
HOMELESS HEARTS: IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN *THE FRENCH LOVER*

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Abstract :

Dr. Taslima Nasrin is a provocative and multifaceted literary figure whose work confronts the often-taboo subjects of religion, feminism, and sexuality, starkly contrasting the reticence of traditional Muslim Bangladeshi society. A recurring and powerful theme in her poetry and novels is the insidious oppression of women by controlling spouses. In traditional South Asian and Muslim cultures, rigid gender roles mandate female self-sacrifice and unwavering compromise for the sake of husbands and children. While the idealized image of 'home' is inextricably linked to women, Nasrin's protagonists shatter this illusion, revealing a pervasive sense of homelessness. This homelessness transcends geographical boundaries, manifesting both within her native Bangladesh and in her experiences abroad, highlighting the universality of her struggle.

Keywords : Feminine, Women, Inequality, Patriarchy, Orthodox society, Religious extremism, Humiliation

Dr. Taslima Nasrin stands as a powerful voice in feminist literature. The label 'feminist,' often applied to her name, acknowledges her significant contribution to the movement. Derived from the Latin 'femina,' meaning 'woman,' feminism advocates for women's equal rights, status, and power alongside men. This encompasses social, economic, and political parity. Historically, women have faced systemic deprivation and marginalization under patriarchal dominance, consistently relegated to a secondary and inferior status. This bias, deeply rooted in cultural narratives, even extends to creation myths, where woman is often depicted as derived from man, as exemplified by Adam's words about Eve: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man." (Krishnamurty, 73). Nasrin's work confronts and challenges these ingrained inequalities with unflinching honesty.

This narrative implies a hierarchical creation, with man preceding and woman being an offshoot. Throughout history, male writers have often perpetuated this view, portraying women as inherently inferior and weak. Their depictions frequently emphasize female flaws and vices, reinforcing negative stereotypes rather than challenging them. As Aristotle viewed: "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities and that we should look upon the female state, as it were a deformity, once which occurs in the ordinary course of nature. On account of its weakness, it quickly approaches its maturity and old age since inferior things all reach their



end more quickly”(krishnaswamy,73-74). Aquinas, the Roman Catholic of the thirteenth century AD, describes female as: “Misbegotten male” (krishnaswamy, 73). Nietzsche, the German Philosopher declares that: “Woman is the source of all folly and unreason and that she is God’s second mistake” (Friedan Betty, 282).

The Post-Vedic period witnessed a decline in women's status, largely attributed to the laws codified by Manu. He advocated for perpetual male control over women: fathers in childhood, husbands in youth, and sons after widowhood. This established a patriarchal system where women were relegated to a subordinate position, their destiny marked by subjugation. Subsequently, Vyasa-smriti reinforced Manu's doctrines, exacerbating the situation. This philosophy emphasized women's complete devotion to husbands, families, and households, portraying them as 'anugamini,' followers of their husbands. The ideals of Sati and Pativrata were imposed upon them. Orthodox Aryans also deemed women ineligible for intellectual and spiritual pursuits due to menstruation, which they considered impure and polluting. Consequently, women were excluded from religious rites and rituals, including funeral ceremonies, which were reserved exclusively for sons. Throughout Indian civilization, women have endured inequitable treatment. With the Arab and Turkic invasions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the subsequent consolidation of Mughal rule in the sixteenth century, their position further deteriorated. Rigid codes and restraints, such as purdah, child marriage, Jauhar, and Sati (widow immolation), were imposed, further restricting their freedoms.

In West India, it was *Shridharmapadhati* written by Tryambakayajvan (1665-1750) of Maharashtra. It described various roles, social and familial obligations and religious duties and rituals for Hindu women. The emphasis was given on woman’s being pativrata.

Tryambakayajvan mentioned three kinds of women who can be called pativarata:

- 1) The wife who dies before her husband.
- 2) The wife who waits for her husband to join her.
- 3) The wife who accompanies her husband onto the funeral pyre and immolates herself.

Taslina Nasrin's fictional world often portrays men as flawed figures, while women are depicted as victims of a pervasive patriarchal system. This dynamic is particularly evident in *The French Lover*, where the protagonist, Nila, is driven to challenge these entrenched gender roles. The women in the novel consistently experience dissatisfaction, disappointment, and frustration in their relationships with men.

Upon returning to Kolkata to care for her ailing mother, Nila is struck by a sense of emotional and physical constriction. She observes that the city's homes, mirroring its inhabitants, have shrunk in both size and spirit. Witnessing her mother's lifelong servitude and suffering, Nila confronts her father and brother, challenging the patriarchal structures that have oppressed her family. It is her mother, in a final act of empowerment, who provides Nila with a means of escape: a check for Rs. 20 lacs, enabling her to flee to Paris. Yet, this escape does not resolve her internal conflict; Nila remains rootless, a sense of homelessness pervading her existence.



The relationship with Benoir in *The French Lover* ultimately dissolves when Nila realizes his self-centeredness and that her dependence on him has ceased. This marks the beginning of her arduous journey towards self-discovery. She grapples with her place in the universe, finding herself adrift, without a sense of belonging: "... do women ever have a land of their own or a motherland? I really don't think so" (*FL*, 292).

Danielle is rootless and distanced from her own family, though she is unaccountable passionate about Nila's halfhearted affection follows her to Kolkata. She doesn't believe manhood because at six, her own blood exploited her. The protagonist asserts that though she lives in developed society, the humiliation is seen everywhere throughout the world, the condition, somewhere is worse while somewhere worst.

