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## Assertion of the Self: An Analysis of Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*

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### Abstract:

Taslima Nasrin, an exiled Bangladeshi writer, is the human rights activist and spokesperson of the women's freedom. Her novel *French Lover* is the story of a Bengali woman who struggles for her right, for her identity and for her 'self'. Nilanjana Mandal (Nila), the protagonist of the novel, chooses Kishanlal, an NRI husband, only to get rid of her past memories and goes to a foreign land, Paris. But Nila's position in her husband's house, although, having every kind of luxurious facility, seems to be uncertain, unidentified and valueless. She feels herself lonesome, unacknowledged and caged within the four walls of the building. Once Nila leaves her home city Kolkata, her sense of dislocation haunts throughout her life not only geographically but also at cultural, psychological and physical level. This paper will strive to account and analyse how the struggle of Nila in her assertion of the 'self' in this dislocated journey seems to tell the story of Nasrin's effort in asserting herself as a 'woman'.

**Keywords:** Assertion of the self, double consciousness, diaspora, postcolonial, patriarchy, marginalisation.

Taslima Nasrin, an exiled Bangladeshi writer, is a human rights activist fighting for the cause of women's freedom. She is hailed as the champion of women empowerment in South Asia. Her struggle for the freedom of speech, advocacy of women's movement for their native rights and her voice against the women's oppression give an impetus to the process of women empowerment. She comes from such a society which is extremely religious and orthodox in nature and attitude but she condemns those orthodox religious practices writing freely about its ills. In her first explosive novel *Shame* (1993) she appeals the world for a new kind of religion, religion of humanity, "Let another name for religion be humanism" (01).

However, in an interview when she is asked if she discourages every religion of the world she plainly said that she hated every religion of the world that encourages women's oppression.

Nasrin belongs to the country which is accounted as the third world country, under developed and colonized for centuries by Europeans who call themselves the most developed, cultured, civilized and rich. However, after independence things and mind sets of the third world countries start changing coming in to the race of asserting their own identities. Because of the globalisation and hybridity there is emerging cultural conflict which brings double consciousness regarding the values of their nativity, and the western criteria of development. The postcolonial writers deal with the hybridized experience of the native people as well as of the immigrants in their texts. Nasrin as a postcolonial author strives to set the time for women, which is out of joint removing the mechanism of enslaving women in the Asian patriarchal society. Her writings mirror sub-continental women's struggle for the assertion of the self and Nilanjana Mandal, the protagonist of the *French Lover* (2001) is an example of such women.

Nilanjana Mandal (Nila) is a woman of twenty seven from Calcutta, who after break up with her lover Sushant marries an N.R.I. Kishanlal and goes to Paris. She is a woman of free will and searches for true love but the conventional patriarchal system of society thwarts her dreams. While migrating to Paris after her marriage she hopes to live her life peacefully but with landing at the airport all her peace of mind is gone. The very narrative of the novel used by Nasrin gives a glimpse that Nila has to struggle in this foreign land for her identity because of being twice marginalised—first, she is a woman and second, she comes from a poor country like India. Nasrin carefully knits the incident of the story how Nila is identified in a First World country. She is not addressed by her name at the airport but with her Indian dress. She is addressed as “Red Sari” not as an individual and is enquired about her whereabouts. Nasrin writes, “Red Sari had come from her father’s hotel to her husband’s. Life would pass between one hotel and the other” (2). A woman has no place of her own.

Racial discrimination and colour based discrimination serve as one of the major issues in postcolonial fiction. The colonised sense of superiority of the West over the East is still employed as the parameter to judge the worth and reliability of the third world people. White people see Orientals suspiciously as if they are criminals and terrorists. Because of this discrimination Nila also becomes its victim at the airport and the security system considers her as a criminal checking her documents after that she is said to stand at a corner. Nasrin writes:

Not a single passport went through the scanning machine. No one had to dig out money from their bags. No one was sent to a corner—the girl was the only one. She felt the corner was like a cage in the zoo. (2- 3)

The immigrants from the Indian sub- continent are always treated as subordinated and marginalised, always doubted and questioned by the White people because the colour of their skin is dark and they do not come from a rich country like England or America. When Nila asks the reason of her being stopped and suspiciously checked while her passport and visa were legal and authorised, Sunil tells, “the reason is the colour of your skin—it is not white enough” and Chaitali adds, “and your passport—it’s not of a rich country”(10). But the irony is that even the Immigrants who are of brown colour, hate black people of the other countries thinking all the troubles in abroad is created because of them. This sets postcolonial mind set of the Indian immigrants.

