual subjugation under different men and the frustration and the self-pity at the inability of her own self to avert such pathetic situations and at the selfish nature of the men in her sexual encounters, the betrayal of her beloved husband, friend and lover enlighten Nila, the innocent and ignorant dreamy bride into a hardcore feminist.

Marriage is Exploitative

Taslima Nasrin's novels present marriage as exploitative and it inevitably ends in divorce, preceded by husband's polygamous marriage. It is through the perspective of displaced woman that the institutions and practices of marriage and divorce are examined. She uses daily events as evidence for the conclusion that subordination and economic exploitation of women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationship.

It is a universal fact that the tradition and custom of any nation demands marriage as the legitimate institution to organize a family, the core part of which is centralized in a man and his wife. Love and affection seems to be the password for emotional attachment and adjustment for a happy married life. A couple of two different temperaments, if united in marriage, find it a difficult relationship where in the mutual adjustments and tolerance towards each other gets dissolved in an atmosphere of bleak disheartedness.

Though there is much talk about women's liberation it is a truth that society expects a woman to make compromises to keep the family intact and happy.

Marriage is an obligation for womanhood but it makes a demand on woman. She is expected to go through a long process of learning what she has to learn in order to adapt herself to her new environment (**qtd. in Shirwadkar 60**).

The institution of marriage, with all its expectations falls heavily on a woman. When it becomes a battlefield between two egoistic individuals who are not ready to compromise, it proves that fittest can survive. 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. The brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union.

Nasrin's Nila

Nasrin's protagonist Nila proves to be 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. Through the character of Nila, Nasrin portrays the inner struggle of an artist to express her feminine urge for self-expression.

Story of Patriarchal Control

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. ***French Lover*** is her medium to convey her views on various sociological, political issues which encompass not only the fate of any nation but also that of women everywhere. It is argued that the roles assigned to men and women grant a dignified position to women. But, with rapid changes, especially in the field of behavioural patterns, the whole harmony between them has broken down. The reason is that the traditional and modern values affect the position of women in a society. Evidently, the traditional values, which insist on truthful devotion and love, have been continually evolving from generation to generation to cripple the growth of women and thwart the development of their personality. So, they work against 'the mortiferous values' in order to safeguard their position. Their voice against the so-called 'cultural conditioning' is termed as 'liberation'.

Nila's Life

Nilanjana Mandal alias Nila, the heroine of ***French Lover***, is a young lady of twenty seven. She is a woman who really searches for 'true love'. Her life is marked by three stages known as the pre-marital, marital and post-marital stages. In all these stages, she is stunted and ditched by man's parochial and superior strength. But her mental maturity helps her to become a woman of courage and wisdom.

Nila has been conditioned all her life by the example of her mother to cater to the men of the family. So initially in her marriage, she tries to do just that. She tries to cook and clean for her husband and lay herself prostrate before his desires. The conflict comes to a head when Nila gets a job for herself and then one day invites her friend's home to a non-vegetarian meal cooked by her. But this creates a rift between husband and wife. ". So, she positively makes up her mind that she need not make any compromise and tries to be a dauntless woman.

Breaking away from Mismatched Marriage

Nila's decision to break away from the mismatched marriage and her refusal to accept the life offered by Benoir and her self-discovery as an individual reveals that a female self can discover herself as an individual. Nasrin introduces Nila as an apostle of the liberation movement, advocating freedom from the tradition bound Indian woman. Nasrin's heroine is more a creature of instincts than of intellect. Her whole journey, thus, is flawed and centres only around her. She accuses Benoir of being selfish without seeing that she too has managed to survive only because of her air-centeredness. All the men in the novel are blackguards and epitomes of selfishness. The novel shows its gender bias in this way. The characters believe in being superficial and here is very little, that is genuine about them.