Though Kishan is earning enough, Nila wants to do a job to pass her time and to engage her. He advocates that whatever he is doing, it is only for her and her household; she contradicted his opinion that was working before their marriage. Kishan doesn't like the manner of protesting his statement-"Oh Nila, you have quite a way with words where did you learn to talk like that? Nowhere, everyone can talk like this." Kishan shook his head violently and said, "No, no, no Indian wives can't talk like this" (*FL*, 55). After little bickering, Nila observes his traditional attitude and asserts, "You should have married a dumb girl who silently do the housework and never protest at anything..." (*FL*, 56). This crisis reminds the words of Mary Wollstonecraft. She believes that it will inculcate critical thinking in women and make them less gullible- "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right where they endeavours to keep women in the dark, because the former only wants slaves and the later a playthings"(107).

For him Nila is: Nila the wife; Nila the beauty and Nila the home worker. He wants to suck the entire beauty. She is nothing more than the tasty dish to be enjoyed at any time. He says - "An Indian girl has something else in her touch - she tastes altogether different" (*FL*, 59). Kishan marries a French girl named Immanuelle, before his marriage with Nila but he doesn't let Nila to do so. Nila wonders if this fact about Kishan's past life affects in any way. But strangely enough, she doesn't feel anything when Nila inquires enough, she doesn't feel anything. When Nila inquires about Immanuelle, the past life, Kishan raises his voice and brings forth Sushanta's issue. He says that if he had told her about Immanuelle, she would have even though married him -"Because Sushanta, the great love, had ditched you and if I didn't marry you, no one else would. News travels for and fast. You had slept with the guy, hadn't you?" (*FL*, 62).

Nila has the key of the house but Kishan has informed her that she can use this key only when the house is in fire. She wants to lose herself in the city, to go a place where she wouldn't know her way back. She sees the romances on the street and park and expects the same with her husband; but a sorry matter, he has no time. She gets a job packing computers in boxes; Kishan doesn't like his wife is doing the menial job with some worthless black people. He says, "My prestige and honour, all are gone" (*FL*, 73). Chaitali, the victim of male- dominated society, surrenders her life for her family, husband and children. She is busy with her household chores. Mithu, an embodiment of Indian typical daughter, sacrifices her life only to unburden



her parents and brother, leaves the way clear for him so that he can marry a girl who can give (him) huge dowry.

Benoir leaves Pascale and his daughter for his extra-marital affairs; she is deprived of the rights as a legal wife. Other subsidiary characters keep formal closeness with Nila. The protagonist has strong hatred for the male dominated society. This reminds us the view of Taslima Nasrin. She says once in the interview and imparted the same in *The French Lover*

“Men are clever enough to give a new meaning to this vulgarization of beauty. Women, they call are like flowers. Flowers, show pieces, but by no means equal human beings! And when flowers are not blooming they can be thrown into the dustbin as ‘damaged’ materials like egg. Milk and fish, women can be destroyed. Men cannot be destroyed. Women are things. And like all other things women can be destroyed!”(Taslima’s Truth)

Nasrin writes about woman-woman relationship too. It sometimes helps one-another while most of the time creates problem for other woman. It becomes belief that girls must be inferior to boys for boys can play in a big field whereas girls have to play with their dolls in a corner of the house, it has been the tradition, and we become accustomed to this tradition whether they are poor or rich, beautiful or ugly, has blue or black or brown eyes, has white, black or brown skin, are unmarried or married, illiterate or literate, clever or stupid all are oppressed. Everywhere women are oppressed, and all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture and customs.

This is evident in the novel that man always boasts himself superior to women. Molina sacrifices her life; she faces sudden death because of her husband’s mistake. Though he is a famous doctor, protecting so many ailing people from death can’t save his own wife. He willingly wants her to die soon. Nikhil, his son too follows and obeys the same tradition; he can’t find time to take care of his mother, his father changes his views and he has been shaped accordingly. He sees what his father shows him. She ceases to be human being. They expect some works to be done by her and if the domestic works are not done, she is useless material. The protagonist doesn’t approve their conduct and asks her father to regret himself.

She knows about the affair with Swati Sen who is fairer than his wife Molina. He gratifies his physical desires with Swati, gives gifts and emotional support to his extra-marital beloved but never touch his black Molina sympathetically. The protagonist shows that man is partial about colours. The whites are loved and the blacks are expected to die or hang themselves. Nasrin displays typical relationship between husband and wife; we have a lot of Anirbans and Molinas in our cultured society. The wife is not always deprived but crushed under the overburdened domesticity of routine of life.

As it is evident, Taslima Nasrin, the staunch feminist, carries the psyche of women throughout her novels. Her protagonists are not the women living in the restricted area, she embodies the universal womanism, and everywhere woman is oppressed. The goat is sacrificed on any religious cult in any religion. It is benefited to three men: first the goat owner, the person who sacrifices him, and the person who devours him. The goat owner gets money, gets satisfaction and the devourers can fulfill the sense of taste. But none among them has soothing



feelings for the bleeding animal; everyone focuses on self- contentment. The case is same with women. She has to obey her father who nourishes her, the gate of heaven doesn't open until she surrenders herself to her husband and her son who grows up on her milk, wants her mother to behave according to his convenience. Thus, she has caught in the trap of daughter- wife- mother bond. The woman in India is confined to "the triple role of daughter in law, wife and mother". She is considered home-maker; she builds it for others but she finds no home for herself.

Dr. Taslima diagnosed the male-psychology, and she, as it is evident through her female central characters, finds the revolt as weapon to demolish the dilapidated mansion of patriarchy.

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