Nila faces such problems also because of the lack of French language and she feels hostile for that. Although, she speaks English language but surprisingly it doesn’t work for her because most of the French do not use English. It is surprising for an Indian woman that:

...there could be a place in this world where English wouldn’t work. In Calcutta the knowledge of English separated the civilized from the barbarians. She had always assumed that civilized people, in any country, always spoke fluent English. (3- 4)

This problem of language haunts Nila throughout in Paris and deprives her of any job according her merit.

Nila had chosen Kishanlal as her husband to avoid the critical eyes of the people and her marriage proves to be an instrument of escape from a place as, “she had felt she had to leave Calcutta, the sharp talons of memory were ripping her to shred every day” (15). Although, Kishanlal is a rich restaurant owner and Nila is availed with a rich house having all the means of leisure but is that all a woman needs? In fact, for Nila, this marriage brings

nothing of value. She opines, "... was this a different kind of death, or did she do it because one had to get married, otherwise people would frown upon her" (15). This has been tradition in Indian society that a girl must marry someone, otherwise her unmarried status would invite blot in the family. But can this be said the only object of getting married? Has it nothing to do with love? T.S. Ramesh writes that this marriage to Kishanlal goes out of tune because her husband shows her no respectful dignity. True love is, as Mary Perkin Ryan says, is:

Two in one flesh offers man and woman many sided opportunity to break out self- isolation to enter into dynamics of love relationship with whole bodies, to bring sexuality into the service of love, to make their bodies instrument of self- giving, to give life to each other, to their family and to their society. (148)

Unfortunately, in Nila's life "two in one flesh" is totally deceitful:

She never felt Kishanlal's body cry out for each and every part of her body, at most, for only one part of his body panted for one part of hers. Nila's delicate fingers, shapely nails, large dark eyes and masses of black tresses lay untouched as a low- caste untouchable. (26)

Nasrin exposes the hypocritical practices of the Indian diasporic men who attempted to imitate at every aspect the western tradition and materialism enjoying all leisures of body and sexuality because "European appearance and culture is assumed to be the norm by which others are judged, making all others 'abnormal' and either exotic or inferior or both"(06). But when it comes to marriage these diasporic men choose the traditional Indian wife. Indian women are considered easy to be adjusted obeying the order of the husband. In *French Lover* Tarique says to Kishanlal, "Foreigners are no good! They are good for a little love making, but not for marriage. For marriage it has to be an Indian" (19). Surely, these immigrant Indians who consider themselves as civilised as white men, are morally deprived of any advancement in their thinking. This is a common demand of all these men that an Indian woman must have a Ph.d. in cooking otherwise she can't be a woman, as when Kishanlal asks his wife Nila about her hand in cooking and Nila answers in negative. He exclaims, "what's this—how can you be a woman and not know how to cook" (20). Here he seems to prove the sayings of French writer Simone de Beauvoir that a woman is not born but constructed. This is how the role of woman is stereotyped in patriarchal society as if she has no other identity. Nila is M.A. in Bengali literature but her education has nothing to do with Kishanlal. All he wants Nila to be a good submissive wife cleaning house, cooking variety of foods for him and satisfying his physical hunger at night.

A woman who leaves her father's house and goes to the husband's also serves to be the purpose of migration. As an immigrant, after settling in the host country, always aspires for his/her homeland, its culture, literature and art in order to grope the connectivity with native roots so does a wife in her husband's place. Nasrin who is an exiled writer living in abroad misses her homeland, Bangladesh. Her Bengali culture and her yearning for its art, music, tradition and festivities find places in her novels. In *French Lover* when Nila reaches Kishanlal's home she feels as stranger in this place and like a caged bird within the four walls. She longs for Bengali food to eat and Bengali people to talk to. When she comes to know that Mojamel who works in Kishanlal's restaurant, is a Bengali her expressions of joy are to be noteworthy, " 'Bengali!' Nila's eyes brimmed with joys" (21).

