

Taslima Nasreen: Looking at Nasreen's exploration of female sexuality, Nasreen as a feminist in the context of Bangladeshi women's movement and Nasreen as a woman poet.



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Acknowledgement

With this dissertation, my journey as an undergraduate student of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University ends. Through this dissertation, I have tried to challenge myself by choosing a topic I was not quite familiar with. I hope my attempts and dissertation have lived up to the expectations of my supervisor.

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Epigraph

*“When you suddenly woke up at dead of night
And drowned yourself in the waves of a woman-river
In a fit of wild love-making.”*

---Taslima Nasreen, *Castles in the air*. (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)

Introduction

One of the significance of writing is that, through this practice, social conventions and traditions are often challenged. When social norms are challenged, there arise groups of people – one group who support the writer and the other one who do not. Hence, Literature could produce plenty of controversial writers over the years. When an author writes a controversial character, readers may not be able to separate it from the author and hence, these writers end up being subjects to debate.

When we think of controversial writers in our country, the one name that comes to mind because of stirred controversies is – Taslima Nasreen.

While controversies brought her into the limelight, they are the same reasons, people refuse to read her. Because, Taslima Nasreen is so mired in controversies, our interests revolve around the controversies only and we do not read her work. However, Taslima Nasreen wrote plenty of poems, fictions and who is also considered to be a secular humanist, feminist and physician.

Taslima Nasreen was born in Mymensingh in 1962 to an exceptionally conservative family. In her autobiographical work, *Utal Hawa*, published in 2002, Taslima expressed her love for writing and at the same time she claimed that she was interested in science. She began writing poetry at the age of 13. She wrote and edited a literary magazine *SeNjuti* between 1978 and 1983. From 1990's, she started getting recognition for her feminist views and remarks on religion. In her auto biographical writings, fiction and poems, Nasreen talks about different aspects of her life, starting from her love life and her relationship with different authors to religion, sexual abuse, her family etc. She gets extremely personal and candid in her writing as well.

Taslima Nasreen's works are considered as derogatory of Islam, and this started debate over the contents of her feminist writing as well. Although a lot of people do not

consider her work because they are hostile to Islamic sentiment, her thoughts are generally welcomed by the Western media, where she is commended as a women's activist who challenges Bangladeshi patriarchal society. However, because of a Government case against her, Nasreen had to leave Bangladesh and she took political asylum in India. Till today, she is living in exile.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has recognised Taslima Nasrin from the European Parliament. She is also awarded the Simone de Beauvoir Award. But, here in Bangladesh Nasreen's literary works are not evaluated, mostly because of her association with scandals, which are shown in an overgeneralised and simplified manner. Her literary works are hardly critically assessed.

However, in today's context, a lot of self-proclaimed internet based feminist organisations and their approach are quite similar to that of Taslima Nasreen. Whether they have read Taslima Nasreen or not, is questionable, but their theme of embracing female sexuality is relevant to Nasreen's writing. In today's digital age, Nasreen has started to become more pertinent.

This dissertation is an attempt to read her works and to see the value of her works in terms of a larger theme of feminism. Reading few of her autobiographical works, fiction and poem, in my thesis, I have looked at how Taslima Nasreen explores the theme of female sexuality and how she presents women's bodies as objects of violence and subjects of pleasure at the same time in my first chapter. In the second chapter, I have placed Taslima Nasreen in the context of Bangladeshi women's movement and tried to comprehend the reason behind the lack of togetherness between feminists of our country and Taslima Nasreen, when they both talked about the same thing. Finally, in the last chapter, I have looked at Taslima Nasreen solely as a women poet.

Chapter 1

Female sexuality has been an abiding theme in Literature over the years. Taslima Nasreen follows the same trend in her exploration of female sexuality in most of her works. In her writings, women's bodies are seen both as objects of violence, especially when she talks about rape and harassment, and subjects of pleasure at the same time. This chapter will talk about the body as an entity of violence and pleasure by looking at *Lajja* (1994), *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), *Shokol Griho Haralo Jar* (2017), *Bhromor Koiyo Giya* (1994), *Dwikhondito* (2003), *Sexual Politics* (1970)

By making rape as important concern in *Lajja*, the novel describes sexual experience of women in a violent way. The novel also depicts a situation in the country, where women are abducted and raped. Their parents are threatened. 'Threats', 'terrified', 'abduction' --- these are the words that are associated with rape. The girls are taken away by outside force. In *Lajja*, the character Suranjan rapes a Muslim woman as vengeance. Nasreen writes in *Lajja* (translated by Shikha Thakur):

"He turned off the lights in the room. He threw the girl on the floor and stripped her of all her clothes. Suranjan took quick, deep breaths, as he dug his nails into the girl's flesh. He bit her breasts, one part of his mind understanding that what he was doing was certainly not love. Relentlessly he pulled her hair; bit her on the cheek, neck and breasts. He scratched her waist, her stomach, her buttocks and her thighs with his sharp nails . . . the girl moaned with pain, screaming occasionally, 'O my God! I am dying of pain. . . .' Suranjan laughed with savage satisfaction." (*Lajja* 200-01)

The violent sexual experience makes the woman moan and scream. She moans with pain while Suranjan scratches her and hits her. Suranjan does not even see the woman in the dark. With his sharp nails he acts like an animal. Woman's body is treated here as an object

of violence. Suranjan uses his penis as a weapon to torture the female body. This is what Susan Brownmiller points out in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*.

