

Rahul Yadav

Research Scholar

Dept. Of English And Foreign Languages

M.D.U. Rohtak

India

yadavrahul3578@gmail.com

SUBJUGATION TO LIBERATION: IN TASLIMA NASRIN'S NOVEL *SHODH*

Abstract:

Taslima Nasrin is a secular humanist writer who fights for the freedom, equality and rights of women in her works. Woman is considered as 'other', less human being and 'object' in male dominated society. They are suppressed, oppressed and limited to the four walls of the house. Thus provided subjugated position in the patriarchal society. Nasrin's novel *Shodh* truly, emphasize on subjugation to liberation where Jhumur, the protagonist, liberates herself in her own unique way. In the novel *Shodh*, the protagonist is restrained to family and 'womb'. This novel revolves around, restricting her status to an 'incomplete' individual, one who defined 'with reference to man'. The protagonist further uprooted patriarchal norms by rebel and liberated to get her own status in society. *Shodh* is all about revenge (getting even), and then upliftment of woman. In the end of the novel, Jhumur got freedom and free herself from the shackles of the society. Now she has liberated herself by getting social and economical equality and stability.

Key Words: Subjugation, Liberation, Patriarchal, Freedom

Taslima Nasrin was born (1962) and brought up in a small town Mymensingh in Bangladesh in a very fearful and restricted environment. She started writing poetry and columns in the daily newspapers and weekly magazines at an early age of thirteen. After completing her MBBS degree in Dhaka medical college she turned to writing. She has published several volumes of poetry and non –fiction among which *Nirbachita Column* (Selected Column,1993) had won her wide acclaim. Till date she has published around 35 books of poetry, essay collections, short stories, novels and autobiographical works. Her published novels include *Shodh* (2003), *Nimantran* (2010), *Lajja* (1994), *French Lover*

(2002), *Homecoming* originally published under the name of *Phera* (2005), and *Brahmaputra Ke Tat Par* (2015). One of her latest book *Split A Life* published in 2018. Her literary work was first acknowledged in 1992 when she received prestigious Anand Puraskar awarded by the Anand Bazar Patrika of Kolkata. Up to now she has been awarded twenty nine international awards, the latest among them being the Simone de Beauvoir Feminist Award for the year 2008, and Ingemar Hedenious Award 2014.

At the time of the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992, communal riots broke out in Bangladesh. Taslima Nasrin traumatized the harrowing scenes and gave expression to her observations in the novel *Lajja*. A fatwa was issued against her life that attracted the attention of the liberals all over the world. Since then she has been living in exile in India, France, Sweden and other parts of Europe. She visited India at a literary event in Malda, West Bengal and in a Literary Festival at Jaipur 2017. Recently she visited at The Hindu Lit for Life 2018.

Taslima Nasrin is undoubtedly a feminist, rational, lover of freedom, and secular humanist writer who criticize and transcends the traditional boundaries, rebels against religious atrocities and regressive social norms. She stubbornly refuses to follow conventionality and denied to be absorbed into a system. She says, “I do not believe in bowing my head before

anyone or anything” (Swahney n.pag.). Resistance and rebellion, according to her, is thus a powerful step to save herself from the subjugation and to proceed towards liberation. Nasrin’s own experience as a woman in a Muslim society is a decisive factor throughout her writings. Her protagonists are subjugated by religious or patriarchal traditions. They are in constant search of their own rights which includes understanding and breaking the barriers of domestic chores, customs, and traditions created by religious and patriarchal world. Hence, in an attempt to assert their dignity and autonomy in the social and intellectual world, they undergo tremendous dilemmas, pulls and pressures of their own emotional world. Thus, Nasrin’s fiction embodies a theme to protest against subjugation and continue their efforts to get liberation.

Further, Taslima Nasrin constantly appears in newspapers, magazines, and a number of reviews related to her fiction. Attadeepa Maurya conducted a study entitled as “ Violence and Women: A Critical Study of Taslima Nasrin’s Novel *Shodh*”. The findings of this study reveal that in any kind of war women are the major victims of violence, torture, and

humiliation. The theme in the novel *Shodh* is gender bias which eventually results in revenge. Taslima Nasrin herself being the victim of patriarchal structure has keenly observed that how women are given the role of subordinate where they fail to assert their right to freedom and parity. This novel is a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal structure where a woman's fidelity is under suspicion and doubt that subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain. Eventually the protagonist Jhumur takes a stand for establishing her own recognition and gets success in it.

