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Tracing the Elements of Non-Conformity in *The Doldrummers* and *French Lover*

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Abstract:

This paper aims at analysing the non-conforming aspects in the play *The Doldrummers* penned by the famous dramatist of the post-independence era Asif Currimbhoy and in the novel *French Lover* written by a well-known yet controversial voice of South Asia Taslima Nasrin. This paper traces out the elements on which the writers have denied the established norms and boundaries set by the society and have gone beyond them to lead a life that their characters idealise. Its explicit bold language and theme makes the play *Doldrummers* an ideal example of non-conformity. It focuses on four friends who do nothing but sit at Juhu Beach in the suburbs of Bombay; they play guitar, sing meaningless songs and drink home-made wine. All four lack morality, the males do not have any aim in life; females earn but through sex work. Technically the word 'Doldrums' mean 'uninteresting' and all the four characters of this play characterise this meaning. On the other hand the novel *French Lover* is a quest for identity of the protagonist because she finds herself trapped in the conventional and suffocating norms of society. She can be called a 'New Woman' as she breaks all the barriers of an Indian household and Indian society to lead a life that she idealises. Both the literary works reject traditionalistic approaches in the lives of their characters and this paper aims to highlight those approaches and elements.

Keywords: Aif Currimbhoy, Taslima Nasrin, Non-conformity, Isolation, Societal expectations, Doldrummers, French Lover.

Eleanor Roosevelt said "Do what you feel in your heart to be right - for you'll be criticized anyway". It takes an extra courage to live a life in which one can have the liberty to realise one's dreams and desires. For many people it is difficult to restrain themselves in the conforming boundaries of society, and they continuously make efforts to go beyond these boundaries. They refuse to act in conformity with generally accepted beliefs and practices; such efforts are often termed as 'non-conformity'. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines non-

conformity as:“refusal to conform to an established or conventional creed, rule, or practice”.

Non-conformity is also a way of life when someone rejects to conform to the traditional approaches of the society and its institutions. In his essay *Self Reliance*(1841), Ralf Waldo Emerson used this term, and he urged his readers only to trust themselves and to reject conforming “societal expectations”, or norms set by the society and to avoid “foolish consistency”, which he calls “hobgoblin of little minds”. He says society loves conformity, its customs and norms but a true man should be a non-conformist:“Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist” (Self-Reliance, para 12).

Emerson hails the man that let to contradict the world to be misunderstood as society did with Pythagoras, Socrates, Galileo; as misunderstanding makes meaning and give us a place to stand alone to make us different or unique from the crowd:“Your conformity explains nothing, Act singly, and what you have already done singly, will justify you now” (Self-Reliance, para 23).

All over the world writers, painters, poets, philosophers urge us to do the same, to avoid what is establish by our so-called cultural society;because only byviolating the set ruleswe can create something new. They argue that these rules and set norms are hindrance in the growth of an individual or an intellectual. Emerson says, “Non-conformity is another way of living, to break from the structure and follow your deepest inner thoughts and beliefs and truly rely on them, no matter what society tries to impose”.

The origin of the term Non- Conformity can be traced back to England when in 16th century ‘Protestantism’ a form of Christianity originated against the tradition of selling ‘indulgence’ by priests.However, today we can see its application in our society and literature that is a reflection of it.

Asif’s Non-conformity in *The Doldrummers*

The Doldrummers, published in 1960, is a romantic play with four youth- Rita and Liza, Tony and Joe in its centre. K.R.Shrinivas Iyenger writes:

In *The Doldrummers*, a set of young men and women in the doldrums are caught in predicament sad and funny in a shack at Juhu Beach... Rita and Liza, Joe and Tony- the four down and outs, the doldrummers – a play of love and sex and poetry and futility and pathos. (Iyenger, 245)

The play is very unconventional in its content. When published in 1960, it was censored due to its ‘Objectionable and bold language’ and the ban was finally lifted in 1969, only due to the efforts made by some eminent writers. It is a story of friendship and faithlessness, coarse