The postcolonial literature, because of the process of globalisation, reveals a harsh reality of the image of the third world countries as dirty, unpolished, uncivilised and sick in comparison to the First World countries where people are said to be disciplined, civilised and

well-mannered as pictured by the Indian immigrants. This kind of their thinking about the Eastern countries is brought in to exposure in this novel. When Nila's husband returns at home from the work place she asks him to wash up, change cloths and get fresh, he says arrogantly, "do you think this is your dirty Calcutta that I have to wash face and hands the minute I come from work" (28). This kind of thinking makes us to think that even a person of Indian sub-continent, after settling in the First world countries, starts thinking negatively about his/her homeland as the orientalist have been posing. But the problem with these settlers is that on the one hand they try to imitate the actions and life style of the whites in order to become like them what Homi Bhabha terms "mimicry" and on the other hand they are also conscious of their sense of rootlessness desiring to be enchanted with their native culture. This kind of situation produces "cultural cringe" developing "double consciousness". Homi Bhabha offers newer ways by suggesting that the world literature might be studied in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered.

This double consciousness to their cultural cringe leaves the diaspora people confused whether to be or not to be, that is the question. They are attracted and deliberated towards the western sort of materialistic pleasure having looked to be dignified in the eyes of the Occidentals, but also desire the traditional social and family circle of the East. In the novel Kishanlal who calls Calcutta a "dirty Calcutta", in order to have the opportunity of enjoying that pleasure which Indian patriarchal system provides, wife as a housemaid, as a cook and as a prostitute to satisfy the need of the husband. He commands Nila to take off his shoes as a housemaid does:

Nila took the dirty socks into the bathroom and thought that at night she'd have to be the perfect whore and sell herself just as they sold their bodies for some money. 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 paying his wife's dues. (28)

Further she thinks, "A mother, a sister, and a prostitute—were they the three roles which a woman had to play to the hilt or were they merely the three persons that a woman was born with" (28).

While asserting the self, an immigrant has to face the problem of habitation which is one of the major issues dealt in postcolonial text. Migration of the natives to the foreign land means the migration of the people of the third world country to the First World countries like England, France, America, Canada etc. is caused by the joblessness and look towards these developed nations. But their arrival is mostly illegal. They face the problem of habitation and settlement and the problem of job according to their merits. But one thing is must for these illegal immigrants to get married any white man/woman in order to get their papers and citizenship of that country. This kind of problem is faced by many characters of the *French Lover* such as Nila, Mojamel, Jewel, Bacchu etc.. No doubt, they are educated but they have to do trivial jobs, their education and degrees become useless. To stay in Paris they use fake visas because many of them are unable to get legal documents due to the strict law and also they come from the poor countries. Mojamel tells Nila:

If I say I'm educated and I was jobless in Dhaka, that I want to work here, build myself a healthy, beautiful life, the kind of life that everyone dreams of, they'd just throw me out of the country. Political asylum they may just allow; but economic asylum—never. (33)

Female characters of the postcolonial literature are not identical with the women of the colonial text of the Indian sub- continents. They are now becoming stronger, decisive having stand to set their ideology in the patriarchal social setting whether it is of Bangladesh, Pakistan, SriLanka, India or any other Asian country. Nasrin's protagonist, Nilanjana Mandal is also a woman of that category. She is educated, well conscious of her own rights and identity instead of simply submissively obey the command and instructions given by her husband. She scorns to be restricted in the household job only sitting idle doing nothing. She has the craving, the urge, and determination to strive for the exploration and feel the experience of every tiny thing of the world. When she wants to go outside to have a walk in the streets of Paris, do a job for her economic independence and set her own identity her husband seems to be perturbed. He is confounded hearing that her "wife" wishes to do a job. He can't believe neither can expect that an Indian woman can think of job. Like other husband of the Indian patriarchal system Kishanlal considers himself the bread- winner of the family, he thinks he does all for his family, for his wife and Nila need not to do a job. He asks Nila in stunned surprise, "Job? Why on earth? Am I not earning enough?" (55). But Nila calmly answers setting her own stand that whatever he is doing and earning is for the sake of himself, for his own credit so that he could be called the master of the home. She asks him, "Are you doing all this for me? You were working even before we got married. You haven't started working simply to be able to take care of me, have you?" (55).

