

Violence and Women: A Critical Study of Taslima Nasrin's Novel Shodh

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ABSTRACT : *Violence against women is an age old practice which has now become a major issue of concern in today's world. It has been witnessed that in any kind of war whether it is civil strife, communal clashes or World Wars women have been the major victims of violence, torture and humiliation. The theme which preoccupies the mind of the writer in the novel Shodh is gender bias which eventually results in revenge. Being herself a victim of the patriarchal structures Taslima Nasrin has seen things very closely that how women are given the role of a subordinate where they cannot, in anyway, assert their right to freedom, right to a healthy life and right to equality. Thus, her novel Shodh is a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain. This paper focuses upon the different dimensions of violence and their impact on the female protagonist Jhumur, who eventually takes a stand for establishing her own identity in the patriarchal set up.*

KEYWORDS: *Humiliation, Maltreatment, Oppressed, Subordinate, Transformation*

I. INRODUCTION

Violence against women is an age old practice which has now become a major issue of concern. Contemporary women poets like Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson and many have endeavoured to bring transformation through their writings by portraying the roles which are assigned to women from time immemorial. Besides these poets, many women novelists have also portrayed the plight of women, their struggle and sufferings due to the perpetrators of violence either, in the name of culture, religion or societal norms. In the history of English literature the writers who belonged to the school of art for art's sake said that the objective of literary piece is to give aesthetic pleasure to the reader but so far as the literary writers are concerned they are the product of the society, thus it is impossible for them to detach themselves from the world they live in. Therefore, the purpose of literature is not only to write for art's sake but also for life's sake so that the hidden truths of life would come in the lime light. Violence is a prominent issue in today's world as the world has witnessed two World Wars and numerous Civil Wars in one or the other country which became a reason of devastation and massive carnage all over the world. Hence, the literary writers are prone to portray the loss and sufferings which they have witnessed in their family, country or the world at large. Thus the most controversial novelist Taslima Nasrin's readings and scrutiny of her major novels viz. *Shodh* (1992) and *Lajja* (1994), clearly reveal that she believes in the theory 'art for life's sake' not art for art's sake.

Nasrin does not write to entertain the idle reader, instead she writes with a purpose and this purpose is to oppose and fight against injustice, oppression and gender bias. She became a voice of the marginalized and the victims who endeavour to survive in the cult of violence and anonymous authority which is probably be named as social, religious or patriarchal. The theme which preoccupies the mind of the writer in the novel *Shodh* is gender bias which eventually results in revenge. Being herself a victim of the patriarchal structures she has seen things very closely that how women are given the role of a subordinate where they cannot, in anyway, assert their right to freedom, right to a healthy life and right to equality. Moreover this issue obsesses Nasrin's mind so much that in almost each of her novels she takes up this theme either directly or indirectly. Eventually, it is obvious to say that a woman is the subordinate and man is the other who has all the rights to oppress, subjugate and violate therefore, a woman becomes the victim of violence. It is important to understand the concept of violence which is enforced most frequently now and then by their male counterparts or the other. Violence can be of mental or physical nature, inflicted at subjected, interpersonal or collective levels in the social, political, religious or domestic domain. Usually women have been the greatest sufferers in domestic violence and that is a major problem in the society of every nation. Violence against women is an "act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or sufferings to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty of her occurring in public or private life.

Some important causes of violence against women are sexual harassment, forced marriage, victims of rape, son's preference and suspicion." [1] Under such circumstances, women have always been suppressed and tortured. The last few decades have focused much attention on the specific group and its sufferings though the problems are age old. In fact, the Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are also the examples of age old maltreatment, torture, suppression, beatings and humiliation of women. The pathetic condition of women in society is itself an indicator of the low value set on women's lives, and their suffering is very well in tune with the social system and life pattern. Being a close witness of all these sufferings and humiliations Taslima Nasrin could not stop herself from portraying all such themes in her novels. Taslima Nasrin (1962-) is a Bangladeshi doctor, turned author, who has been living in exile since 1994. She works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought, equality for women and human rights by publishing, lecturing and campaigning. Early in her literary career, she wrote mainly poetry with female oppression as the theme. She started publishing prose in the early 1990's, and had produced three collections of essays and four novels before the publication of her controversial novel *Lajja* in 1994. Her other novels are *Oporpkho* (1992), *Shodh* (1992), *Nimontron* (1993), *Forashi Premik* (2002), and *Shorom* (2009).