“Along with the use of fire as well as the first stone tool, man's discovery of his ability to use his genitalia as something of a weapon to trigger fear can perhaps be said to be one of his discoveries in prehistoric times. All through history rape has played a critical role in keeping women under control. In essence, it is a controlled and familiar method by which men keep women intimidated. That some portion of the male society carries out this heinous act provides an alarming enough threat to keep all women in a constant state of fear and paranoia”. (Brownmiller, 1975)

The same thing happens in *Lajja*. Men of both religions, Muslims and Hindu, rape women to exercise their power. In the novel, it is shown how the Muslim men use rape to induce fear among the Hindu community. Suranjan being a member of the minority Hindu community, too, plans to rape in order to take revenge. In both cases, it is the woman's body that is being violated constantly, in order to bring other community under domination. The phenomenon of rape in *Lajja* shows that rape is political. Here, the rapists do not only rape individuals, but their ultimate goal is to rape a whole community, which Susan Brownmiller also points out in her book. Structural domination has always been an integral part of rape and women's bodies are used as property. Brownmiller, in her book, talks about rape in prehistoric times, and how the men fended off all other potential aggressors, once the man took ownership of a particular woman in the community. The male made themselves responsible for the security of women and thought of themselves as the protectors of women. Due to this protective nature, women were kept confined and they were isolated from the society as a whole. The historic cost of a woman's security by one man against another man was the burden of purity and monogamy. (Brownmiller, 1975)

What this illustrates is that sexual assault and harassment are phenomena that affect women's bodies, and a behaviour that is most exclusively carried out by men. Men feel a sense of great achievement by viciously invading a woman's body. What more appalling is that men who take the burden of protecting women on their shoulders, as their spouse, sibling, father, or peer quite often begin to treat these same women as a thing they own, bringing into question the true significance of respect and male-female relationships. Women have had to inhabit in male-dominated environments such as offices, and classrooms on numerous occasions and in these spaces repulsive comments have been made about them. Even though those making the remarks would never engage in any kind of sexual abuse, what this does is allow a culture to proliferate that views women as worthless and inferior.

Coming back to *Lajja*, we see Suranjan feeling worthless and inferior being a Hindu man and who is unable to protect his community. His masculine ego compels him to take revenge on the Muslim community and rape is his way of regaining his worth and power. While *Lajja* is a piece of fiction, Nasreen talks about rape in her non-fictional works as well. In her recent book called *Shokol Griho Haralo Jar*, she describes the gang rape case of Purnima, who was raped when she was thirteen. Out of 17 accused, only 11 were sentenced to lifetime imprisonment after 10 years. Nasreen was deeply disheartened after hearing about Purnima's life after the rape. Purnima is shamed and pointed out in the streets when anyone recognises her. The brutal treatment of Purnima's body has not only affected her physically, but also the psychological damage leaves a permanent mark. The exploitation of a woman's body by rapists allows other men to think of her as a cast-off. Another rape case of a five year old girl is mentioned in the same book. Nasreen writes:

"In Bangladesh, a girl named Puja was raped. She was five year old. This five year old got raped by a 42 year old man called Saiful Islam, who was a father to four. This incident of torture took place in Dinajpr. The girl used to call the man Boro baba. He was

her neighbour. Maybe, the girl was his daughters' playmate. As far as I know, 70% of child rape happens by a male family member, a close relative or someone very known." (Shokol Griho Haralo Jar, 53) (My translation)

Nasreen also claims that, in most cases, men who are rapists are either already married or have sexual partners. Yet, to prove their masculinity, they rape, so much so that even little girls are not secure. This particular 42 year old man happened to be an authority figure to this little girl. When he was raping her, he is taking advantage of the authoritative position that he holds. Nasreen in *Shokol Griho Haralo Jar* says,

"'rape' in this patriarchal society is worn as a crown in the head of men's much worshiped genitals. It is used as the ultimate tool to establish one's position over the other's body. If the genital is the weapon, woman's body is the object of torture. Also, in family structures, males are considered authoritative figures, which give them the scope to exploit their wives' bodies."(My Translation)

In the name of protection, even husbands rape. The concept of marital rape is also included in her works. In *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, she mentions how repulsive the husband Altaaf was. She describes Altaaf as someone "who can only tear things and consume". The idea of violence and force that has always been used over female bodies by authority figures to exploit power is talked about by Nasreen while depicting the sexual experience of women within and outside marriage.