Nilanjana acts as an epitome of the postcolonial Indian woman who can open the eyes of her husband and make him conscious of the fact that he is not entirely the bread- winner of the family nor she can entirely depend on him while she has also the calibre and capability to stand at economic independence. Actually, Nila is not like the woman of the 1950s India e.g. Kishanlal's 'grandmother' who used to surrender against the will and power of the male members of the family, and therefore, he gets annoyed by her arguments saying "No, no, no. Indian women can't talk like this" (55), Nila replies confidently:

You should have married a dumb girl who'd silently do the house work and never protest at anything, who doesn't have a soul to call her own and cannot read or write, who didn't have wits about her and didn't dream a single dream. (56)

Nilanjana's all confidence depends on her education; however, in Kishanlal's eyes her degree in Bengali literature has no value and cannot afford income, for she is not holding the degree of a doctor or an engineer and therefore, he believes that all her pride for her education is absurd because she has no other choice but to be dependent on him for the economic support. The mind and belief that the degree of a doctor or an engineer holds value has become the parameter of judging the value and worth of anyone's education promoting the western concept of professional studies money oriented. This concept tends towards the new kind of economic post- colonialism based on superiority of knowledge.

In the era of postcolonial feminism woman has become empowered with the device of education and exposure of the developed nations she no longer remains a mere doll in the hands of patriarchal social structure silently following the command of the male figure of the family. The postcolonial woman is conscious of the subordination of women in male dominated society consequently protests and raises her voice against this marginalization. She is no longer ready to follow the conventions and traditions that are the means of obstructing women's progress in society. She can take step against her father, her brother, and her husband who think her mere a 'thing' and not a human being. Nasrin's Nila is such kind of emblem of the postcolonial third-world women denying the procedure of taming her

by her husband Kisanlal. If she can't get along with him she is ready to leave her husband's home where she has no freedom of choice, the home which demands from her an Indian servant. When she takes the job and leaves the house she clarifies and justifies her stance in this matter leaving a letter for Kisanlal:

The reason why I took that job is that I hate begging from you. I know you don't consider it begging. You feel you're looking after your wife, doing your duty. But it comes with a price: 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'll clean your house, cook, serve and provide sexual gratification at night. Is there any other role in which you see me? Oh yes, the other day you said you need a child. I have to give you an heir. I have to because you want it, as if it has nothing to do with me, and everything to do with you. (79)

The cultural conflict, one of the major elements of postcolonial writing, pervades the eternity of difference between East and West. The postcolonial society is always in between whether to follow its own native practices of tradition, habit and culture or get along with the culture of the white people. Because of globalization there is not only the import and export of the materials and goods but also of the invisible culture which latter on becomes acknowledged. People usually face the chapter of acculturation (merge of two cultures) for two reasons: first, because of the consciousness of the deeply rooted connectivity with their own native culture which they can't ignore, neither wish to forsake and secondly, because of the compulsion and the intension to be considered developed, civilized and cultured in the eyes of the people who are supposed to be their models, their postcolonial masters consequently the immigrant copies them. Nila observes this kind of acculturation how it is practiced in postcolonial society. She has been visiting the restaurants in Paris with Daniel to have fun and enjoyment but feels embarrassed at the tradition of their food stuffs and drinks. If she takes the food stuffs and drinks with her Indian choice her friend Daniel gets embarrassed and thinks her as "uncultured and uncivilized", "this was shameful, not drinking wine"(84). Although Nila did not like to drink wine but feels the urgency of getting used to it if she wants to be considered a normal person in this alien city of France. She feels ashamed at her inability of dancing in the party because the French thought "only strange being didn't know how to dance". In fact, "Nila had assumed that dancing was something one had to learn" although, "dancing... was just a rhythmic swaying to the music".

