

PREVAILING NON-NORMATIVITIES: EXPLORING GENDER NORMS, TRANSGRESSIVE DESIRES AND IDENTITIES IN LITERATURE BY MUSLIM WOMEN WRITERS OF THE SUBCONTINENT



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Abstract

“Prevailing Non-Normativities: Exploring Gender Norms, Transgressive Desires and Identities in Literature by Muslim Women Writers of the Subcontinent” is an exploration of essentialised gender norms, transgressive desires, deviant sexual practices and identities persisting within heteronormative framework structured around marriage normativity and reinforced heterosexuality as the norm within institution of south Asian subcontinent. Hence, the current analysis focuses on literature by Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957), Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) and Taslima Nasreen (1962) under the lens of feminism. Using selected literary pieces by the chosen Muslim women writers, I have examined the ways in which they are anti-hegemonic in terms of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage. Societal values, norms, culture, religion, patriarchy and other internal and external influences often contributes formation of distinct gender performance and the shaping of one’s sexuality. Hence, within both public and private sphere, there is existence of pluralities, ambiguous identities and gender and sexual performances that does not confirm to the norms. Women’s emancipation through higher education, employment, mobility and increasing financial solvency enabled women in voicing their lived sexuality and sexual desires. Hence, the works produced by the selected writers can thus be viewed as their bold effort harking towards women’s empowerment through articulation of their aspirations.

Key words: *gender, feminism, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, marriage*

Introduction

“Apparently, it was an old tradition in Vidyamoyee School—older girls chose pretty young girls from junior classes as their favorite. It meant forming a special friendship, but it had to be kept secret. No one must know. No one must see them talking after school, or during the lunch break, or games class, behind the compound wall, or by the pond, or under a tree. The two girls would hold hands as they talked, and the older one would bring little gifts for the younger one.” (p.184, Nasrin, 1998).

Although homoerotic or same sex desires were present within the native myths and legends of Indian sub continental culture, the influence of Puritan values in addition to Islam, which condemns homosexuality, introduced the concept of homophobia that never existed in this part of the world (Vanita, 2002, 2009, Dasgupta, 2011). As a result, today we have been made to believe that heterosexuality is the norm, where other forms of sexual relation are seen as abnormal and hence tabooed. Therefore, in different cultures, it has been observed by feminist researchers that within the literary tradition female writers are erased off and subsequently forgotten; hence, women never had a history of their own available to them (Wolf, 1929). As a matter of fact, in a different era, when a woman wants to write, they have to look for references, in the process of which half of the time is spent finding who was before her. So, in the beginning of Chapter 5 in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf talks about the importance of having a history of women's writing. Hence, she talks about why it is essential to revive and find out about women's writing.

Flipping through a contemporary publication of Mary Carmichael, *Life's Adventure*, in the library, she stumbles upon a sentence, where it talks about two women loving each other for the first time. The very next words I read were these:

'Chloe liked Olivia. . . ' Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women", (Woolf, 1929).

In fact until Jane Austen's day in the 19th century, since women of fiction were seen in relation to the opposite sex, therefore, Mary Carmichael's attempt to shed light "*in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been*" (Woolf, 1929), is remarkable for Woolf because she had never seen any other piece, written by a woman, where they admit to the realities of lives in which homoerotic desires of women were practiced. And my experience of South Asian feminist writers was very similar to Woolf's experience in the beginning of the last century. Moreover, being an avid reader of literature from the west, I had always supposed same sex relations to be a product of the West. The fact that Muslim women were writing on these

realities were as surprising to me as it was for Wolf, when she opened Mary Carmichael's piece.

Despite being a progressive feminist writer, Wolf was surprised because it is almost uncommon to see such issues being dealt with by female writers, and after a century I am in a similar position regarding Muslim female writers. And to my pleasant surprise, I found it and thought that it's important to explore this tradition. That is why Elaine Showalter in *The Female Tradition from A Literature of their Own* (1977), states that it's important to examine this feminist tradition as it has different phases. Firstly, feminine, which involves a "prolonged imitation" of prevalent dominant culture and "internalizes" social roles, for instance, women are expected to be soft and submissive. Secondly, feminist, which is a "protest" against social values, prescribed by patriarchy and subsequently "demands autonomy". Finally female, which incorporates both feminine and feminist that involves looking inward for "self-discovery" and "search for identity" (Warhol and Herndl, 1996, p.274). Though these phases are used for western feminism, in case of English women writers, I discovered that this can be applied in a different way. I admit that other than this, enormous academic research have been done on Ismat Chughtai, Taslima Nasrin, if not Khanam, for example by, Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar in *Dismantling Patriarchal Marriage in The Quilt and Other Stories*, Srijeeta Mitrain *The Politics of Power: A Study of Gender and Sexuality in the Short Stories by Ismat Chughtai*, Dr. Sigma. G. R. (2013) in *Feminist Themes in Taslima Nasrin's French Lover*, Samraghni Bonnerjee in *The night she planned to go clear: The Third Wave and Psychoanalysis in Taslima Nasrin's French Lover*, Fatima Husain (2003) in *A Chronicle of Discrimination*.