On the other hand, Nasreen openly talks about female sexuality in a pleasure frame. She shows women's bodies as subjects of pleasure too as opposed to them being objects of violence. Female bodies, too, need sexual pleasure --- Nasreen states it through her writing. She enjoys her experience and does not say 'no'. In *Dwikhondito*'s chapter 'Jemon Khushi Temon Shajo' Nasreen writes:

“I have given my body because my body needed it. I have found the excitement of bodily pleasure for the very first time with Rudro. When Rudro is no more in my life, I have shared my body with men like Milon, Nayeem and Minar. I have spent three nights in Kolkata with Jalal. He came to me one evening to share his life story. I have listened to his stories the entire night, I have listened how he fell in love, how he got married, how he got divorced and how loneliness is killing him. He was drinking the whole time. When dawn slowly came, he stopped drinking alcohol and started drinking me. I did not say ‘No’. I did not say ‘No’, not because I could not. But, because I did not want to.” (Dwikhondito, 227) (My translation)

Here, by stating that she did not want to say no, when she could have, Nasreen implies that she sleeps with Jalal with her own consent. In *Bhromor Koio Giya*, Nasreen describes the female protagonist’s sexual experience with a man named

Kaiser, “I close my eyes and feel his warmth. I shiver couple of times. Then, when he kisses me on my mouth, I cannot hold myself in. I let it go, like a rose spreads its petals while blooming.” (Bhromor Koio Giya, 79) (My translation)

The woman here also hugs Kaiser back in this paragraph and says she does not want to hold back, because there is no one in the room to stop her. She thinks she is capable enough to yield to her needs. She compares the quenching of her body’s thirst to that of a summer’s field during rainfall. The metaphors that she uses indicate the willingness towards the sexual encounter, while she frankly discusses her needs.

Nasreen talks about her sexual encounters with different men in her work. She has been in friendly terms with most of these men, but none of them is her husband. While rape is considered a political thing, ‘sexual pleasure’ can be deemed as political in too. Nasreen is enjoying her sexual experiences with these men when she does not consider herself inferior to them whereas she fails to enjoy her sexual experience with her husband, who used to feel superior to her. Here, sexual politics has played a crucial role in her works. The term, ‘sexual

politics’, is coined by feminist writer Kate Millett. In the second chapter of *Sexual Politics* called ‘Theory of Sexual Politics’, Kate Millet says

“introducing the term ‘sexual politics’ will be the first step of answering the question “Can the relationship between the sexes be viewed in a political light at all?” (Millet, 355)

The answer to this will have political implications as sex is a category for a person’s status. Thus, being the first of its kind-the answer will be both tentative as well as imperfect. This is solely because the said answer will be a general one, taking the subject as a whole, and also the exceptions will not be taken in. Thus the change from intimate scenes to larger political references will be a great achievement. (Millet, 1970).

Millet emphasizes on taking the intimate scenes of closed rooms to larger political context. In *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, Nasreen openly shares what happens inside bedrooms after the marriage. After her marriage, the man is unable to satisfy his wife’s sexual needs. He even tells her that, she is a sex-crazed woman who needs help. The novel graphically describes the sexual episodes inside the bedroom *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*:

“He holds my hands. He buries his head inside my breasts. I make a moaning sound which even surprises me. I do not know why I like it so much. Altaaf moans too. He touches my entire body and kisses me while moaning. I realise that I am wet and sweaty. I hug him tightly. He wants to melt within my body but then, I do not know what happens. He releases himself. I am breathing heavily. There are waves of ocean inside my body. Altaaf turns and falls asleep. I am restless and not able to fall asleep.” (Bhromor Koiyo Giya, 16) (My translation)

Nasreen shows how the husband fails to satisfy wife’s sexual needs. These incidents are repeated almost every night. If politics is a structure or system, where one is leading or guiding the others and incidents inside bedrooms are associated with politics, then it can be

said that, Altaaf, being the husband is trying to dominate his wife, Nasreen. Kate Millet says in *Sexual Politics*,

“A disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as herrschaft, a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalised nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females.” She adds, “If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger. However, just as with any human institution, there is frequently a distance between the real and the ideal; contradictions and exceptions do exist within the system. While patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic forms, whether of caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy, just as it pervades all major religions, it also exhibits great variety in history and locale.” (Millet, 26)

Therefore, politics is not only related with sexual encounters in a violent framework, but it is also related with women’s sexual encounter in a pleasure framework. Nasreen in her autobiographical writing *Dwikhandito* also mentions a married man named Kaiser, who had an extra-marital affair with her. Like Milon, Nayeem and Minar, Nasreen enjoys her sexual journey with Kaiser. She admits that she is amazed by Kaiser’s beauty. She finds Kaiser very handsome and has always wanted to be with a man this good-looking. She knows Kaiser has a wife, but that does not stop her from wanting to be with him. She keeps wondering whether Kaiser likes her back until one day she finally sleeps with him. When Kaiser touches her for the first time, Nasreen says that she cannot hold herself back. She gives in the very first time he touches her; her entire body shivers. In her words,

