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**MATRIX OF VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE: A FEMINISTIC STUDY OF TASLIMA
NASREEN'S NOVEL *FRENCH LOVER***

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ABSTRACT

Taslina Nasreen in the literary canon of Bangladeshi English writers is hailed as one of the most powerful voices. The conventional perception of gender roles in a socio-cultural setup cast women as emotional, weak, nurturing, sub-ordinate and submissive thereby casting men as strong, and rational, protective and decisive beings. Therefore, women are expected to fit themselves in this frame, where in every sense they are inferior to men and lose their entire identity. Taslima Nasreen in her life fights constantly against this nuisance of age old practice of violence against women which has now become a major issue of concern in today's world. Thus, this present paper, studies the vital subject of violence and sacrifice under patriarchal control against women as is narrated by Taslima Nasreen in her novel *French Lover*.

Keywords: conventional perception, socio-cultural setup, Taslima Nasreen, Bangladesh, violence, patriarchy.

The novel *French Lover* tells us the story of patriarchal control over Molina by her husband Anirban, over Chaitali by her husband Sunilda, and over protagonist Nilanjana by her husband Kishanlal, by her father Anirban, and the domination of her friends and lover especially Benoir. *French Lover* is her medium to convey her views on various sociological, political issues that encompass not only the fate of any nation but also that of women everywhere. The analysis focuses on the failure of marriage in the case of various individuals, especially that of protagonist Nila. Taslima through her novel *French Lover* brings out the sufferings of women characters under the name of religious, traditions, codes, and cultural practice of the society. She discusses elaborately the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society. While talking about her mother Molina, Taslima tells us about her father's patriarchal control over her in the family: "It was always Anirban who decided where the sofa or the beds would be and even what was to be cooked

that day in the kitchen. Molina was there only to execute his wishes. Anirban made it amply clear that the house was not Molina's stand he was the lord and master. That is how it was until Nila left the country and Molina this world." (Taslina *French Lover* 215)

Taslina Nasrin in her writing especially in the novels presents marriage as exploitative and it unavoidably ends in divorce, preceded by husband's polygamous marriage. It is through the perspective of oppressed and displaced women that the institutions and practices of marriage and divorce are examined. She uses daily events and happenings as evidence for the conclusion that subordination and economic exploitation of women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationship.

The custom and tradition of any nation demand marriage as the legitimate institution to organize a family which is a universal fact, the core part of which is centralized in a man and his wife. Affection and love seems to be the password for

emotional attachment and adjustment for a happy married life. A couple having 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 woman's liberation it is a truth that society expects a woman to make compromises to keep the family intact and happy where she has to be a domestic slave and has to be at the back and call of her husband. Thus, she loses her real identity and is reduced to nothing. Meena Shirwadkar, in *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* says: "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." (Meena 173)

The institution of marriage, quite with all its expectations, falls heavily on a woman. However, when it becomes a battlefield between two egoistic individuals who are not ready for compromise, it proves survival of the fittest, but 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 but the brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union. Taslima's protagonist in the novel *French Lover* Nila proves 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.

Even a casual reading of the novel makes one conscious that Nasrin is not only writing about her female protagonist Nila, who is a victim of the institution of marriage and identity crisis, but through Nila, also about other women who are subjugated and enslaved. Kishan never understands the identity of Nila. Women have faced the identity crisis, but the crisis seems to occur mostly because of the control men exercise over women. A crisis in one's identity leads to a heightened sense of alienation. Nila leaves Kishan's home. Nasrin generalizes Nila's experiences as a subjugated woman and the subsequent trauma she undergoes

and her successful exit as an individual to raise consciousness among women in general.

Nilanjana Mandal who is the heroine of the novel *French Lover* is a young lady of twenty seven (27). She really searches for 'true love'. Her entire 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 patriarchal 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. In the beginning in her marriage, she tries to do just that. She tries to obey her husband. 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.

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 woman can discover herself as an individual. Nasrin introduces Nila as an apostle of the liberation movement, advocating freedom from the tradition bound Indian woman. Taslima's protagonist is more a creature of instincts than of intellect. Her entire 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. In the novel, all the men 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 novel *French Lover* gives a 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, communal violence can never, never take place. Taslima's 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." Taslima makes a positive authorial intervention to bring about reconciliation between the two warring communities, the Muslims and the Hindus of Bangladesh.

Female characters of Taslima Nasrin fly from East to West and West and East, in the hope of enjoying bliss through marriage, which is not to be. Almost all the women characters suffer sexual atrocity. It may not be necessarily from unknown men but the men of their own family and men who happened to be their friends. Pathetically enough, sex does not distinguish a daughter or a friend, Nasrin generalizes the plight of women by introducing various women characters in parallel situations where in the experience of one woman happens to be that of other women. Ultimately the culmination becomes the liberation or emancipation of women from men. This may be like Nilanjana leaving her husband to live with her friend or like Danielle leaving her father to live alone in the company of friends of her own. The heroine removes herself from her family and her husband because she feels she has an identity of her own that cannot be related to anybody else.