This has been the practice of denouncing and criticising the manners and habits of the Orientals declaring they were uncivilised and uncultured because they lack the decorum and propriety. But postcolonial text exposes the other facet of western culture that the west is not entirely good. The habits and practices of the Occidentals can also be dirty and ill. The homosexual, Daniel who expresses the feeling of disgust at Nila's ill sense of dressing, talking and habits is actually herself very filthy from the heart. She advocates freedom of choice and free will but takes undue advantage of Nila's helplessness pouncing upon her body lustfully, "Daniel's rapacious tongue licked her for the rest of the night. Nila lay there, speechless, breathless" (99).

The stance taken by Nila to leave her husband's home eventually leads to her union with her French lover Benoir Dupont whom she meets in the flight while returning from her home land after the cremation of her mother. Her meeting with him awakens her deep feelings of love and it appears to her that all her dreams are now coming to be true, the

dreams that remained unseen , unexplored in the union with Sushant or Kishanlal. T.S. Ramesh points:

His aggressive physical love makes her see “Apollo, in him, loving his Aphrodite deeply”. Their “union” makes her body “wreck with pleasure, the sharp, shooting pleasure of light flames”. She feels his love was her “pride” and makes her life “worth Living” and full of “meaning”. “She perceives his love with her body and soul”. (52- 53)

Ramesh explores that with Benoir Nila feels Sexuality as a kind of “asset”. She comes to the exploration of some kind of truth to life that all the Spirituality of life gets its significance and meaning by “love” and for this love “sexuality” is that impetus energy which aids in attaining the mystical divinity. As Mary E. Giles Opines:

We are totally sexual, for that we do as man...or a woman we don't have bodies. We are bodies in most real sense. The highest spiritual acts of lives demand bodily means to express them unless we would become disembodied spirits, and then, of course we would no longer experience human spirituality. (127)

However, this visionary life of Nila with her French lover diminishes soon when she comes to the realisation that this “Apollo” of Nila was not actually in love with her “self” but with her body and more than that with “his” self. After a long hunt of lodging when Nila succeeds in her mission, she feels herself free from the world. She can have pride for the room of her own. She has her own choice, her own wishes. She could do now what her mother could not do in Anirban's house. But Benoir's visit to her new home makes him dumb struck. He can't believe that a woman of the Third world can live so lavishly. He seems to be jealous of her upper position and also feels hurt. But this superiority of Nila over a French man acts as an assertion of her “self”.

Later on Nila leaves her French lover because she can't compromise with her self-respect. Mr. Benoir who claims to support freedom in love and sexuality enforces a condition on Nila's love for him that if she loves him. She must love Jacqueline, his daughter from Pascal. This demand is utterly ridiculous because no one can force someone to love others to get the love of the desired one. It is not less than a bargaining in love in which the lady has to pawn her individual dignity against the will of a self- centred lover. Nila realizes that he can't love anyone but himself and therefore, she takes a daring step of rejecting her “Apollo”. As

T.S. Ramesh sums up:

In fact, Nila longs for “true abhiman”. But, she is perplexed when she feels, she is let down by men. Men, whether husband or lover, she thinks, “with the logic of their understanding”, “with their purposefulness” and “with gift for sharp distinction ‘become selfish, whereas, she, a woman “with the logic of her heart” aims “to get to the heart of the matter” but her effort becomes futile. (54)

Taslina Nasrin in her whole life has been struggling for this “true abhiman” in order to explore and sustain her “self” as a woman, a woman that is not subordinated in this world of patriarchy. She allows her characters to break the silence against the hypocritical male ego who believes in imposing its own created and defined ideology to stereotype women's role. The initiative taken by Nila is registering her protest the male chauvinism, no doubt, is a kind

of deliberate attempt that helps Nasrin to cast a stone in the process of women empowerment asserting their “self”.

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