“Us two people, we get lost somewhere while loving each other. While getting lost, I realise my thirst is quenched gradually. My thirst is quenched. All these times, my body has wanted something. In the season of drought, it has wanted water. Then suddenly, rainfall of happiness has started pouring down on me. There is a sudden sound of rainfall on a dry field. There is greenery. I am lost in a different world. I do not quite understand what is happening to my body. I do not even understand how my thirst is fulfilled. But, when it is getting fulfilled, I grab Kaiser’s back with utmost happiness; I leave my nail’s mark on his back”
(*Bhromor Koio Giya*, 79) (My translation)

With metaphors of dry field, rain and thirst, Nasreen here clearly talks about her climax. The paragraph introduces the feeling of being unearthed, about how the author has become lost in some fantasy while undergoing the act of sexual intercourse. The use of the word 'thirst', water and rain imagery achieves two goals at the same time. Primarily, it is to symbolize how sexual fulfillment is achieved, similar to how a barren earth regains a sense of rejuvenated life after rainfall. The imagery bounces forward from the author's initial mention of becoming lost and the change in geography aligns quite neatly with that short induction. Taslim Nasreen’s writing allows her character to admit about sexual desires openly. There is an openness and a poetic manner in which she writes about her sexual experience.

Taslina Nasreen talks about both pleasant and unpleasant sexual encounters distinctively. In her recent book, *Shokol Griho Haralo Jar*, she admits that when she wanted to sleep with someone, she did. But, when she did not want to sleep, she would not sleep, even if the earth turned upside down. Therefore, while her works prove that politics is involved in sexual encounters, both in violent and pleasure frame, it also tries to give a distinct idea of sex with consent and sex without consent.

Chapter 2

Women's movements and activism in Bangladesh has worked in four broad areas which are - violence against women, rights for women, question of religion and interface between state, and global feminism. Among the array of movements, two of the movements aligned with Taslima Nasreen and they are – sex workers' movement and secular movement. In this chapter, Taslima Nasreen will be placed in the context of women's movement in Bangladesh.

Ayesha Banu for the paper 'Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000 Voices from Women's says "the issue of body was raised around the question of prostitutions and sex work. The most controversial demonstration took place around women's rights in the public sphere demanding rights to livelihood and declaring 'sex work as work' during the late nineties. Another issue that was raised by key figures in the movement was the question of religion. The affinity with secularism and its contestation with the women's movement were largely identified as one of the unresolved arenas within feminist understanding and of the nation, till today." (Banu, 2012-13)

Taslima Nasreen who is globally recognised as a feminist writer and who has also received death threats because of her provocative writing can easily be seen in this context. Along with women's bodies and female sexuality, religion has been an integral part of her writing. However, in the context of Bangladeshi feminist movement, there have been different opinions about Taslima Nasreen as a feminist and her acceptance by women's activists has been debated. Najma Chowdhury, founder of Women and Gender Studies department, University of Dhaka, in an interview to Ayesha Banu for the paper 'Feminism in Bangladesh: 1971-2000 Voices from Women's Movement' says,

“Her writings are not spontaneous. I think she writes purposefully to create agitation. Most of her writings were based upon her personal experiences highlighting women’s body and sexuality. She could not draw attention to basic issues related to women’s lives. The women’s movement had a conflicting relationship with Taslima. Nevertheless, I could never support the way religion-based political organisations have attacked her and threatened her with death sentence. I also could not support the way the state reacted to this attack upon her. During that time we were under democracy and under the female leadership. What happened to Taslima was not expected and acceptable in a democratic country.” (Najma Chowdhury, interview dated: June 2011)

The women’s movement in Bangladesh has addressed rape cases and violence against women during Liberation War to contemporary acid attacks, movement around deaths of Saleha, Shabmeher, Rima, Yasmin, in the mid-nineties’ religious fatwas against women, all these have brought to light by women’s movement. However, Taslima Nasreen without being actively part of any organisation, has aggressively talked about women’s bodies and religion, but in a disruptive manner. Nasreen’s approach seems to be different from the way women’s movement addressed the same agendas. In *Lajja*, by focusing on revenge rape, she sensationalises the systemic rape of women. She talks about various practices around *Pirs* in *Amar Meyebela* too, which created a stir. Feminists in the women’s movement during that time have sensed dishonesty and disrespect in her work.

Again, Ayesha Banu in her paper states that the breach between Nasreen and the women’s movement came about through a sense of distrust and doubt. People thought that she personally gained popularity by writing, which itself was seen as deliberately too explicit and lacking content. Though Nasreen did not become popular among feminist groups, yet everyone agreed that the fatwa against her as well as her ban was undeserved and took things too far. However, the Western media seemed to take a liking to her. Nasreen, before her

disappearance from the public is in many instances seen to be almost combative and the Western media appreciated it. For example, she smokes a cigarette while holding the Quran in a BBC feature film. Her provocative writing that showed Bangladesh as a country with extremist beliefs and showing an absence of secularism, result in her being pushed away from the lively and growing feminist movement, which again is also absent in her writing. (Banu, 2012-13)

Taslina Nasreen also attacks feminists, including Jahanara Imam and Sufia Kamal. In her recent book, *Shokol Griho Haralo Jar*, in the chapter 'If I were a man', Nasreen writes about Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, pioneer of women's rights to education in Bangladesh:

"Whether a woman writes well or not, she is judged by the number of men she has slept with. Since Begum Rokeya never left her husband, the husband who was old and, and she never was involved with another man after her husband's death, she is a good woman." (*Shokol Griho Haralo Jar*, 89) (My Translation)

In this book, she claims that other women writers are not hated as much as she is. No other women writer reveals the truth about women as she does. She also claims that she speaks the bitter truth and hence, she does not get the blessings of male writers. She attacks intellectuals and feminists of the country by inducing provocative thoughts which isolates her from the feminist literary community. However, in the same book she claims that she has been fighting for women's right for more than three decades. In her words,

"It feels like the entire world has gone backwards, including the society. Girls are being forced to wear burkha-hijab, women are being gang raped, even children are not safe. I have been fighting against discrimination against women, laws and superstitions that are against women, people's negative attitude towards women etc. I was previously told that, I

was crossing my limits and women received more rights than they should have. Yes, they used to tell me that. I was always isolated.” (My translation)

Here, she says that she was being isolated for speaking the truth. However, it is also claimed that Nasreen was approached by women’s organisation, which she refused to be a part of. The internal dynamics are elaborated by Maleka Begum to Ayesha Banu. She says,

“We approached Taslima to join the platform of the women’s movement but she declined. She liked to fight her own battles individually she said. We also asked her to stay back, not to flee from the country, but she had her own way. In principle we were in favour of her right to speech and voice but could not give her wholehearted support as her controversial remarks against Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam and many more created agitations within the women’s movement.” (Maleka Begum, interview dated: March, 2011)

Dr. Habiba Zaman, Professor of the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, in her paper ‘The Taslima Nasreen Controversy And Feminism In Bangladesh: A Geo-Political And Transnational Perspective’ quotes Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kari (a non-profit organization). Khushi Kabir says:

“Taslima went for the jugular, and we're not ready for that. There's simply too much at stake. You have to learn how to deal with the situation - how to handle the bearded ones. And that is something that Taslima never understood.”

When the women’s movement played the lead role in protesting religious extremism and ensuring women’s rights and their freedom of expression, Taslima Nasreen’s method of protest to an extreme level would cause an utmost backlash. Moreover, her discussion of religion was very stereotypical and lacked new elements. In fact, her criticisms of Islam and people who followed it, does not depict the real picture of Bangladesh. For example, in

chapter 'Pir Baari', in *Amar Meyebela* Nasreen talks about a Pir called Amirullah and she says, each and every young girl including her mother was desperate to impress the Pir. When Amirullah used to relax after his afternoon snacks, Nasreen's mother and other women would fight among themselves over providing services to him. Some wanted to massage his arms, some wanted to massage his legs and some to his head. These women want to serve Amirullah, because they believe by serving him they would be ensuring their place in heaven. In this representation, she not only demeans the society she grew up in, but also demeans her mother. She writes that her mother was greedy for wanting to massage Amirullah's legs. She fights with other women over Amirullah's saliva as if it is some kind of Nectar of Heaven. However, Taslima's father disapproved of her mother going to Amirullah's place. He stops giving her pocket-money. Nasreen's mother considers all these restrictions as the devil's way of distracting her. She become more adamant in pursuing her goals.

In the article, "Nasreen Gone Global: A Critique of Taslima Nasreen's Criticism of Islam and Her Feminist Strategy, Md Mahmudul Hasan writes, Nasreen uses a stereotypical representation of Muslims, claiming that illiterate and uneducated people who had no scientific knowledge would believe in religion. According to her, believers in Islam do not have any brain. When it comes to criticising Islam, many of her statements are charged with emotions, outright impropriety and offensiveness, and break boundaries of respectability and civility. For example, she overgeneralises and slanders all hijab-clad Iranian women, lampooning them by saying that they strip themselves naked in doctors' chamber on flimsy excuses. Such strident, sweeping comments on Iranian Muslim women and on another country suggest insensitive cultural caricaturing. (Hasan, 2016)

In the chapter 'Dhormo' in *Amar Meyebela*, Nasreen talks about the religious conventions in her family. She writes about Jhunu Khala who gets a lot of marriage proposal because she is fair. Her grandmother wants her Jhunu Khala to study further. Junu Khala has

an elder sister. Her mother does not want her to get married before her elder sister does.