dialogues and frantic poetry, with loneliness and doldrums prevailing. *The Doldrummers* is a story of four people living at Juhu Beach in the suburb of Bombay; they all are poor who do nothing besides sitting near a shack, made of thatched coconut palm, singing songs, taking piffle and playing guitar. When the play opens, we find Rita, a young woman ‘very much in love’, fondling Tony’s hair. She earns her living by ‘stitching some dresses’. Her male companion Tony, is an ‘idle lazy’, ‘a slob’, who has not worked for ‘a year of Sundays’. He does nothing but dreams of having ‘a fancy silk shirt, or a sporty tie, or one of those nice pointed shoes for dancing’. He wears an ‘all proof watch’ with 17 jewels, which he received from Liza, a sex worker, as ‘a token of friendship’. He plays guitar very well, although he cannot read the notes. He used to work for Uncle Lolo, a fat and bald man. Joe, Tony’s friend, is a PhD, which Tony mentions various times. Tony considers him to be very intelligent but he too does nothing. He is always seen drinking ‘bathroom grim’ with Tony, playing Tony’s guitar and singing meaningless songs or ‘dirty little poems’. Liza ‘a techni colour doll’, has ‘many admirers’ who ‘shower her with presents’, has and wears a ‘pure cultured pearls necklace’. She likes Tony and asks him to visit her sometimes.

Asif has always dealt with something new and unconventional. He is ‘the first authentic voice of Indian Theatre’ (Faubian Bowers). He experimented and implemented new techniques in drama. His women are more powerful, men are more passionate and dramas are more realistic than the traditional ones. Anita Myles says:

Asif Currimbhoy laid the foundation of modern Indian Drama in the 1950s liberating it from the static tradition of Tagore and Aurobindo... He had an amazing variety of subject matter. He was pre-occupied with history and current politics, socioeconomic problems, East-West encounter, psychological conflicts, religion, philosophy and art.

The Doldrummers is a play, which presents youth that has created its own world and lives its own. In the opening scene, we find Tony and Joe singing meaningless verses on the guitar, Rita fondling Tony’s hair, and Joe ogling the legs of Rita. When they end their verse, Rita ‘claps enthusiastically’. Then Rita and Tony start kissing each other in front of Joe. Even when Joe expresses his irritation and tells them to stop, they do not.

The language Asif has put into the mouth of Joe is very coarse. He says: “Go on. Make pigs of yourselves... till surfeiting the appetite may sicken and die” (Asif, 13). Even the way he describes his females is very explicit. For Rita he writes: “She is a young thing, fully physical, and very much in love” (Asif, 10) and for Liza he says, “Liza is a technicolour doll: everything about her is painted” (Asif, 10). Asif has also used some coarse sexual dialogues as when Joe tries to tickle her, Liza says: Liza- “Oh, Stop it, silly boy. That’s not the kind of tickle that amuses me” (Asif, 19). When Rita comes to know about the ‘Thursday affair’ of Liza and Tony, she asks Tony to leave and then Tony exclaims: Tony- “ Alright. Alright. But don’t call back for me. You

want me to go; alright I'll go. But don't call me when you're in heat" (Asif,35).When Joe asks Rita to accept a profession just like Liza, Rita asks him ifdoes not see any difference between both of them and does he consider them same. He says:Joe- [almost fiercely]" Don't bring me in Rita. I am out, and I want to stay out. Rita or Liza, you're all the same to me. Women with something nice between their legs. No more" (Asif, 40).When a drunkenman arrives at Rita's place, she asks him ifhe will get out or should it be written on a paper and put into his pockets. He exclaims: Drunk- [toying with his belt trying to unbuckle it] "Sure, I'll take off my pants so's you can reach my pocket" (Asif, 65).When Tony takes the drunk with him and pretends to be Joe, he uses very bold language and says: Tony- "I'm Joe. This here is Tony. He'll serve you well. I've even taught him to play the guitar and he is the hottest thing in bed. He doesn't talk much"(Asif, 85).

Asif portrayed Tony and Rita living together in the same house, sharing everything without marriage, at a time when such relations werenot even heard of in society. Tony goes to Liza's house every Thursday to make love with her and in return, Liza gives him some presents. Liza is not least regretful of her profession; even Tony justifies his conduct to Rita-Tony- "Why do you look at me like that? Like I've done something wrong. You got no claim over me, like we weren't married or something" (Asif, 29-30).Then again, he says: Tony-"Well... I'd do anything to get a present. A woman does it, so why not a man" (Asif,30) He also adds: Tony- "I never get that feeling with anyone else" (Asif, 31).

Non-conformity is quite evident in their moral conduct. Liza is a sex worker; she is proud of it and does not mind being a sex worker. She even flaunts the gifts proudly which she receives from her admirers. Liza knows very well that Rita and Tony are a couple and yet she asks him to visit her sometimesand gives him presents for visiting her. Tony is cheating with Rita by deceiving her, but even though he visits Liza for sexual activities, he is not regretful of it. Heeven argues over it with Rita and tries to prove himself right. He also says that he would not mind if Rita also gets presents as he is getting from Liza.