John and Nair (1998:6), in the first comprehensive book on sexuality in India, also addressed questions and anxieties when Western literature and theories are used: 'why bring up western theories at all?' They responded that 'the West' is not only a particular geographical place but also a relation of complex domination or even hegemony, because 'we are effectively located in the West'. What is to be challenged is the notion that West-inclined feminist scholarship is unable to deal with locality. One must, therefore, be able to understand locality as a site of specific, time-space bound power relations. Both John and Nair (1998) and Menon (1998, 2007) accept that though at an unconscious level South Asian feminists draw upon Western theories, they still engage in a process of theorization of sexuality and sexual 'economies' through their own understanding of its realities in its experiences of uneven modernity, set in its own socio-historical backdrop. For my own theorization process, this means that I am

inspired by existing Western theories, but that I also engage with ‘multiple levels of analysis and the forging of articulation between the global and local’ (John and Nair 1998:7).

As a literature student, it was worth a journey to make, because it’s my own journey of finding a common thread between these three women in a tradition of feminist writing but located in different spots in the past. Even though the lens might be of western feminists, I can say how female tradition is very diverse. When we talk about the subcontinent, somehow our own female tradition, especially the feminist literary writing becomes very limited. I want to show that this cannot be limited to phenomenal women writer. In fact, we read so much about western feminist traditions where, if we refer to Showalter we notice how she documents so many subgenres within feminist writings, tradition within the western literature, female tradition, and women literature and how she categorizes various phases. May be similar to those of Showalter’s, it can be followed by three women writers I have chosen. Among them, only Taslima Nasrin is a very pronounced feminist writer. Therefore, even though it’s a western categorization but somehow, it can be used in my understanding of the female tradition, especially within this paper.

Since, sexuality beyond the framework of reproduction was considered to be “dirty and scandalous” feminine desire of sex for pleasure was forbidden and negated by the Victorian society (Hutson, 2006-08). Moreover, as all women who seek for gratification of their sexual desire were seen as amoral. Hence, Victorian women were expected to “eschew sex”, subsequently remain free from any form of fantasy of love or sexuality until they had received a proposal for marriage which did not apply to Victorian men, who could indulge in both “premarital and extramarital sexual relationships”. Further since a Victorian man views his wife “as nothing more than an extension of his household” which comes along as part of “furniture”, hence the husband had full control over wife’s body, for which physical abuse and marital rape were legal. Though in Victorian Era, authors could not write explicitly about sexuality, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu Wroty’s story *Carmilla*, explored not just female desire but also lesbian love. Similarly Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, depicts arousal of woman’s sexual drive “out of nowhere” in absence of male presence. Feminists have had a long run at critiquing the sex-gender system and sexuality as a realm used for establishing patriarchy, and its unequal-oppressive gender relations system. In order to deconstruct patriarchal norms and practices, and to define/theorize sexuality, female sexualities and femininity, two very significant and influential concepts and theoretical approaches came out of the second wave

feminist scholarship and movement: Heteronormativity and Queer theory. Heteronormativity, from feminist perspectives, is:

...the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations. Heteronormativity insures that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up both as a model and as 'normal'. Thinking straight means employing ways of thinking that assume the centrality and universality of heteronormativity. (Ingraham, 2006:315)

Feminists like Rich (1980), Wittig (1976), Rubin (1975), Grosz (1995), Butler (1990) etc. have all critiqued a sex/gender system of social arrangements that are seen as sites of heteropatriarchy which oppress its members through heteronormativity. Marriage normativity and compulsory heterosexuality are at the core of heteronormative structures, and are seen by these feminists as a powerful force of women's oppression. Furthermore, experience of "crushes" between school girls, narrated by a number of "young women" in the Victorian era and popular presses publishing stories about deviant sexual practices and "lesbian love triangles" are worth exploring.

Although, homosexuality did not exist as a category until the late 1880's (Hutson, 2006-08), same sex desire has appeared a number of times in the past prior to the 20th century, in the form of "transvestites, androgynous women, occasional lovers of women and romantic friendships within texts from western tradition", that depicts views and perspectives of only white women and excludes intimate relationships between women of color in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, as romantic friendships is hardly available especially before the 20th century, when I got to read aloud the South Asian ones, to my sheer amazement, I found out that there has been a process of puritanism, purifying, sanitizing literature, women's desire, women's expression on desire, erotic desires in the subcontinent through the colonialist time and postcolonial times. Due to the influence of Victorian values on the subcontinent, by the time it has come down to us, we got to believe that these are very deviant kind of writing. Women express their daily lives within the systems they operate in through all these diverse ways and this article (*Lesbian History: Beginnings*) represents the documentation of those (Hutson, 2006-08).

Therefore, the purpose of my thesis can be seen from two levels; firstly, I want to explore for myself as to how these Muslim feminist writers have been building upon a tradition of creating a challenging feminist kind of writing, and secondly, I want to observe how this whole issue of sexuality has been depicted by Muslim women writers within the

subcontinent. I am engaging with it because I am really intrigued by it and seek to find out how they have engaged on these issues over the years, in different eras and geographical locations.