Nasreen's mother's brother is a Madrasa student who has a job in Dhaka. Nasreen talks about how fair his wife who happens to be her aunt is. Unfortunately, her aunt is not able to conceive a child. Neighbours and relatives start getting Nasreen's aunt various tabiz. Her maternal relatives play a crucial role in this chapter. She writes

“Nani is worried that her kids will become vagabond if they do not study. When her hair starts to turn grey, she decides she will go to hajj. But, where will she find the money to go to hajj? Nani gets furious. Nana believes Allah will give her the money. However, in the end, my father gave her the money. Nana gave him his words that he would return the money after coming back from hajj. Inside a huge tin's suitcase, he carried all his clothes. With a white pen he wrote his name Mohammad Moniruddin Ahmed and address Aqua Madrasa Quarter, Mymensingh on the suitcase. The year he was on a sheep to go to hajj, Neil Armstrong went to moon the very same year. Nana is in hajj and Neil Armstrong is in moon.”
(My translation)

The comparison between Nasreen's nana being on hajj and Armstrong being on moon is a representation of the juxtaposition of science and belief system. She shows how the moon is being followed in order to perform certain festivals (e.g Eid, Ramadan etc) in her book. Also, the dialect Nasreen utilizes to advocate women's rights is clearly hostile and insolent to the social and religious practices. According to Md Mahmudul Hasan, she could have used a way which Bangladeshis can acknowledge and, the different strands of the women's activist development in Bangladesh would massively benefit from her work. As indicated by Hassan, utilizing Islamophobic remarks to advance women's rights is an inconsistency in wording, as she logically asks: ‘Are Muslim ladies not disciples of Islam? Are Muslim ladies not casualties of "Muslim-bashing"?' Hasan contends that the system of stigmatising Islam to set up women's rights in Muslim social orders has not rendered any great advantage to women or

to women's liberation'. By maligning Islam for the claimed contrariness between Islam and women's rights, Nasreen offends the very women whose rights she claims to ensure. (Hasan, 2016) She is uncritical of the whole colonial debate in which Muslim women were placed in a certain manner.

In addition to this, the description of Razia Begum in her writing provides an anti-feminist representation of women. Her mother used to suspect that Razia Begum has an affair with Nasreen's father. Even though Nasreen through Pir Amirullah's story shows her mother's insanity, she seems to take her stance in a serious manner in this regard. She describes Razia Begum in her *Amar Meyebela*:

"Razia Begum is beautiful, beautiful in my mother's definition which is fair. She has a pitch-black pair of eyes like that of cows in her fair face, her lips are like that of orange, has waist length hair, when she ties her hair, it looks like her she's carrying a parcel in her head and her breasts are so huge that it looks like she is having a hard time carrying it." (My Translation)

The description of Razia Begum's body is not a clear feminist stance in her writing. Razia Begum is one of those women whose rights she claims to ensure as a feminist writer. She compares a woman to a cow by stating that she knew she could get two bowls of milk if Razia Begum was milked. She also compares her body to a mountain and claims that when Razia Begum walks, the earth shakes. Her representation of Razia Begum is based on her mother's description because Nasreen had never met her in person. Also, in her short story *Dukkhoboti Meye* (1994) she tells a story of two sisters. The fair sister who got married soon and the sister who is dark in complexion called her sister stupid for getting 11 out of 100. Her writing pitches women against each other, which how women have been represented

throughout the centuries. Taslima Nasreen is doing the same. In fact, she herself condemns Begum Rokeya for not breaking stereotypes and not leaving her husband.

These representations of our society have been shown in a negative light by the western media. The western media, too, play a crucial role in Taslima Nasreen's case. Habiba Zaman in her paper mentioned that the Western media's depiction of Nasreen as a champion of hostility to Islam not just helped the political circumstance to disintegrate further, but also took away any possibility of help at the grass-roots level. Majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims, yet not fundamentalist in the customary sense. There is a solid mainstream drift in Bangladesh legislative issues and culture. For example, the radical/liberal powers, numerous understudies, and different women's gatherings battled next to each other determinedly from 1952 to 1971 to free Bangladesh from the military-bureaucratic neo-colonial complex of Pakistan. Partha Ghosh, Director at the Indian Council of Social Science Research, commented, "Bangladesh is typical of South Asian politics where religion is used for political purposes yet secularist forces also remain vigilant and strong" (1993). All through the Nasreen contention, the Western media did not investigate the exercises of either radical/liberal powers or women's activist/organisation's movements, and in its obliviousness, ignored these other contemporary powers. They painted a negative picture of Bangladesh, where religious fundamentalists issue and execute fatwas and Bangladeshi women are aloof casualties, powerless in their everyday lives. Truth be told, liberal and common powers were solid in the socio-political procedures in Bangladesh. The 1996 general decision showed again how solid these powers were to the point at which every single religious parties were dismissed. The Western media's picture of Bangladesh as undimensional Islamic religious government was absolutely deceptive and false. (Zaman, 1997)

Nasreen, in *Kha* (2004) talks about her days in Paris and reflects how she is valued by the Western Media. She mentions that various journalists and writers have tried to reach to

her for speaking about women's issues. The famous La Novella magazine wants her to write for them. Taslima Nasreen writes:

“Magazine’s editor Je Danielle sent me a lot of faxes when I was in Dhaka. He requested me to write a diary. Famous writers of the world write in that magazine.” (My Translation)

In the book she also appears in an interview in a French TV shows and says,

“In my country, the extremists take money from Arab countries and are getting armed. The entire country is under Anarchy. People are preaching religion openly.”