The life of Nila after her marriage undergoes a massive change. Her free will gets curbed, her independence broken and her very life squeezed out. This all generally happens to a woman after her marriage. Nila's overall transformation has been brought about by the compulsions of her married life, more particularly by the domineering behaviour of her husband. In the novel *French Lover*, the kind of life expected of Nila, as she herself says is: "I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master, you are the boss, without you my life is pointless and I am a mere servant who will clean your house, cook, serve and provide sexual gratification at night. (79) Kishan further grudging against Nila, 'today you are on leave, but from tomorrow you will have to get down to house work, okay?'" (Taslima *French Lover* 18)

Nila started working like a maidservant in the house. She sat at his feet and untied the shoelaces

with her slim fingers and took off his shoes and socks. She felt like a complete housemaid, a little like Chitra who used to take everyone's shoes off, just as she was doing. Here, Nila wondered if there was any difference between a prostitute's client and a husband. The only difference she could find was that the client can get away only after paying off the prostitute whereas the husband can get off the hook without ever paying his wife's dues. She felt that a prostitute actually has more freedom than the wife in more ways than one.

The pattern of life in male dominated families is such that if any family member gets indisposed all of sudden, the whole family keep themselves at his or her back and call, thinking of his speedy recovery, keep themselves busy all the time looking, caring, nursing etc but when the wife of the family gets indisposed, everybody gets irritated at her being in the sick-list. The wife has to remain forever healthy so as to shoulder all the responsibilities to look after the family but not herself. Nila's mother fell ill. Nila reflects on how and why she fell ill. It was because, like most women, she was expected to look after the family but not herself. The doctor explains: "The illness isn't sudden; it was festering for a long time. It was just a boil in her intestine at first and that was haemorrhaging. It could have been operated quite easily. But because it was allowed to grow, it turned into cancer. This is the problem with patients' families. They don't begin treatment on time and when it is too late the throw their weight around." (Taslima *French Lover* 143)

The novel *French Lover* is about an important theme of male-female encounter, which assumes a rare depth and validity. In other words, it may be summed up as man-woman relationship in the context of marital and extra-marital relationships. We find the disharmony between Nilanjana and Kishanlal the two individuals of different tastes and feelings as in the family of Sunilda and his wife Chaitali. Benoir and his wife tell about a woman who is willing to give her husband to another woman for the sake of love. Monique Mathew, the French citizen turned Indian, after marrying an Indian, travels from France to India in the hope of living with her husband forever. But destiny decides differently, she gets divorce. Destiny snatches Molina away from

Anirban in their relationship. Molina has been neglected for long and there is no treatment for her disease which results she dies. Danielle, a French citizen, has a very bitter childhood to recall. Her father had raped her. She has suffered many times because of the sexual vulgarity of the people around her which results she turns Lesbian. Nila's relation with Sushanta, exposes the infidelity of a love that fails before marriage. At last the girl Nila marries Kishanlal in the hope of love and happiness but: "Nila had her share of dreams about her life sustained only on love. Perhaps every Bengal was born with that desire." (Taslima French Lover 19)

Women are subjected to extreme brutalities. No place is safe, neither the home, the campus, the workplace nor the street. No age is safe, little girls, young women and even old women can be the victims of rape. The enormity of the offence can be gauged from the Amnesty International report which was released on the eve of 8th March 1991 and submitted to the United Nations Commissions on women's Status which declares that: "Rape continues to be a phenomenon prevailing in every region of the world and under every system of government. The victims have included babies, teenagers, pregnant women and even older women above sixty." (Sethe 144)

They are nowhere safe and secure, not with parents, with brothers, with friends and not even with their husbands. Taslima herself was raped in her girlhood by her uncles. In French Lover, Sunil, a friend of Nila's brother assaults her sexually. It is always considered shameful for a woman to have relations with men who are not their husbands. However, man can have as many intimate relations as he likes. Any girl who sleeps with a boyfriend makes her ineligible for marriage and that is the worst punishment for her in Bangladeshi society or in any other society but this is not so with a man. Kishanlal in French Lover takes pride in patronising a fallen woman and wishes her to be grateful to him for this benevolence. Kishanlal had married a French woman to get French citizenship and concealed the fact from Nila. When Nila shows her annoyance, he in return taunts her for having slept with her lover Sushanta and silences her. Here is an account of oppression of female sex given by Engels, "The man

seized the reins in the house also. The woman was degraded, enthralled as a slave of man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children." (Sushanta 96)