Shodh is a story of revenge, dealing with a young woman Jhumur who is an educated girl and marries the man whom she loves. She breaks the news of her pregnancy to her husband, Haroon hoping to make him happy but to her utter dismay he accuses her of cheating on him by saying that it was not easy to conceive in six weeks and he puts an allegation that she wanted to get married to him hurriedly because she was carrying someone else's seed in her womb as he says, "...it's not possible to become pregnant in six weeks." [2] He forces her to get the child aborted which casts a deep psychological impact on Jhumur, so that she becomes vindictive and decides to avenge herself. In spite of being an educated, courageous and open minded woman her voice in the house-hold matters is suppressed. Radhika Coomraswamy says in her book *Violence Against Women*, "the refusal to recognize women's economic independence and empowerment is one of the main reasons for violence against women, accentuating thereby, their vulnerability and abuse." [3] Similarly, Jhumur whose independence, dreams of happiness in marriage and child bearing are shattered when her husband Haroon forced her to abort her first offspring. This left a menacing and dark impact on her psyche which was impossible to heal. Usually in the patriarchal society it has been witnessed that "women are terrorized and even killed for being unable to produce a male child. Parental preference for son gives rise to female foeticide." [4] On the contrary Jhumur's case is entirely different but the irony occurs when she conceives early and is accused of carrying some other man's child in her womb. This allegation and mental wound kills her spirit to live and shatters all her preconceived notions. Thus, through the character of Jhumur, Taslima Nasrin exposes the ugly face of sophisticated elites of society and who under the cover of material well being rob their women's happiness and mental peace. Nasrin lays emphasis on a woman's perpetual struggle against all odds to create a niche for herself. Jhumur cannot cultivate a sense of belongingness to the home of her husband, Haroon because there is lack of love, harmony, mental peace and mutual understanding.

Through the story of Jhumur and Haroon, Nasrin lays stress on the need for love, harmony and a little freedom in relations, while before marriage Jhumur and Haroon seem to be a perfect couple, the relationship loses its charm once the egocentric, suspicious and chauvinistic male supersedes the lover Haroon. Nasrin very closely examines the negative impact that such disharmony in married relationship creates upon the woman concerned. Eventually in order to avenge herself Jhumur gets intimate with Afzal, a paying guest in her house, and finally gives birth to a son, labelling him as Haroon's son. Haroon's loving of the baby ardently, thinking him to be his own son is highly ironical and serves the novelist's purpose of casting a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain. Jhumur feels happy and doesn't harbor any guilty feelings about bringing Ananda, her son into the world of Haroon and his family. She adheres to her action and says:

I took recourse to that to avenge the indignity I suffered. I'm not so insignificant, or of no account, that I'll swallow my utter humiliation in the hands of my husband and remain forever beholden to him." [5] She goes on to say, "my heart swells with happiness when Haroon cuddles Ananda and calls him 'Baba'. I have doused the fire of suspicion that had raged ferociously in Haroon's heart and left mine charred, with waters from the fountain of joy that has bedewed me from within." [6]

There are several witnesses of women's oppression and torture, they have been the prime victims of violence in every communal strife, riots and wars. It is aptly said by Dr. Archana Sinha, "it has been quite distressing experience all over the world that in any conflict, a war, civil strife, communal riots or disturbances women and children became the prime victims of violence."

Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victims of rape.”[7] Like Taslima Nasrin some other literary writers have explored this issue of violence against women in their works. During the cataclysmic event i.e. the partition of India, women were abducted, raped and killed brutally. Therefore, the partition and post partition writers like Khushwant Singh, Amrita Pritam , Bapsi Sidhwa, and Amitava Ghosh have portrayed the plight of women and their unimaginable sufferings in their novels. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* is a vivid portrayal of women’s misery and savage killings whereas Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar* is a revenge story set in the wake of partition. Pritam has shown how women become the prime victim of violence and prone to unimaginable torture and humiliation at the hands of the people belonging to the other community.

Thus to conclude, it is apt to say that patriarchal system in the society is the root of male hierarchical order where power is enjoyed by them only and as violence accompanies power-it does nothing except giving torture to a person who is powerless. Foucault has also supported this concept of power as he has said that power is dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body and it is aptly associated in the case of Jhumur, where she is compelled to get the child aborted because Haroon has power to which Jhumur is subjected and surrendered. It has been witnessed that a relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things it forces and results in harmful and devastating actions. Nasrin’s focus is laid upon the drastic impact of the abortion case on Jhumur i.e. how she becomes vindictive and eventually succeeds in avenging herself to the best she could do. Hence, it has been experienced universally that “male violence exceeds female violence and exploiters, oppressors give way to the exploited and oppressed to counter violence.”[8] The suppression of Jhumur’s voice and her desires compelled her to act in a diverse form which ultimately gives her courage to establish her own identity and regain her self respect and individuality besides being a wife, mother, daughter in law. Jhumur’s words are actually motivating for every woman to take a stand in order to maintain her own individuality and respect. She says:

I feel I’m strong. That I am someone, separate and distinct from me as Haroon’s wife, Ananda’s ma, Ma-in-law’s Bouma, Dolon, Hasan, Habib’s Bhabi...No. I’m Zeenat Sulatana, Jhumur, a teacher. I am not something to be flung away, I’m not a thing, something, anything to add grace to a house, to embellish a family....Haroon recognizes I won’t tolerate his cruelty; that I am no his slave; that I dare. I have remade my own life. I love Haroon without surrendering myself, without doing away with all my aspirations.[9]

Nasrin has expressed her experience regarding violence, exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination of women in the patriarchal society. Probing deep into the psyche of her characters, she graphically delineates the traumatic impact of violence on the protagonist and other family members. Nasrin’s novel tries to make the people aware of the importance of love, cordiality, harmony which is essential for the progressive and peaceful life of the human beings.

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