Joe is a friend of Tony, yet he always has an evil eye on Rita, and he is the man who manipulates Rita to be what Liza is, a sex worker. He is the man who makes her believe that Tony loves money more than he loves Rita, and says if she wishes to get Tony back, she will have to be Liza or Liza-like. Tony loves Rita, but they are not traditional lovers; he does not mind Rita's indulgence in sex work. WhenJoe tells him that Rita is whoring for money, he pretends to be angry, but when Joe hands him a knife and asks him to kill that man who is with Rita, he does nothing.Even when Rita asks him to kill that man, he not only stands passively but also accepts the money offered by the fat and bald man to remain silent about that matter. When Rita asks him if he minds what she is doing, he says no. He admits that he is not ashamed of anything, but the reason behind his sadness is the disappearance of his friend Joe. He can't sing and enjoy the guitar without him. Rita refuses to follow societal norms when Liza asks her to abort her child; she says she will get the baby a father instead.

Nasrin's Non-conformity in *French Lover*

French Lover, a novel by Taslima Nasrin, was first published in Bengali in 2001 and then in 2001 as an English translation by Sreejata Guha. This novel takes the readers through the journey of the protagonist Nilanjana Mandal from a disillusioned life to a life of self-realization and self-reliance. About this novel Taslima says:

I wanted to portray a woman caught in the conflict between the Western and Eastern cultures. It dwells upon racism, the insecurity of minorities and the slave mentality of the people of the subcontinent in regard to the whites. You may call me a feminist. But I think I am protesting only against oppression and I would continue to stand by people who are meted out injustice. Why should people suffer in this world? (Dhar, Interview, 2002)

This conflict, oppression and injustice inflicted upon Nilanjana aka Nila pushes her to break free from her role as a conventional homemaker due to utter lack of respect and freedom given to her. It is a story of a young Bengali Girl Nilanjana who migrates to Paris after her marriage to Kishanlal, an entrepreneur involved in restaurant business. She only functions as a housekeeper and an object of sexual gratification and desperately seeks a way out. The blurb at the back of the novel presents it as: "Bold in concept and powerful in execution, *French Lover* is a fascinating glimpse into the workings of a woman's mind as she struggles to come to terms with her identity in a hostile world" (Back).

Nila is not just a woman, but also a woman who thinks and questions everything and has an opinion about everything that happens around her. Ever since she lands in Paris, she faces discrimination, and throughout her journey of self-discovery, she had to face it in different forms. Nila has an assertive character; she is unable to accept things as they are. When at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, the officer found her identity as dubious because she had a different last name than her husband, in spite of nervousness she says: "That's not same because...I have deliberately not taken his name" (Nasrin, 7).

Through Nila, the author has portrayed the character of a woman who has a strong will power to take decisions to preserve her identity and ideals. She stands for what she considers as right even when she knows that she had to fight against all oppressive powers. Like all Indian girls, Nila grew up in a culture where men subjugate women. A well-educated woman, yet at first she tries to accommodate all the changes marriage brings in her life. As Simone De Beauvoir says: "In the early years of marriage the wife often lulls herself with illusions, she tries to admire her husband whole heartedly, to love him unreservedly, to feel herself indispensable to him" (496)

In the chapter *Life at Home*, readers come across Nila's repressed desires to have an identity and to be able to earn her own money. The house is a golden cage where she has to ask for everything with a justification and Kishanlal denies all her requests. However, she cannot resist her desires for long; she strives for economic independence and one day she asserts herself: "You should have married a dumb girl who'd silently do the housework and never protest at anything, who doesn't have a soul to call her own and cannot read or write" (Nasrin, 56).

The writer has juxtaposed the ideals and desires of Nila and Kishanlal's life in binary opposition. This contradiction enhances the hollowness and depression in Nila's life and forces her to defy Kishanlal's imposed decisions, which prove destructive to her so called well-settled married life. The more he wants to mould her into an ideal, subordinating wife, the more she wrestles with her life. He tells her not to go outside alone, but she defies him: "Nila used the key, which Kishan had advised her to use only when the house was on fire –and walked aimlessly on the street" (Nasrin, 65).

Next day she tells him about her adventure and further challenges his male ego:

"Kishan gritted his teeth. He could see that she was exceeding her limits. She hadn't put her feet down when he came in; instead she was forthright enough to describe her terrible behaviour in the most calm, unperturbed and serene manner. Kishan held his hands tightly to his sides and balled them into fists or he would have dragged her by the hair and thrown her out of his house. 'Go and roam around to your heart's content'" (Nasrin, 70).