Taslima Nasreen clearly observes that the position of a married woman and the demands made on her by society. Most of her works express how the very first step after marriage is marked by extreme sacrifice of starting a new life at a new place and entirely under new conditions. It is nothing less than a new birth. She is forced to believe that her own wishes and interests are subordinate to those of her husband and his family. They are property of men and represent their honour and the honour of their family. In the novel French Lover, Nila is not allowed to do a job, not even to move outside. She is forced to stay inside the whole day, cook, work, and to keep the dignity of the house intact like a complete maidservant. Nirmala Sathe agrees, "In society women are seen as the property of men and represent the honour of the male, the family and the community." (Sathe 186)

Married woman is not a woman who always suffers; even an unmarried woman also suffers for not being married. Hence, for parents girls of marriageable age are a big concern. Mithu in the novel French Lover commits suicide for not being married in her life. It is less the non-fulfilment of her sexual desires but more the shame of her coarse looks that drives her to kill herself. She had earlier requested Nila to find a suitable match for her but she couldn't:

Find me a man; you know I am four years older than you. Baba was a clerk and the job has gone. Now he is a watchman in the same office. Dada is jobless. Whoever comes to see me for a match rejects me because of my dark skin. Baba doesn't have any money to offer me a fat dowry. Nila, you are married and youth wouldn't know what a crime it is in this society to stay unmarried. I have passed my B.A. long ago and I am sitting at home. I am nothing but a burden on my parents. I am an eyesore. A man abroad. I am not particular about religion; anything will do, if only he agrees to marry me. There is no one in this country who'll marry me This is such a

big crime of mine. Nila, if someone marries me and then treats me like a servant, I don't mind-at least please marry me. If you find someone, old, mad. (Taslima French Lover 136-137)

Later on, Nila is informed about Mithu's hanging, sacrificing herself at the altar of family's honour. Obviously, a girl's life has less worth than family's honour. Once a girl is married off, nobody in her parental home is ready to take her in again. A famous proverb is often repeated to the Indian girls, "Dear daughter, go to your husband's home in palanquin, but come out only on a hearse." Married girls are discouraged by their parents to complain about her in-laws or her husband. It is never told to Nila by her father whether she is comfortable or happy but he is always full of sympathy for Kishanlal. He even is not ready to let her stay at their place: "After marriage your husband's house is your home. There lie all your rights. Girls come to their father's place for a short while, not to stay." He further warns her, "Either go back to Paris, or kill yourself like Mithu and let us off." (Taslima French Lover 154-155)

Taslim herself worked as a gynaecologist, and had witnessed fear and worry writ on the faces of the women who gave birth to a girl-children. When she informed the waiting relatives outside the room, of the arrival of a girl, their faces were transformed with gloom: "How undesirable was the arrival of a girl child was something I witnessed almost every day. To stop the wails of a twenty-one year old woman who had given birth to a girl child, I had said, "Being a woman yourself, you don't desire a girl child, what a shame!" The woman told me in a low tone, "I will be given talaq, if that happens, where will I go?" (World, BBC News)

Thus, depicting the plight and predicament of the Bangladeshi women, Taslima admits: "The life of woman beckoned me. Women made me think constantly. I perpetually experienced the sorrows and pains of women. The pain that I had suffered in my life was the pain of a woman. Was the pain mine alone? I know, it had to be the pain of thousands of other women." (Wild Wind 507)

Taslima believes that religions all over the world are responsible to a large extent for the deplorable condition of women and thus rejects religions. It is not only Islam but every religion which undermines women. She criticizes, "If any religion keeps people in ignorance, if any religion allows people to persecute other people of different faith and if any religion keeps women in slavery then I cannot accept that religion." (No Country for Women 227)

One important aspect of feminism is hatred for men. In the novel French Lover, Danielle, the lesbian, hates men and has never allowed any man to come close to her. Having been raped by her father in her adolescence, she suggests an analogy with Taslima too who was raped by her uncles at round the same age. Danielle warns Nila against men, "You have seen how life is with a man . . . Hasn't it taught you a lesson?" (Taslima French Lover 118) She concludes, "All men are the same. They all exploit women." (Taslima French Lover 118)

Taslima Nasreen in her writings suggests that emancipation from the bondage of man is not possible without economic independence and education because women's dependence on men is largely responsible for their low status in society. Taslima debunks all patriarchal structures through her novels and makes her heroines debunk them; it does not matter whether it is religion or tradition or socio-cultural restraints. She chisels them in a way where they can evolve into their independent stature by acquiring education and economic freedom. These characters whether they are Nila, Jhumur or Maya-all shape independent destiny for themselves by asserting their rights on their body and their circumstances.

Thus, Taslima Nasreen asserts her stance vociferously regarding a woman's right not only to exist but to live in a dignified manner where she can be the mistress of her body and her soul.

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