The exaggeration in her portrayal of Bangladesh to the Western media gave her international popularity. In *Kha*, she also says that she was approached by different writers to get *Lajja* translated. However, *Lajja* focuses more on religious extremism rather than a feminist discourse. Habiba Zaman says “*Lajja*, represented more geo-politics in the subcontinent than feminist views in Bangladesh. Nasreen did break the structural silence of her society on various women's issues, but her writings and her remarks went beyond what feminist/women's groups could support, and may have jeopardized their gains. After Nasreen's exile to Sweden in 1994, her case was not discussed by any feminist/women's groups in a public forum in Bangladesh. Even in the general election of Jatiyo Sangsad in June 1996, no individual or group raised Nasreen's case as an election issue.”

Chapter 3

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* talks about how women do not produce enough poetry. She claims that writing poetry is harder than writing prose because, prose or novels can be written by simply sitting in the living room, observing all the chaos. The daily stories of lives can be easily written without much concentration. For example, Woolf thinks Jane Austen could produce novels without having a separate study. She says, "How she was able to effect all this', her nephew writes in his Memoir, 'is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party. Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper. Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion." (Woolf, 1929) Hence, the difficulty of writing poetry makes women deprive of creating them and writing poetry is thought of a masculine act.

However, Woolf fails to recognise female poets such as Emily Dickinson, Sappho etc. in her text. Over the years the world has produced female poets, proving that women write poetry too. Taslima Nasreen, has expressed herself through poems over the years, which are often overlooked under the controversial framework. While love is the main theme of most of her poems, she also confesses her days in exile, her mother's role in her, women's role in the society. In her poem, 'I don't feel upto love these days', Nasreen writes:

*"My heart aches for those who love
As if they are dead.
It aches all day,
And needles poke me,*

*am I mad that I'll leap at love?
 First I'll have to help those who're floating,
 first I'll have to scratch my hand
 towards those who are drowning.
 After that, if I live, I'll live,
 if I love, I'll love.” (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)*

Here, Nasreen talks about human love in general, not a living room love story she might have observed. It has rhetorical questions, metaphors of drowning and floating. Not only love, Nasreen also talks about male domination over women in her poems. For example in her poem ‘Border’ she writes:

*“I'm going to move ahead.
 Behind me my whole family is calling,
 My child is pulling my sari-end,
 My husband stands blocking the door,
 But I will go.
 There's nothing ahead but a river.
 I will cross.
 I know how to swim,
 But they won't let me swim, won't let me cross.” (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)*

The poem depicts most of the Bengali woman’s social obstacles. Husband, children, family members are represented as obstacles. The struggles of a woman’s journey are narrated within stanzas including metaphors and punctuation. Even in poem ‘Another Life’, Nasreen sees ‘the rice’ as everything about society and life has to offer and the stones are the negative aspects of life. She writes,

“Half their lives women pick stones from the rice.

*All their lives stones pile up in their hearts,
no one there to touch them even with two fingers.” (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)*

Though everyone will eat the rice, women are forced to experience the task of getting the stones out, they will face obstructions the men will not. Men will simply enjoy the rice that is given to them without worrying about anything bad being in it. And, because women have to go through so much bitterness, experiences really affect them badly and their hearts grow hard, unable to give the warmth they could have otherwise been able to. These things hurt them so much, their hearts harden so much, that it becomes utterly impossible to find that original pure happy state they are born with. Nasreen through her poems, narrates stories like these. Sigma G. R, in the chapter, ‘A feminist analysis of the love poems of Taslima Nasreen’ in International Journal on Multicultural Literature, talks about how Nasreen blatantly demonstrates the sexual and sensual feelings of women and the poet persona does not have a passive role. Sigma says,

“The authority of experience and social consciousness are exuberant in Nasreen's poems. This intensely personal and confessional quality of Nasreen's work recalls in some ways Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who attempt to work out in their poetry traumas in relation to their parents, particularly their fathers. The sense of betrayal evident in their poems is vividly realised in Nasreen's lines as her father betrayed her mother.” (Sigma, 2017)

Nasreen also discusses sexual desires in her poems openly. Female sexuality is an important theme in her poems. Sigma in the paper further compares Nasreen to Kamala Das. She says,

“Like her Indian counterpart Kamala Das, she also comes to consider sexual relationship an essential part of womanhood. Kamala Das does not think it is indecent or vulgar or indelicate or even undignified to speak about the need of sexual relationships in

explicit and specific terms. Kamala Das avers that a woman's sexual activity is a very important part of her physical and mental makeup. Nasreen also surely feels the need for love culminating in sexual relationship. She wants herself to be subjected to such an ecstasy, which she has been denied.” (Sigma, 2017)

Nasreen writes that if only her beloved could arise the woman in her that moment of bliss will be eternal:

*“When you suddenly woke up at dead of night
And drowned yourself in the waves of a woman-river
In a fit of wild love-making.” (Castles in the air) (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)*