In South Asia, John and Nair (1998) and Menon (2007) sum up the feminist approach to sexuality as a challenge to biological 'genitality', as 'a way of addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutions and practices, as well as the discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of "sex" (John and Nair 1998:1). Since Fatema Khanam, Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasrin have commonalities in terms of Muslim background and belong to various parts of South Asia situated in different eras; hence using their literary pieces I intend to explore similarities and differences in terms of concepts, values, beliefs, etc. associated within heteronormative framework. While discussing Fatema Khanam's writing which was produced during a time when women were not provided with formal education, it nevertheless provided a perspective on intimacy and gender. Ismat Chughtai talks about the endorsement of values, limitations and individual life choices during a nationalist time when women's education was encouraged but simultaneously was also put into a religious structural setting where they were not given many options. Finally, Taslima Nasrin's contemporary late 20th century writings have all the elements of women's empowerment that have been uniquely articulated in a very definitive and confident manner, though sometimes still being bogged down by the existing patriarchal system. However, it should be noted that though all these three could be stylistically different, content wise however they hold similarities. In fact, there are commonalities among all three writers which defines the purpose for me to not to analyse the stylistic value of their writings, rather I am interested to look at the content of the literary pieces they had been producing.

Coming back to the use of a heteronormative framework for studying sexuality in South Asia, Menon (2007:3) focuses on 'counter-hegemony', or the politics of counter-heteronormativity that refers to 'a range of political assertions that implicitly challenge heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage'. Heteronormativity, however, is a problematic term in itself, because of the porosity and instability of the boundaries of institutions and binaries that constitute it. Yet, Menon argues, it still remains a significant concept in understanding the continuous processes of producing particular forms of family, gendered identities and establishing desires as natural and historically eternal.

While pursuing my Masters, I was introduced to these feminist writers and the feminist way of interpreting literature, within which there is a gender-normative way of behaving where sexuality being a tabooed topic is however overwhelmingly present in every discourse we talk about. Even though I initially knew about Taslima Nasrin but the other two were a discovery for me which triggered this idea that if heteronormativity is so strong even today as a discourse and as a framework in one's everyday life, engaging into how these three very diverse writers took on the challenge of addressing the concept of heteronormativity, especially, non heterosexualities, in such courageous manner would cover elements such as, literature, feminism, heteronormativity within a Muslim context, and hence, assist in fueling my desire to research on these issues. However, I realized that within the subcontinent's history, to contextualize Muslim female writers is even more of a challenging job. The whole shaping of Muslim women's world has been influenced by different elements such as, Non-Muslim culture, Muslim culture, colonial influence, all of which contributes to constructing a Muslim women's life in this very fast changing era. Thereafter, I have chosen these three different writers, situated in three different timelines in the last century, among which, two of them belongs to the early 20th century whereas one of them is from the contemporary era. I intend to see a progression of Muslim women writers who act as a central theme of my paper, and their perspectives on sexuality, heteronormativity and gender, due to which the chapters will have historical context of each of these three writers.

As a background on the struggle of the Muslim women in early 20th century during the British rule, they were in a "miserable" condition, as they were deprived of their rights both by the government and patriarchal Indian society particularly regarding education, inheritance, marriage, etc. However, though initially British government seemed progressive and liberal in granting equal rights "irrespective of sex", but in reality, they were not much concerned about the situation of women. As a consequence, Muslims had to comply in accordance with the norms and values, prescribed by the traditional Islamic principle. However, since "Islam bestowed a high position on women", some Muslim reformers felt that Muslim women should be given modern education, so that they would be able to claim both their social and economic rights, but at the same time they were against Muslim women receiving complete knowledge of the Western customs (Shabbir, 2011). Hence, pioneers, such as Bibi Taherunesa, Rokeya Sakhawat, Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, Nur Jahan, Ayesha Ahmed, Abul Fazal, through their writings, "sought to redress perceived social ills, (such as polygamy and child marriage) and advocate female education, eradication of *abarodh* (lit.

siege-used mean extreme *purdah*) and generally improve women's status in society", as an attempt towards "nari jagaran (women's awakening)" which began within the Muslim community that got "concretely manifested in the women's reform movement of the early 20th century (Amin, 1996).

Subsequently, even though Muslim men were encouraged to acquire scientific, technological and religious education and hence were able to meet the needs of the modern era, Muslim women were educated at home in order to prevent them from mixing with other women belonging to different "classes, castes and creeds", who were "studying jointly" at school, as it was thought to be a threat to Muslim values. Moreover, due to the restrictions imposed by *Purdah*, high and middle class families was reluctant to send their women to the common institutions. Hence, around this period, many women's journal like, "Asmat", "Khantoon", Taleem-e-Naswan", "Sharif Bibi", began to appear to promote the cause of women's education and motivate women to opt for higher education. As a result, British governesses went door to door to teach "English language and other modern subjects" to Muslim women, but this was very limited (Shabbir, 2011).