Imtiaz A Tantrey and Kranti Vats in their study "Plight of Bangladeshi Woman in Taslima Nasreen's Novel *Shodh* attempts to see how the patriarchal subjugation and marginalization, religion and traditions have increased the oppression and sufferings of women all over the world in general and more specific in Bangladesh. The protagonist eventually succeeds to control her identity in her family and makes a space of her own.

Rakhi Bhatia in her paper "Aggression and Women: *Shodh*. A Story of Woman's Retaliation by Taslima Nasrin" works on the theme of gender bias that ultimately results to revenge. Taslima Nasrin being the victim of male chauvinistic world, closely understands that subjugation hampers to bid life in one's on terms with freedom and equality. Nasrin believes in the theory of 'art for life's sake' instead of 'art for art's sake'. She writes to oppose and fight against injustice, suppression, and gender discrimination. At last establishes her identity in the male dominated society. Some of the significant critical studies on Nasreen's works include "*Shodh: A Site of Subaltern Articulation: The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasrin*" (1999) by Saiyeda Khatun.

A Number of researchers have examined different aspects of Taslima Nasrin's fiction. The present study contends that in order to understand her novels in correct perspective, it is not enough to examine issues related to quest for identity, violence, cross-cultural conflict, blasphemy and the like. There is further a need to undertake a close critical analysis of her novel *Shodh* which can enhance a reader's knowledge related to different aspects of her treatment of the theme of subjugation to liberation. It is also important to investigate the stereotypical belief systems that convince us that, "the burdens of power are too great to seek and the happiness of powerlessness is too great to leave" (Rakesh and Nawale "Preface"). Nasrin's fiction is an effort to break the prisons of predictions with a motive that leads to enhance and glorify the individuality and liberation of women.

Feminism is a serious attempt to understand, formulate and find solutions to gender problems and move in the direction of liberation of women from various forms of patriarchal

and religious oppression by ensuring equal rights and social justice. Its key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined and a woman is trained to fit into those roles. The concept and roles of 'daughter' or 'mother' are not inherited but acquired because a woman is groomed in accordance with the demand of the role. In a situation where the economic and socio-cultural roles are pre-determined. These alien forces correspond to various structures and control mechanisms like patriarchy and social conditioning.

The term liberation has been defined in various ways. The term Liberation: "resonates not just with independence from oppression and male supremacy for individual women, but with solidarity among women seeking independence and ending oppression for women collectively" (Napikoski n.pag.). If take 'Women Liberation' then it means "A movement directed towards the removal of attitudes and practices that preserve inequalities based upon the assumption that men are superior to women" (Women's n.pag.). Margaret Fuller, a distinguished editor and journalist, USA, believed that education, employment and political rights are the key factors to achieve liberation for women through providing adequate opportunity to use their potential. The 'first wave' of feminism refers to the political activity that led to right to vote to women in the United States and Great Britain.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* "...has had a worldwide impact. Most feminists consider it to have been the impetus behind what is called the 'second wave' of feminism" (qtd. in Arp 265). She argued that men are able to mystify women and this mystification and stereotyping worked as a means to perpetuate and strengthen patriarchy. Women too accepted this stereotype and were thus a means of their own oppression. It is not only the male members of the house but the females also who take advantage of their superior status in the family hierarchy and pass on the stereotype, thus adding to their misery. Man was the ideal, the norm and woman the follower or the 'other', attempting to achieve perfection and trying to be like the man. Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* asserts: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the subject, he is the absolute--she is the other" (86). Further she concisely summed up: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283). Various structures and manifestations of patriarchy are responsible for confining a woman to merely feminine roles and expectations. Choices are pre-decided and restrictive in nature, therefore, one is not free to choose. Beauvoir's major contribution was to shift the focus from biological aspect to a social one, which is man made, and to establish how liberation of women can be achieved through controlling the influence of external forces like patriarchy

and social conditioning. Feminists stress the importance of freedom and autonomy of the women that involve creativity and lead to progress.