Kishan even coaxes her to believe what he believes to be good for her: "I don't understand why you even need this pocket money. This house has everything you need and I have bought you the rest. Kishan walked towards the bar" (Nasrin, 71). However, she insists on self-reliance: "You will, Kishan, you want to buy me things. But I also want to buy myself something sometimes" (Nasrin, 71).

Finally, she goes on to achieve financial independence notwithstanding the wish of Kishanlal, and it proves to be a milestone in her difficult and rebellious journey. This milestone of liberty later shakes her superficially calm and happy married life. In the essay *Self-Reliance* Emerson states that society forces us to conform: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members [...] the virtue in most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs" (Para 6).

Kishanlal, a prototype of conformity, cherishes the conforming way of living; he cannot accept the non-conforming ways of Nila. Non-conformity is a choice, altogether a different way

of living and when one chooses it, one should be ready for repercussions: “For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure” (Self-Reliance, para 11).

Nilā also faces the displeasure of Kishanlal when she invites her colleagues Danielle and Catherine for dinner and cooks a non-vegetarian meal in *his vegetarian house*. Therefore, Nilā leaves the house with an uncertain future to attain liberty, respect, love and self-reliance. This proves to be another major milestone in her quest. Nilā moves from Kishan’s house to Danielle’s tenement and has a fresh taste of freedom: “She had never felt so happy, so free in Paris. She raised her hands in the air and said, ‘So you wanted to keep an Indian servant. Now where is she, Kishanbabu? Why didn’t I do this sooner?’ she hugged Danielle and shouted, ‘You have set me free!’” (Nasrin, 81).

Taslīma has projected marriage as a corrupted institute based on the concept of ‘master and servant’. It remains intact as far as the woman is ready to play the role of a submissive servant and does not challenge the authority of the husband, *the master*. Nilā’s marriage is nothing but a bond of suffocation and she sets herself free at the very first opportunity she gets. A woman separated from her husband is considered as a taboo in Indian society, but for Nilā this separation leads her on the road of love and self-assertion.

Taslīma has portrayed Nilā as a synonym of non-conformity. She not only yearns for independence but for sexual liberty also. She desires not to be a passive object of sexual gratification but wants to be loved and desired. Nilā develops a homosexual relationship with Danielle while living with her. Though she is skeptical about this relationship, she feels sexual pleasure and liberty with Danielle that she could not feel with Kishanlal. However, she ends this relationship when Danielle tries to dominate her.

Nilā’s equation with her father, Anirban is turbulent. He is an epitome of traditional Indian male character and firmly believes in the norms of society. However, her mother Molina’s illness provokes her to deny the authority of her father and she confronts him: Nilā stared at Anirban’s moving lips carelessly and said, “Baba have you ever cried [...] But she continued, ‘There is a word – regret. Have you ever heard of it? Have you ever felt it? No, you haven’t [...] Whatever else you may do, regret certainly wouldn’t be one of them, right?’” (Nasrin, 138).

When she learns about the true cause of Molina’s illness, she cannot stop herself from getting some answers from her imperious, egoistic and hedonistic father, in front of whom she could not even think of raising her eyes: “Nilā switched off the TV, sat down in front of Anirban and said, ‘Yesterday I spoke to you of regrets. Well do you regret anything?’ [...] ‘That’s a mere pretence, to show people that you’re getting her treated by great doctors.’” (Nasrin, 144)

She faces the opposition of her father, brother, relatives and even bank employee to receive her inheritance of twenty lakhs that Molina left for her. She questions the actions of Nikhil, her brother, who is performing after-death rituals in spite of having no faith in them.

While returning from Calcutta she comes across Benoir Dupont, who later becomes her 'French Lover'. She instantly gets attracted towards him and he too is fascinated by her looks, which he idealises. Soon they begin a forbidden passionate sexual relationship as both of them are still legally married to their partners. Through the explicit sexual relationship of Benoir and Nila, Taslima puts forward her own views of sexual liberty. Taslima considers sexual-liberty as a key to freedom for women from the tyranny of man, marriage and society. She supports the liberty of woman's mind as well as body. In an interview with Romain Maitral for *The Times of India*, she chastises the attitude of society towards sexual-liberty:

In traditional societies, we have a long legacy of men controlling the body and mind of women. Such societies have valorised motherhood and fabricated concepts like chastity. Women have been the victims of these notions for thousands of years. A man can have multiple relationships and affairs and talk about them. But if a woman ever writes about her love and sexuality, she is immediately described as defiled, treacherous, and abominable. In human history, whenever a woman has stood up against patriarchy and spoken of her liberty, she has been condemned and abused as a fallen woman. Quite some time back, in my introduction to another book of mine, I wrote that I love to call myself 'fallen' in the eyes of society. To me, the primary condition for a woman to be pure is to be a so-called fallen angel. Among all the 'awards' that I have hitherto collected, I consider the title of 'patita' or fallen woman to be the highest. This is an achievement of my long-struggling life as a writer and as a woman.