The British then took initiative to open institutions, which observed veils, where "primary education was free of cost" and provided innumerable number of scholarships, incentives, etc., that encouraged many Muslim girls to attend school. Hence, since many women were trained to teach, other than having job opportunities in schools, because of being educated, it consequently opened employment sector for women in various departments. Further, several women's colleges and the option for women to appear as private candidate in University examination without attending classes and a number of vocational schools, also contributed in increasing the number of educated Muslim women. As a result, by 1941, many Muslim women went abroad for education and subsequently accomplished becoming doctors, bankers, lawyers, etc. (Hossain, 2011).

On the other hand, as the birth of a daughter was unwelcomed both by Hindu and Muslim societies, "female infanticide" were also common in Northern India, under British Raj. Further the practice of dowry as the only option of women to get married and due to daughters being a burden for families child marriage also prevailed in India, as it was considered to be a religious duty for both Hindus and Muslims. Hence, when the reformers claimed a ban on child marriage, and took "age of consent" into consideration eventually passing of "Hindu child Marriage Restraint Act", which can be applied to members of any

religion. However, it was strictly objected by Muslims, as it was inconsistent with the existing Muslim laws that are “enacted by Islam”. Therefore, even though Hindu community did abolish child marriage, it still continued in Muslim communities. Moreover, as Islam emphasized on education of women and does not strictly advocate for child marriage, the opposition from conservative Muslims does not have any legal ground. Furthermore, Muslim women were deprived of their share of property that was a form of violation of Islamic injunctions. However, it should be noted that the levels of injustice faced by Muslim women in British India still persists even today in some form or the other (Shabbir, 2011). Hence, Muslim women writers from the subcontinent had a long tradition of oppression, subjugation due to a lot of restrictions, resulting from the assumptions about religion, religious culture, gender or religion that often stops us from knowing or seeing group of women producing every challenging stereotype of literature.

As women are associated with the myths and stories, from civilizational point of view, women are always seen as the other of the male self thereby depicting themselves them in the form of immanence in comparison to transcendence. Moreover, since marriage “is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (Beauvoir, 1997) women are forced to acquire forced marital status, role of a wife and hence subjected to the notion of forced motherhood, subsequently making a compromise with her desires and diverse desires. However, the goal of writing this thesis is to investigate, how Women Muslim writers in the subcontinent has worked around in resisting compulsory heterosexuality within the society that strictly base itself on heteronormativity. Therefore, as a process I attempt to examine the following concepts, firstly, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and finally marriage.

Heteronormativity refer to the ways in which heterosexual culture is taken as the basis of human association which models on intergender relations persisting within all communities and subsequently considered to be the mode of reproduction without which society would collapse. Therefore, normal and heterosexual are understood as synonymous. This means that all social relations and all forms of thinking that exist with these relations are heteronormative. To put it crudely, heteronormativity creates a language that is "straight." Living within heteronormative culture means learning to "see" straight, to "read" straight, and to "think" straight (Sumara & Davis 2002). However, these normalized forms can be interrupted. Queer signify any non-normative behavior, relationship, or identity occurring at a specific moment, further indicating to an alternative form of desire that threatens the stability of the dominant norm. Since, literature provide the readers with the opportunity to gain new

perspectives and experience and moreover, research has proved that “normative assumptions and hegemonic narratives can be challenged by alternative stories” (Brändström, 2012), this section will focus on how hegemonic idea of heteronormativity is challenged through various forms of literary works.

However, since norms are taken for granted and constitutes a notion of normalcy, therefore, anything that deviates from norms is deemed as abnormal and is likely to be punished. As Foucault points out that according to the bourgeois societies, “*On the subject of sex, silence became the rule*”, so it should be confined within the bedrooms of the legitimate couples, who enforced the norm in which sterile behavior is seen to be abnormal. Since there is a matter of maintaining secrecy, anybody who tries to make it visible or does not confirm to this form of repression is liable to pay the penalty. For instance, those who are interested to have illegitimate sexual encounters are welcomed only in places like the brothel and the mental hospital where irregular behaviors would be tolerated. Although, “establishment of a regime of sexual repression” began in the seventeenth century, a range of scandalous literature flourished at that period. From time to time, directors would encourage telling everything. As a matter of fact, “not only consummated acts, but sensual touching, all impure gazes, all obscene remarks all consenting thoughts” (Foucault, 1976) were made visible. For example, Aphra Behn’s “*To the fair Clarinda*” (1688), represents homoerotic love which is depicted through “female friendships, or romantic friendship” (Frangos, 2004) love between two women that allows us to interpret it as a lesbian poem.