In a journal called “Viewing Taslima Nasreen and her Writing from the Vantage Point of 2014” published in *Manushi*, a forum for Women’s Rights and Democratic Reforms, Shonu Nangia, Associate Professor of Foreign Languages, Louisiana State University at Alexandria, writes that some of her translated version of *Love Poems of Taslima Nasreen* are quite eloquent in expressing poet’s intimacy, anxiety, depression and desire. They also reflect on poet’s existential musings on life and love. These poems are also in lyrical vein. Her poems manifest that for persecuted writers writing is in a way a form of refuge. For writers who are stateless, writing becomes their only way to reach their own people. Hence, the theme of Exile, too, plays a very important role in the poems. (Nangia , 2014)

In her autobiography and other prose works, Nasreen talks about her days in Exile, her desire to come back to her homeland. The same concept is articulated in stanzas through her poems. In her *Love Poems of Taslima Nasreen*, Nasreen not only talks about her love for opposite gender, but also she talks about her love for her motherland. Love in general works as a theme in the poem. Nangia states,

“Simple yet eloquent, tender in tone, the poem “Exile” comprises three stanzas. It expresses the emotional pain of this exiled writer and her yearning for her homeland.

*Exposing her innermost vulnerability and loneliness, the poet addresses her country as would a pining woman in a letter to her beloved in a distant land. Nasreen's pain and anguish as an exile are expressed through the idiom of unrequited love in a style that does not fail to evoke the humility of one totally surrendered to the fire of longing. Each verse evokes a sentiment of acute and unbearable longing. The function of the first stanza is more than just emphatic, as the poet initiates a direct, insistent enquiry and interpolates the homeland to find out about its well-being: "My country, how are you? / How are you, my country? / You, my country, how are you? / Are you keeping well, my country?" The repetition of "my country" in each line suggests a sentiment of closeness and belonging that the poet feels towards her country and indicates a bond that has obviously not been severed or weakened by events, distance, and time. The homeland comes across as an *idée fixe*, an obsession that the poet cannot shake off." (Nangia, 2014)*

In order to write poetry, writer's inner thoughts, keeping the meter, symbolism in mind is quite distinctive than that of writing in plain verse. Nasreen has produced plenty of such poems that carry messages of her inner wounds. In *Love Poems of Taslima Nasreen*, there is a poem about female masturbation titled 'Masturbation' as well. In the poem she writes:

*"Throw the ball,
Dont let orchids embrace you at all,
Dont go to poisonous and bushes.
Push yourself into sensuousness." (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)*

The lines of the poem can be read of course on surface and deeper levels. A surface level reading is portraying a girl being told to go and play outdoors but to be wary of some of the dangers associated with the outside world. A deeper level reading will show that the poet is attempting to encourage and warn the female figure, quite similar to the surface level

reading. However here, the symbolism of orchid represents man's inherent want to overpower her; the poisonous ant bushes could reflect the ease with which it is possible to be stung and hurt by the multitude of patriarchy's words and ideals. The poet warns the figure to be wary of these, but to go ahead and do whatever she wants at the end. Nasreen's symbolism in her poem depicts an imagery through which she tells woman to be free. Symbolisms of nature, e.g flower, sun are present in her works. For example, in another poem called 'Self-Portrait', Nasreen writes:

"I dont believe in God

I look upon nature with wondering eyes

However much I move forward grasping the hand of progress

society's hindrances take hold of my sleeve

and gradually pull me backwards" (Translated by Ashim Chowdhury)

The first imagery that comes to mind is of chain, as if someone is locking her up. And she is trying to crawl forward but she is chained- so the chains are "society's hand" in this poem. It seems that she is in a locked up cell with just a window above her head. Hence, the "I look upon nature with wondering eyes" can be that she is looking at sunlight.

In her poems, she also touches upon issues in a less sensationalised tone. Nasrin has produced both prose and poetry in her literary career, but as a poet Nasrin is more interpretative.

Conclusion

By looking at these three aspects – Nasreen’s exploration of the body, Nasreen in the context of Bangladeshi women’s movement and Nasreen as a poet – this dissertation tries to show why Nasreen can be worth considering as a writer. Through the exploration of the body as objects of violence and subjects of pleasure, Nasreen shows how structural dominance and power become important factors in the theme of exploration of female sexuality. There may have been a difference in Nasreen’s depiction in the Western media and in Bangladesh but, Nasreen is a writer who still continues to write, and we should consider her writing. She is quite active in the digital platform as well, through which she is reaching out to audience till date. She is giving interviews and commenting on social causes including women’s rights, religious extremism in the country etc. In Twitter, she has expressed her wish to return to Bangladesh and asked for Government’s support while strongly advocating for the right to freedom of speech.

Using a way of sensationalising things, Nasreen was able to create stir and at the same time, came to limelight and reached out to a larger audience. A lot of people are reading her portrayal of Bangladesh. Therefore, it is important to critically analyse her work instead of accepting the oversimplified perception that many have regarding her. It is also important to realise the extent of truth in her writing and reflect on what feminists and intellectuals of the country think about her works. This helps us see things from a different perspective and evaluate Nasreen not just as a writer but also as a feminist. Lastly, Nasreen’s poems are more eloquent than her prose, which is why she can be worth considering as a poet too.

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