

Feminist Themes in Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*

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The subordination of women under patriarchy is a common subject all over the world. Alfred Tennyson, in his poem "The Princess", echoed the universally prevailing attitude to women when he wrote:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle she,
Man with the head and woman with the heart;
Man to command and woman to obey
All else confusion. (30)

Many other writers from most countries of the world have written similarly, thereby certifying to the widely prevalent patriarchal control over women. Because of the physical prowess of men and due to some clever manipulation by males, women trained to be domestic and subordinate. But the emancipated women of today want to liberate themselves from the unwritten norms of patriarchy.

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. This article on *French Lover* focuses on the predominant thematic concerns of Nasrin as a feminist. *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. The analysis focuses on the failure of marriage in the case of various individuals, especially all the chief characters. Nasrin may be construed as justifying the frustration of Nila at her shabby treatment by Kishanlal and subsequently abandoning her husband. When Nila speaks on behalf of Nasrin, she justifies her liberated escapades as the result of the lack of real love or affection in her husband's attitude towards her and his former French wife.

Taslima Nasrin combines both fancy and reality to weave the novel which is more or less precise painting of the world at large with pictures of human beings who live to suffer under the sun. It may also be noted that in this novel the author pursues the theme of male-female encounter, which assumes a rare depth and validity. It may be concisely summed up as man-woman relationship in the context of marital and extra marital relationships. In the marriage of Nilanjana and Kishanlal we find the disharmony between two individuals of different tastes and feelings as in the family of Sunilda and his wife. Chaitali, Benoir and his wife tells 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 loving husband forever. But destiny decides differently. Though she is a lovely and vigorous person and has married a Bengali much younger than her she gets a divorce. In the relationship between Nilanjana's mother Molina and Anirban, Destiny snatches Molina away from Anirban. Nilanjana's mother has been neglected for long and there is no treatment for her disease though her father Anirban is a doctor. In Nilanjana's opinion whatever treatment Anirban might have given to his wife was a pretence to she was getting treated by doctors.

Danielle, a French citizen, has a very bitter childhood to recall. Her father had raped her; she has suffered bitterly many times because of the sexual vulgarity of the people around and, ultimately, she turns into a homosexual. Nila's relationship with Sushanta, the high caste Brahmin of Calcutta, exposes the infidelity of a love that fails before marriage and also the pre-marital illegitimate sexual life of an Indian girl on Indian soil. The girl marries Kishanlal with thousands of hopes and dreams: "Nila had her share of dreams about hard life sustained only on love. Perhaps every Bengali was born with that desire" (Nasrin, *French Lover* 19).

On her first trip to Paris, Nila meets the Dutch lady Gabriella; she is forty three and has been buying fabric from India and taking it back to sell in her country. She makes a good profit in her trade of selling plate, jewellery, incense etc. In the Western culture the woman takes her relation ship with a man perhaps in a very light way and there is nobody to talk about her. But, in Calcutta, if a woman flirts with a man her life is considered to be doomed and there will be no man to marry her and that is why a man like Kishanlal has had to travel from France to marry the girl Nila when Sushanta jilted her.

On her second trip to Paris, on board the flight, Nila meets Benoir Dupont, who is two years younger than her. Benoir can sense that Nila is like a reckless refugee. He is very cautious about his every move towards this newfound comfort. In Nila's Indian tradition, sex is admissible only in the context of love and affection. But, in Benoir's culture, one can have sex with someone without loving her, depending on the circumstances. Benoir has just happened in Nila's life.

After studying all these relationships one can simply say that these are not relationships. According to the Indian tradition, a relationship is deemed to last for ever and to keep the concerned people happy, while encounters, where a man and a woman meet each other and find themselves indulging in certain actions (sexual) end only in unhappiness, regret and reproach, with no possibility of a compromise and happy solution. Because Nasrin's women characters are all dominated by emotions, they are not ready to tune themselves to the domestic sphere ruled by man. Nasrin wants to show that her women characters have liberated themselves from their subordinate status. Baker Jean Miller, in *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, says:

Most women do have a much greater sense of the emotional components of all human activity than most men. This is, in part, a result of their training as subordinates; for any one in a subordinated position must learn to be attuned to the vicissitudes of mood, pleasure and displeasure of the dominant group. (19)

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 as an individual if it really wills so. Nasrin introduces Nila as an apostle of the liberation movement, advocating freedom from the tradition bound Indian woman. Nasrin generalizes her opinion and makes the reading public aware that the liberation of women should start from one's own mind.

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 seem 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 wherein the mutual adjustments and

tolerance towards each other get 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. 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" (60).

The institution of marriage, 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 that the 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 protagonist 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. Through the character of Nila, Nasrin portrays the inner struggle of an artist to express her feminine urge for self-expression.

Even a causal 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 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.

But in Consciousness Raising, the point of sharing information about personal life and personal experience was to connect these into something that could transcend the personal. A crucial function of CR was to connect the personal with the political. Once shared in a small group with other women, individual pain and suffering appeared in a different light. (Milkman 36)

Danielle and her lesbianism represent western freedom, which means she is emancipated, free from all restrictions, social or otherwise, but runs the risk of moral corruption and hence is negatively emancipated. The society at large is still ignorant of such vulgar and gruesome assaults on women though it is a land of "equality", but she revolts against these atrocities by transforming herself into a lesbian to get a female identity.

To sum up, in *French Lover* the story revolves not only round the Indian bride how becomes a liberated woman afterwards, but also on the less fortunate women who are considered objects of sex and gratification as many women in the developing countries. 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. Nasrin's strength as an analytical writer is revealed as she speaks sometimes through the characters within the frame and many times like an objective chorus. She wails from the periphery of the entire string of incidents. The author makes her characters live and suffer at various places of the world, kindling the imagination of the sensible readers to recognize that the plight of women is the same throughout the world. Her characters fly from East to West and West to East, with the hope of enjoying bliss through marriage, which is not to be. Almost all the women characters suffer sexual atrocity. It may be not 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.

Works Cited:

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