However, during the 18th century, due to the increase in population, there emerged a need to regulate sex “through useful and public discourses”, as for the first time society realized that “its future and its fortune were tied not only to the number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his sex”. Therefore, around eighteenth or nineteenth century, centers such as medicine, psychiatry produce discourses on sex. Moreover, as the courts could condemn homosexuality, sexual pervers became an issue of concern who were condemned to the status of mad men having “mysterious physiology”. They were considered to be sick, scandalous, dangerous victims, prey and are often locked up which does not necessarily have to be prison and thus seen within “houses of correction, the penal colonies, the tribunals, and the asylums”. Therefore, homosexual is seen as species upon which one can exercise power and derive pleasure. “*The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light*”, that involves “*capture and seduction,*

confrontation and mutual reinforcement” (Foucault, 1976), hinting at boundaries that are not to be crossed. For instance, Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years imprisonment for homosexuality, which in his day was a crime under gross indecency. And his imprisonment is thought to discipline him since it made him more serious, religious and induced a strong Christian element to him. Therefore, even though at one level it is repressed but on another level, it creates an obscure area of tolerance as it made way towards the formation of a counter discourse as “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1976).

Though, Foucault claims that “sexuality based identity categories” originated in nineteenth century Europe which did not exist before, Indian historians and queer scholars Vanita and Kidwai (Dasgupta, 2011) have discovered that these discourses were already available in ancient India, which can be explored through the uncharted territory of the Indian archive on homoerotic love. *“One of the dominant tropes of same sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships”*. In fact, homosexuality prevailed in precolonial India as the British administrators and educationists were responsible to homophobic attitude. For example, ancient Hindu epic, Mahabharata, Krishna and Arjuna are referred as “two Krishnas, developed their relation on the basis of friendship which goes ‘beyond marriage and procreation’. To Krishna, Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen” (Dasgupta, 2011), and therefore he cannot live without him. Hence, within Padma Purana, which is third largest book in Sanskrit literature, after Mahabharata Arjuna transforms into “beautiful woman”, named Arjunaī and Arjunaiyā, in order “to experience the true nature of Krishna, to become one with him” (Chaitanya, 2011). Like Arjuna, Vishnu took the shape of a lovely woman, Mohini who is pursued by Shiva, despite being aware of Mohini’s true gender, which lead to the “birth of Ayyappa”, who is born out of a relationship between two men, hence an indication of “non vaginal sex”.

Similarly, same sex desire amongst women is also found in the Bengali text Kritivasa Ramayana. Further Bhagvad Gita, most widely read Hindu text, depicts same sex relations. In fact, the through metamorphosis of male into female which allows Hindu deities to appear in any form, “male, female, neuter or even in a non-human form”, represents fluidity that persists within gender identity. On the other hand, although Koran strictly condemns homosexuality, but within Islamic culture in India in the latter half of the tenth century, “a

huge body of literature on same sex love especially those concerning between men” emerged. For instance, the relationship of Muslim ruler, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna with his slave Ayaz, who compares their relation with “heterosexual lovers in South Asian history - Heer and Ranjha, Laila and Majnun” and eventually stands as an epitome of perfect love in ‘ghazals’. Although with ‘ghazals’, the gender of the beloved is usually ambiguous, but in “Mahmud and Ayaz poems consistently identifies the beloved as male, through the trope of Mahmud’s passionate longing for Ayaz”. In fact, “the context of an intense male-male attraction at first sight”, has also been mentioned in “eleventh-century Sanskrit Kathasaritsagara story-cycle”. Though homosexual relations were widely visible during this time but were never mentioned derogatorily. Further the “queer Urdu ghazals” composed by Sa’adat Yar Khan Rangin (1756-1834) introduced lesbian voice to the “literary elites of Lucknow”, that portrays intimate feelings of “women narrator” for her “feminine aashiq” which “extended to eroticism” (Dasgupta, 2011) explicitly depicting same sex desires.

However, since homosexuality was not accepted by British administrators and educationists due to their Puritanical value, “most Indian nationalists internalized” homophobic attitudes and viewed “homosexuality as an unspeakable crime” (Vanita, 2009) that was never the case before. The “new homophobia was made overtly manifest by the British law of 1860, Section 377, Indian Penal Code, still in force in India” (Vanita, 2002). As a result, at present the “police force and educational as well as religious organizations” attempts to control “same-sex unions with horror and even violence” (Vanita, 2009). In fact, even before these issues were put forward by Indian LGBT movement, “same-sex marriages were reported from rural areas and small towns” where if their relationship is accepted by their families “female couples are generally able to stay together”. Although “law courts have uniformly upheld the right of consenting adults to live together” (Vanita, 2009), in cases in which families tend to take a strong stance against them, sometimes involving the local police, couples are made to “separate” or commit suicide under compulsion “leaving behind notes declaring their undying love” (Vanita 2002) for one another. However, women had been voicing their lived realities, negotiations, resistance, which maneuver through various forms of expression and literature is one of them, which depicts the construction of femininity in a society, women’s position within marriage, family, etc., that keeps women into a marsh mellow kind of existence, which has disturbed them for a very long time.