Kate Millet makes a distinction between sex and gender; sex is biologically determined whereas gender is socially, culturally made through sex-role stereotyping. Feminism has included race as a factor and defined feminist theory in terms of analyzing gender. Feminist theory is the philosophical and analytical approach that employs the political position (feminism) to read cultural practices, whereas, “feminist criticism... is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (Toril Moi 204). The problem of inequality between the sexes was highlighted by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and also Olive Scheiner in *Women and Labour*. Virginia Woolf examined the problems that women face particularly in academic circles and argued that these differences could be removed only when women achieve social and economic equality with men. Elaine Showalter attempted to intervene in cultural practices or mechanisms of patriarchy in late 1970, through shifting the attention from ‘androtexs’ (books by men) to gynotexs (books by women). She called it as gynocriticism that covers the history, style, themes, genres and structure of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity, potential and norms of female literary tradition. Showalter classified the three main stages of women writing as:

A Feminine phase (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards. Then comes a Feminist phase (1880-1920), which is a protest phase, where women authors rebelled against patriarchal attitudes. This phase represented women’s demand for freedom, autonomy and liberation. And finally a Female phase (1920 onwards), it has distinct female identity, style and content which represent women writer’s search for their own voice and identity as opposed to the identity imposed by patriarchy and social conditioning. It is a stage of liberation of women as a whole. This phasing was needed to attain theoretical respectability and to establish a sense of progress. The upliftment of women begins from resistance of women against patriarchal attitudes that have been learnt by conditioning or reinforcement, and demand for liberation from patriarchal and religious oppression and suppression. The last stage is the stage of liberation of women that can be achieved by de-learning of patriarchal control mechanisms, and re-learning of new values that are based on freedom, equality, autonomy and involve one’s creativity, potential and liberation from old values.

Taslina Nasrin emerges as an independent liberal author who does not take the traditional view regarding the status of women for granted. She believes that each woman in

the world has a right to live with honour and dignity and tears apart the ethical cover-up of the subordinating practices of patriarchal structures. She draws on heavily from her practical real life experiences and activities to discuss women's problems. Uprooted from her original home by religious fundamentalists, she has since lived in India, France, Sweden and other parts of Europe. Her rootlessness has been a shattering as well as a uniquely learning experience for her. Her assertion that "My world is gradually shrinking" speaks for itself. In her interviews, essays and lectures, she constantly talks about her situations as a displaced person and identifies herself as an 'unhoused writer'. Her ideas of liberation of women have thus been translated into reality in her own life that she has lived so far. She initiates a break with the tradition of Bangladeshi literature that has witnessed a tradition of celebrating the self-sacrificing womanhood. She does not commend such renunciation and criticizes religion, traditions and the oppressive cultural customs which discriminate women.

Taslina Nasrin, thus, emerges as a rebel in her writings who opposes and rejects all rotten conventions and accepted norms of society. "I rebel-therefore we exist ..." this famous formulation in Albert Camus' renowned philosophical work *The Rebel* (1971). The act of rebellion, as Taslima Nasrin asserts, is linked to the awareness of those minimal attributes of life which have to be respected and which can not be abrogated under any condition. Rebellion is thus a powerful step towards the subjugated women to restore their liberation. Subjugated women in male oriented and male dominated society use this tool to attain and realize their sense of dignity, autonomy, and liberation.

In Korchin's opinion: "Man differs from all other creatures in his capacity for awareness and self-consciousness. We each have a unique and distinctive view of reality. As we conceive others, we also conceptualize ourselves, and have hopes, aspirations and values for as-yet non-existent future. Our perceptions, expectations, fantasies, and personal meanings give direction and purpose to our external and visible behaviour" (369). He also argues that "Humans have an inherent capacity for growth; they can change, make choices, and determine their own destinies" (369). Taslime Nasrin's women empowered with inherent capacity for growth makes stand and raises questions against their subjugation and demand their rights of freedom equality and liberation.

The review of the writings of Taslima Nasrin with special reference to her major novel –*Shodh* (2003), distinctly shows that she writes with a motive and the motive is to raise questions against the misrule of patriarchy, religion and its oppression and gender bias. Fictional works of Taslima Nasrin mainly deal with the themes related with fundamentalism, feminism, home and homelessness and human relationships. The protagonist of her novel

Shodh reveal tolerance, love and harmony where no community or sex is superior to another and each individual has equal right to live on equal footing. Due to some clever manipulations by male dominated ideology and structures, women were trained to be domestic and subordinate, but the women of today want to liberate themselves from the unwritten norms of patriarchy. Nasrin has used her writings as a medium of revolting against the inhuman practices in society in general and against enslavement/liberation of woman by patriarchal system in particular.