The Theme of Injustice against Women and Their Oppression

Injustice against women and their oppression happens to be an equally important theme in Taslima Nasrin's novels. As a woman, she understands how the whole society dominated by males creates paradigms the purpose of which is to subjugate woman and turn her into a subservient individual sans any freedom, sans any free will or choice. She confronts the nasty truth that women are mere passive objects in the matters of sex and other matters too. They are only to be possessed and mastered. With her own experience and the experience of her sisters in Bangladesh and not only Bangladesh but the world over, she realizes the fact that all the inalienable rights prescribed for human beings are denied to women because of a vicious conspiracy between religion and society in order to subjugate a woman's free will. The texts and sub-texts of all the discourses in Islam regard woman as a very potent agent of corruption. Ironically, there is a parallel stream which presents woman as an erotic object to be possessed

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover* 81

and enjoyed but who has no right for equal participation even in this intimate act of union. Thus, she is a double victim - on the one hand, she is taken to be possessed and used as an agent of pleasure, and on the other hand, she is recognized as an agent of corruption and hence is required to be kept under control of man.

A Crusader

Taslima Nasrin in her novels emerges as a crusader for women's rights; she acts as a champion for women's right of living with honour and independence in the framework of human dignity and equality. She also vociferously advocates a woman's right to have a free choice in matters of love, marriage, sex and in choosing friends. She talks of a woman's natural right to live in peace and harmony in a place which she can call her own.

Male Supremacy

In her novel *French Lover*, Taslima Nasrin reveals that male supremacy is an acknowledged fact everywhere-in the East as well as the West. Nila, the protagonist leads a discontented life with her husband Kishanlal who is an utter mismatch to her and emerges in the novel to be a male chauvinistic prig. He keeps his wife confined in his home for his own pleasure and denies her any kind of freedom. Eventually, Nila rushes into the arms of a French Benoir Dupont, but soon realizes that the Western males are also chauvinistic in their own refined manner. Mithu, a minor character in the novel, and Nila's mother Molina serve as examples of suffering as they have to succumb to the tantrums and mechanisms of their patriarchal heads. Mithu commits suicide; Molina dies of cancer in want of proper medical treatment while Nila lives a wholly bleak existence at the end.

Documenting the Failure of The Institution of Marriage

Thus, Taslima Nasrin's novels document the failure of the institution of marriage to protect women in a culture which is based on a concept of women's dependence on the male protector. By unveiling the patriarchal agenda of subordinating women and by introducing overt and covert strategies to subvert this agenda, Taslima has pioneered the feminist discourse in Bangladeshi society.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover* 82

The novels of Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja* (1993) *French Lover* (2002) clearly reveals that she does not believe in the theory that art is for art's sake. She seems to believe that art is for life's sake. She does not write fantasies or romantic stories to entertain an idle reader. She writes with a purpose and the purpose is to oppose and fight against oppression and gender bias. She is with the victim and the marginalized and against irrational authority; it does not matter whether this authority is religious, social or patriarchal. Taslima Nasrin convinces the readers that the fundamentalist forces can be stopped if all of us who are secular and humanistic join together and fight their malignant influence.

=====

Works Cited

Dhar, Sujor. Interview with Taslima Nasrin. June 6, 2002 Asia Times:

India/ Pakistan at times.com.

Datta, Sudipta. "A Search for Lilies". The Hindu 4 August 2002.

Giles E, Mary. *The Feminist Mystic*. New York: The Cross Road publishing Group, 1983.

Khatri C L. *World Literature in English Critical Responses*.

Delhi: Book Enclave, 2006.

Miller, Baker Jean. *Towards a New Psychology of Women*.

Boston: Beacon, 1976.

Naikar, Basavaraj. *Indian English Literature*. 4 vol. Delhi:

Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2007.

Nasrin, Taslima. *Lajja*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994.

... *French Lover*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002.

Prasad, Amarnath. *Critical Essays: Indian Writing in English*.

New Delhi: Sarup & Sons Publisher, 2003.

Ray K, Mohit. *Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. New Delhi:

Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2007.

Shirwadkhar, Meena. *Image of Woman in Indo Anglian Novel*.

New Delhi: Sterling, 1979.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:1 January 2015

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Theme of Suppression in the Selected Novels of Taslima Nasrin - *Lajja* and *French Lover*

Sochen, Joan. *Movers And Shakers: American Thinkers*.

Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd, 1973.

Talwar, SreeRashmi. *Women's Space, The Mosaic World of*

Margaret Drabble and NayantaraSahgal. Delhi:

Creative Publication, 1997.

=====

A. Aruna Devi, M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor of English

Sri Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College

Sattur-626203

Tamil Nadu

India

arutheiva15@gmail.com