Whether it is heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality, it should be noted that both are culminated by marriage. Traditionally, marriage is a “legal and spiritual contract”

essentially between the opposite sexes bonded by a life-long commitment where the father gives away the bride who “vows to obey the husband” (Chambers, 2008) with the aim to produce offspring, enabling the procreation of the “human race, the family, and the perpetuation of property and wealth within particular family/genetic lines” (Poole, 2009). Even though marriage is a form of contract, it does not prefer spouses to select partners in accordance with their individual choice and hence advocates for arranged marriage. Further, marital bond also renders an unequal status to wives whose mission is to “please and serve her husband and rear children”. Therefore, though according to Plato, “men and women should work together”, on the contrary Aristotle believes that men are fit to “rule” through commands, whereas women should comply accordingly, thus a manifestation of male “courage” and superiority essential for “the marital good” (Brake, 2009). As a matter of fact to Engels marriage is not a historical social institution, rather he sees it as “the realization of an ethical norm derived by thought from the ‘nature of man’” (Draper, 1970). Hence, tracing back to the history of marriage in the primitive society, gender relations were based on “free sexuality” in which kinship is traced through the maternal line that eventually indicates various forms of family with whom one can develop sexual relation and identify the kin which formed one’s primary social group, that ensures men’s right to own property where legitimate children stands as a source of labour force in the form of one’s own possession. However, since both sexual relation and sexual desire outside marriage is condemned by Christian philosophers, such as, St. Augustine and St. Paul, and moreover, sex for the “sake of procreation is not sinful”, marriage is the “sole permissible context for sex” (Brake, 2009). Simultaneously, it should be noted that within the “old insistence of monogamous male/female bonding” since the males went out to hunt whereas, “women stayed home minding the babies” (Engels, 1884) it subsequently provides women with an inferior status by imposing “traditional gender roles” through the institution of marriage which must take place “between a man and a woman” (Chambers, 2008) hence reinforcing compulsory heterosexuality.

Since, marriage contributes to women’s oppression and exploitation through “economic and political disempowerment and limitation of opportunities” (Brake, 2009), hence forcing women to compromise with their desires and aspirations the institution of marriage is critiqued by feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1798), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), etc. However, although “feminists seem to think that marriage is both oppressive to its (female) participants and oppressive to its non-participants”, but since the institution of

marriage prevails which itself is “oppressive” and moreover due to the “symbolic pressure on women to marry”, and idea of being “worthless if unmarried” (Chambers, 2008) it is better on the part of women to get married rather than remaining unmarried.

Even though, the concept of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality originated from the West by Western feminists, who were further concerned regarding the institution of marriage as one of its implications, but it should be noted that apart from white middle class women many of the “non-white” (Thakur, 2014) South Asian women expressed their views regarding heteronormativity in order to achieve equality across the spectrum of genders. In fact, through the process of modernization by the west as part of nationalist project, heteronormativity persists as a dominant paradigm in South Asian post-colonial nations, which base itself on “Socio-sexual norms” under “strict gender binaries, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage normativity” (Karim, 2012) that eventually established itself as a universal norm, ultimately suppressing “sub continent’s own pre-modern history of sexual diversity”. Hence, the attempt of exploring the basic concept of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage in this paper provides a solid framework for my own research. And moreover, since I aim to explore the following concepts through literary works produced by Muslim women writers of the subcontinent, therefore, the next section is on heteronormativity in literature.

Hence, in this research, I would focus on the selected works by Fatema Khanam, Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasrin to explore the ways in which elements such as heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage makes their piece anti-hegemonic in terms of heteronormativity or heterosexuality. Therefore, the objective of writing this thesis is to explore how Muslim women writers in the subcontinent have worked around in resisting compulsory heterosexuality within the society that strictly base itself on heteronormativity. As a matter of fact, through analysis of historical research and intertextual references from selected works by Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957), Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) and Taslima Nasrin (1962- present), I attempt to examine the ways in which the writers challenge the concept of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and the institution of marriage.

Therefore, in this paper I aim to explore to find some answers to a specific set of research questions:

(1) How the female Muslim writers have been associating gender norms under the discipline of heteronormativity?

(2) Do these women writers consider the formation of same sex relationship as an alternative to break gender hierarchy?

Instead of arranging thematically, I rather prefer to proceed chronologically, according to writers. For instance, Chapter one is on Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957), Chapter two is on Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) and finally Chapter three, is on Taslima Nasrin. However, in each of these chapters, I began with the socioeconomic condition of the writers where they were located before I discussed in short about the writers themselves and eventually delved into analyzing texts, using intertextual references, literary theories and a summary of history where appropriate.

Chapter 1: What Means To be A Woman

In this chapter, I made an attempt to explore the fluidity of identities. So, with the aid of the characters from Khanam's short stories "*The Bond*" and "*Chameli*", I have tried to explain like gender, how the sex is also constructed though it was initially taken to be something biological, whereas gender was a social construct. So apart from incorporating gender norms prescribed by the society in which Khanam lived, I found Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* worth using, because the act of performativity actually contributes in the shaping of biology of both men and women. Further, through the conversion of woman into a woman, who always thought herself to be a man for the purpose of marriage, I tried to connect it with compulsory heterosexuality. Alongside by incorporating issues, such as child marriage in absence of consent, domestic slavery of wives and persisting hierarchies within heterosexual relation in marriage, I initiated a form of critic of the institution of marriage.