In the novel *Shodh* unlike her other novels, Taslima Nasrin seeks to revolutionize the concept of love and marriage in traditional-bound societies, where the women protagonists faces suppression and subjugation by the advocates of religion, patriarchy, and conventionality while they works as a wife, mother, or daughter-in-law. The motive of this novel is to oppose and fight against injustice, oppression, and gender bias. Taslima Nasrin has observed that women are treated as object and kept them bound within four walls where they fail to assert their right to freedom and equality. In this novel the protagonist is treated as 'other' in her husband's home. *Shodh* is a story of revenge, dealing with a young woman Jhumur who is an educated girl and marriage the man whom she loves. The novel explores the institution of marriage and its regulatory structure of surveillance and subordination. Taslima Nasrin raises questions regarding the position and status of a newly married woman in her husband's home. The bride in new environment remains always worried and tense. There is no freedom no mental peace. The writer compares Jhumur's position with that of the maid Rosuni and says, "In a sense Rosuni, the maid of the house and I, the bou, were in the same boat.... Rosuni cooked, so do I; she tidied the rooms, I did as well." But at times I felt Rosuni avails more freedom as: "She could lift her veil whenever she pleased. I had to keep my head covered" (12).

In patriarchal setup women lives behind shadow of her father during her childhood and of her husband after marriage. Women do household works, they have no role in decision making largely engaged in non earning domestic work and have no power, no honour, and no recognition. Moreover, "observance of purdah (seclusion) stands as bottlenecks to women's freedom of movement" (Abdul Hakim 41). It explores the transformation of a girl who initially embodies the spirit of freedom, into a 'normal wife' through the rites of marriage, so that the girl happily abandons exploration of life on her own terms and follows the new program of renunciation to achieve the status of a good wife. But Nasrin's women characters are all dominated by emotions, they are not ready to tune themselves to the domestic sphere ruled by man. Jhumur, the protagonist of the novel, subverts the patriarchal agenda of

appropriation and effacement of the female. She tells the news of her pregnancy to Haroon, her husband, in a hope to be happy but gets utter discourage as he accuses her of cheating him say that it was not easy to conceive in a very short time of six weeks and puts a blame of carrying someone else's seed it is not possible "Can one conceive in six weeks time ... it's not possible to become pregnant that soon" (73). Haroon forces her to abort the child, it deeply affected her emotions and psychological makeup, and breaks the faith and develops the seeds of hatred in her heart. She becomes revengeful and decides to punish him. The voice of an educated open minded, and courageous woman in the household matters and in every sphere of life is suppressed. Jhumur's dreams of independence, happiness in marriage, and child bearing are shattered as Haroon forces her to abort the child. It is a threatening challenge and a dark impact on her psyche and not possible to heal. Women are suppressed and subjugated for the causes that are not under their control as Coomaraswamy argued: "women are terrorized and even killed for being unable to produce a male child. Parental preference for son given rise to female foeticide" (qtd. in Maurya 24). This novel stands for 'getting even' (revenge) from her husband who suspected her of bearing a child of someone else, by conceiving a child outside of marriage, and passing him off as Haroon's legitimate son. Jhumur's in-laws' home is not a place where she can find harmony, understanding and self respect. There is a perpetual tug-of-war for self-assertion and liberation with Jhumur on one side and Haroon, her husband, together with other members of the family, on the other.