She further asserts that, "For me, it is not nudity or sex that is obscene". To explain that being loved is a natural instinct, she gives vivid description of Nila and her French lover's sexual encounters. There is no shame in loving someone. By pointing at the passionate sexual relationship of Nila and Benoir, Nasrin justifies the sexual-liberty for woman inside and outside the marriage. If a woman is just submissive and man acts as the master of her body, eventually she seeks love outside her marriage. Her protagonist also shares the same view on sexuality:

Nila felt sexuality was a kind of asset. It was because sexuality existed and because she could give him that gratification, that Benoir loved Nila. Without that, Nila would have had to spend her life in the vacuous loneliness of Molina or end her life like Mithu [...] Nila was hungry for love and sexuality was important to get that love. (Nasrin, 280)

Nila enjoys this newfound love and liberty, and spends lavishly on Benoir and on her life-style. She enters in an out of wedlock *live-in relation* with him. This creates havoc in her family and her father, who warns her of her ways, condemns her: “There is still time to mend your ways, come back to India and live a life that won’t have so many people point fingers at you” (Nasrin, 252). In Indian society, “Marriage ceases by the infidelity on the part of the wife; but no such forfeiture of marriage right occurs to the husband in the event of his infidelity” (Krishnaraj, 277).

Everyone blames Nila for her failed marriage and incriminates her of infidelity, but she is happy in her own Eden and pays no heed to such warnings. Nila enjoys life and goes to Italy on a vacation with Benoir. However, this vacation does turn out to be as expected by Nila. She becomes aware of the hollowness of their relationship, which is like a hollow case decorated with beautiful jewels and seems repulsive to her. One day Nila learns that she is pregnant. This makes Benoir thrilled and happy. He tells Nila that though he cannot divorce his wife Pascal, he will keep her in his house. Nila, who wants a legitimate status for her child, refuses this arrangement and realises that Benoir does not love her. She tells him “You love yourself, Benoir, your own self. No one else” (Nasrin, 286). When he pleads her to give birth to his child and promises that he will marry her, it is Nila who refuses his proposal and decides to abort the child. This revelation shakes Benoir and in the hope of ultimate victory, he curses and blames Nila for ruining his life. In desperation, he even tries to kill her, though he cannot and walks out of her house.

Her blue eyed, handsome French lover now leaves Nila, who leaves her husband to break all the repressing shackles of her marriage and to live a life full of liberty. She feels more at peace and more in tune with her life. She calls Danielle and asks for the help in carrying out the abortion. She gains complete control over her body and life and feels that, “men, of whichever country, whatever society, are same” (Nasrin, 291)

At this point, Nila makes brave choices of resuming her life and leaving the past behind her. With the help of Marilu, a housecleaner, she finds a rented place in Sandani. She discovers that people are same everywhere and it is necessary to follow one’s own conscience to not only survive but also to live a life of one’s choice. Conformity to oppression may lead to an acceptable life, but it kills one’s liberty and identity. Asif and Taslima portray their protagonists as epitome of non-conformity. Asif was a genius who enriched his dramas with human sentiments as well as futility of life. His characters are romantic as well as cynical, his subjects vary from each other, and his technique is innovative and breaks the traditional boundaries set by the dramatists so far. K.S. Iyenger says about Asif:

There is no doubt that Currimbhoy has a flair for playwriting. He can contrive interesting situations, his dialogues are arresting, and he has a sense of atmosphere; and his plays are actable. The one play that

acquired a special notoriety of its own... but these waif and wastrels are nevertheless basically human. (Iyenger,245)

Taslina projects Nila's life as a continuous tussle between what she wants out of it and what is given to her: "Nasrin introduces Nila as an apostle of the liberation movement, advocating freedom from the tradition bound women" (Sigma).

She has included many incidences in the novel to show that subordination and oppression only culminate into resistance, which is much needed to carve one's identity. Her characters assert that in difficult times difficult choices have to be made, even if one has to set one's foot in the territories forbidden to one by society, in order to lead a life of self-reliance.

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