Chapter 2: Are Women Naturally Heterosexual?

In this chapter, I aim to explore whether it's an innate characteristic of women to be heterosexual. Therefore, using social background of the time Chughtai was writing and characters from Ismat Chughtai's short story, "*The Quilt*", I have looked into gender norms which are different for both genders, where interchange is not acceptable. Apart from that, I have also focused on deviant forms of sexual desires for both men and women and tried to

figure out the causes behind this transgressive desires which does not confirm to compulsory heterosexuality, for which I found Adrienne Rich's essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* and Simone De Beauvoir's chapter on *Lesbians* in "*The Second Sex*" quite helpful. Furthermore, I also looked into how women are being controlled and subjugated in every sphere of their lives through the institution of marriage that instigates women to choose lesbianism as a form of way out.

Chapter 3: Desire and Fear

In this final chapter, I tried to look for a solution to women's oppression. Therefore, by analyzing Nasrin's autobiographical memoir, *My Girlhood* and the novel *French Lover*, under a framework of theory and the time line, I have tried to see how the female protagonists in both the pieces challenge all the basic tenants of my research, heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, and chose a path of self-discovery in search of their identity that has been lost during the course of domination by the patriarchy.

Chapter I: What Means to be A Woman

Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957) was born in 1894 in the Manikganj subdivision in Dhaka. Before discussing her biography or progress of this writer, it's essential to understand the era or the time, where she was situated, socioeconomically, culturally and politically.

The early 20th century was the period of Bengali Renaissance, as the age had brought remarkable reforms through its process of modernization as part of nationalism. Due to strong British presence in Calcutta Western philosophy became superior in the public sphere. As a consequence of increasing Europeanization as part of nationalist movement, men acquired western education in order to work in colonizer's domain, subsequently leading to the emergence of "new Bengali middle class" comprising of mostly upper caste Hindus, who mimicked British and subsequently dominated most of the jobs available to natives within the Government bureaucracy. But simultaneously, it had pushed women into the private sphere where only the native Indian rules were followed. Since women occupied the inner sanctum which is deemed to be the non-colonized space in India or Bengal, the woman are glorified as they became the repository of the spiritual self and *Bangaliana* of the national spirit. However, within the new patriarchy in Bengal middle class educated urban *bhdrolok*, who were created by the colonizers domain, were in search of a *bhdro Mohila*. As the women failed to "provide intelligent companionship to their husbands or discipline to their sons" due to lack of education, the new woman for the new man has to be educated, well versed, possess free thinking and have opinions (Chakraborty, 2011).

Hence, progressive social reform movements initiated by reform minded Western educated Hindus, particularly *Brahma Shomaj* alongside the influence of European culture, brought changes in literature, religion, education, clothing, and gender roles, eventually leading to the rise of "new modern upper class Bengali woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Chatterjee, 1997). According to the education reformers, women should not learn either science or mathematics and receive education up to the level that is simply needed to become qualified wives for the new man of Bengal. On the other hand unlike Hindus, Muslim men of Calcutta shunned Western education; becoming professionally established they focused on retaining literary and religious culture. Therefore, Muslim women in the household were given the role of transmitting and preserving Muslim culture and religious life. Muslim women's reform lead by *ulama*, taught women in the light of Islam, to enable them to become good wives, mothers, homemakers and better Muslims who were able to

“appreciate the message of Islam and, consequently, be better equipped to bring up their children in the true spirit of Islam” (Chakraborty, Hossain, 2011).

Since the Muslim girls observed purdah, moreover, as early schools for girls were run by mainly Hindus and Christians, reformists of Muslim modern education like Sir Sayed Ahmad and Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Calcutta Madrasah were against institutionalized schooling and Western scientific education for Muslim women who should instead prefer Qur’anic education at home, but on the contrary, Syed Ameer Ali felt that women should have equal level of progress to that of men in terms of education. When the Muslim men of Calcutta opposed western education, a Muslim lady of Shyambazar took initiatives to recruit girls for the school she had assisted to establish in various parts of Bengal. Efforts were made to set up schools in Calcutta and Dhaka, but they were short lived. Since the standard of education was initially very poor in girls’ schools that had different curriculum from that of the boys, icons like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Samsunnahar Mahmud, Razia Khatun Chaudhurani, Khairunnessa Khatun and Mamlukul Fatema Khanam concentrated on female education and created discourse specifically on issues related to “women’s education, women’s mobility and seclusion” (Azim, 2013). Thereby, initiatives taken by the pioneering figures in formal education, such as, Nawab Faizunnesa Chaudhurani, the founder of Faizunnesa Government Girls School (enlisted among five English middle schools in 1911), Begum Rokeya, the founder of Sakhawat Memorial Girls School at Calcutta (where women could acquire knowledge in both science and arts, consequently making women self-reliant) and Begum Khedive Jung’s encouragement to develop women into independent earners alongside maintaining their household are worth acknowledging.