In spite of being an educated, courageous and open-minded woman, her dreams of happiness in marriage and child-bearing are shattered. Taslima Nasrin exposes the ugly face of patriarchal society who under the cover of marital well being, deprived woman of joys and happiness in life. Jhumur makes continuous efforts to retain her individuality against the patriarchal 'rites' and Haroon's paranoid feelings that threatened her identity as an individual and as a woman. Jhumur reveals the ugly face of patriarchal society that under the cover of conventionality subjugates the innocent brides makes away their happiness and mental peace. There is Jhumur's perpetual struggle against all odds-the oppression and subjugation to create a niche to liberate herself that can be possible via love, faith, harmony, mutual understanding and peace. While before marriage the couple of Jhumur and Haroon seems to be perfect. The relationship losses its charm when irrational causes comes into sight in the form of paranoid feelings like suspiciousness, lack of faith; preudice and irrational demands of conventionality. Finally for revenge Jhumur herself gets intimate with Afzal, a paying guest in her house and gives birth to a son, named Ananda. No one knows anything about it. Afzal conveniently goes to Australia. Haroon considers newborn Ananda as his own child. The

revenge is completed that serves the novelist purpose of casting a splitting blow to the patriarchal setup where a woman nature is considered suspicious and doubtful ,therefore woman faces subjugation anguish and pain. Jhumur a bold and courageous feels no guilt bringing Ananda in the life of Haroon and his family.

After her second pregnancy, she succeeds in creating a respectable space for herself and is able to mould the whole family environment in her favour. At the time of the child birth, atmosphere was festive and Jhumur, as a mother of the male child, was the focus of attention. She gets more freedom as: “I’m no longer the veiled daughter-in-law of the house; I’m the mother of the precious scion of the family. I’m somebody, for sure!” (208). Jhumur suggested the name of the child which was accepted by the family as: ““Never mind, let me give it its pet name Ananda,’ I demand. ‘Okay then, Ananda it will be!’” (209). Now all the members give importance and value of Jhumur’s opinion in all family matters. She herself observes it as: “I like to see the values my opinion. I’m regarded as wise, not silly. That’s why, perhaps, the rent from the downstairs flat comes straight to me and is no longer given to Ma-in-law” (215).

Nasreen considers education a liberalizing factor and attached great importance to it. She thinks it indispensable to make woman realize their potentialities and to make them financially independent. Jhumur has moulded whole family environment in her favour and she enjoys more liberty and freedom. At the end of the novel, Jhumur shows a copy of a letter she has written accepting a job offer, to a group of all her old friends gathered for a meal on their invitation. Their reactions reveal how glad they were: “Except for Haroon everybody is clapping” (223). Each person has an urge to want to ‘become’ or ‘realize’ himself. Jhumur says to Haroon about the job: “You didn’t allow to me to work after we got married. . . . I have given you this surprise of taking up a job. I have given you the proof of my capabilities” (224). Every person wants to earn money and to be economically independent. Jhumur further says, “I want to find out how it feels to earn money of one’s own, what it’s like to spend on what one wants. I too wish to give money to others, to you, to Ananda, to my parents. I want to take on the responsibility of others, like you have done” (225). Her teaching employment signifying her independent financial status in the last phase of the novel, by this accomplishes her search for liberation. She has finally succeeded in reaching a position where she would be able to utilize her potential to the utmost that became possible by moving from subjugation to liberation.

Taslima Nasrin, being bold and fearless reveals all the real events to the society without any fear. It shows her real image of liberation. Taslima Nasrin's protagonists do not

submit to their contenders, they observe patiently, revolt against stereotypical belief system of patriarchy and religion and assert their significance. Jhumur the leading character of *Shodh* attains dignity, freedom and liberation by taking revenge from her husband and joining a job of teaching. In her narration she is very bold and fearless, and real image of liberation. Jhumur challenges the ritualistic, dogmatic, religious and patriarchal practices in different ways and make her best efforts to succeed in realizing her dreams of leading a dignified, autonomous, and liberal life.

Taslima Nasrin regards the search for liberation as one of the propelling forces of the human life. She projects her characters persistently struggling with their conflicting selves and the environment. She has also worked on various dimensions of pressures exerted by the complex nature and demands of the society in which modern man is doomed to live. Her writings deal with “the operation of inherent forces impelling each person to want to “become” or "realize" one self” (qtd. in McDavid & Harari 87).

The findings of the present study breaks the stereotypical belief system of patriarchy and to control the various kinds of outer and inner pressures in the form of suppression and by revenge she traces out way to liberation. The results concentrate on liberation of woman through struggle and rebel along with the inherent urge to want to “become” or "realize" oneself through resistance and liberation. The finding of the present study reveals to control the familial atrocities of oppression and subjugation on women and their liberation through revenge in the novel *Shodh*.

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