Khanam was in a very liberal Muslim family but was married off at the age of twelve to a conservative one where she could not study. Since she studied at home and attended private tuitions and also acquired painting lessons, later she was able to work at a school. Against the time there was this progressive woman who was trying to find a way to be more assertive, independent and vocal. Within this context, Khanam wrote the short stories, *The Bond* (1925) and *Chameli* (1928). *The Bond* is basically about a woman’s reconciliation with her husband after a long time of her marriage that took place ages back in her childhood whereas, *Chameli* is a story of a “girl who dressed like a man and hang around with men”, who under the pressure of society is made to reject masculinity, instead adapt femininity because of having a female body. Since the female protagonist of these stories can be juxtaposed as one lies in sharp contrast to the other, for instance, Naim is an epitome of the ideal Bengali woman, who

confirms to the prescribed norms of the society, whereas Chameli is marginalized for deviating from the norms, that is pretty common today, which was highly suppressed during the 20th century. Therefore, through the selected short stories, *The Bond* and *Chameli*, I aim to observe to what extent Khanam is able to question the concept of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and the institution of marriage.

Apparently due to heteronormative behaviour, individuals can fall under the margin of being either a man or a woman and has to perform according to the given gender roles that are separated from one another. Therefore, in the beginning of 20th century, since most women belonging to the elite society could hardly take part in instruction outside their homes as they were secluded through the institution of purdah “from a very early age” the female protagonist in *The Bond* being a lovely woman attempts to conceal her face behind the “*ghomta*” of her sari, as the head cover then symbolized both “both modesty and modernity” for modernizing women entering new spaces (Chakraborty, 2011). In fact, the body trains the mind to accept certain disciplines, certain ways of life, eventually allowing ways to except all the societal dictates. Therefore, as one is groomed or trained to be in certain gender sex position which creates a kind of certain physical self, because of the training from childhood Naim develops into a woman who is dependent on men like her father or her husband Haleem for protection, emphasizing “the need for male control over her at all stages of her life” (Walsh, 1990), whereas, Haleem was trained to become an independent man, who goes outside to work all by himself. Further, as the Muslim women's reform lead by *ulama* idealizes “women's purity, religiosity, morality and loyalty to Allah and the family of utmost importance” (Hossain, 2011), the act of complying to certain feminine role, such as, cooking, cleaning and her attempts towards maintaining a disciplined household depicts Naim as an ideal woman in the eyes of Bengali society.

Since only men were allowed to work in the public space, in *Chameli*, despite being a woman, Chameli gets rid of the chains of Purdah and performs masculinity in order to travel to distant places like, Darjeeling, Lahore, Delhi, etc., for the purpose of her business. However, performativity requires a stylized repetition of acts, which evolves repetition both at the individual and cultural level. It is continuously repeated, till it becomes oneself, as one cannot be something else other than that. Moreover, according to Judith Butler, what one acts out in one's everyday life from childhood to forever almost to eternity is what one actually is. Therefore, Naim's repeated acts of performing feminine roles induce her to believe that she is a woman and not a man which is also applicable in case of Haleem. On the other hand, in

Chameli, Chameli's repeated acts of dressing herself as man, frequently associating with men, playing cards noisily, smoking *bidis* together with men and hanging out with the company of young loafers of the locality from a very early age, eventually made her forget the fact that she is a woman and sees herself as a man since she no longer have the instinct of being a woman.

Hence, when Malek tells her to get married, she does not even realize that she is a woman and surprisingly snaps at him in discontentment, "Am I not a man?" (Khanam, 1928), which is highly significant because through her repeated acts of a man, she began to consider herself to be a man that is something which is inseparable. Therefore, "Chameli had wrapped the fake skin too tight on her body. It would not be easy to tear it off" (Khanam, 1928). Hence, Chameli's sari inscribes what culture has to say about femininity but the exaggeration of the body also erase that and makes it a parody as one pretends to be someone else. For instance Chameli is not feeling shy; rather she is pretending to be shy. So the body and the coyness becomes an inscription of what a woman is supposed to feel. At the same time, it masks her own excitement and pleasure. In fact, she acts in this way because as a woman one is expected to act in shame. So when Chameli performs as a woman, there is an element of parody in it because she has not really become a woman, rather she imitates being a woman.

Since due to the assumption of heteronormativity, it is assumed that everybody is heterosexual which involves sexual or romantic attraction for individuals of the opposite sex, eventually marginalizing same sex relation and "hatred of people who have those" (DeLamater et al., 1998) in *Chameli*, Malek's desire to bring Chameli, "clad in a man's long shirt and plaited dhoti, back into the fold of holy Islam at any cost" (Khanam, 1928), in order to marry her can be seen as an attempt to convert Chameli into a woman who always thought herself to be a man, despite having a woman's body. Moreover, as part of Victorian value, since it was considered to be a criminal offence for "person to voluntarily have carnal intercourse against the order" (Das, 2013), under Section 377 which was formulated by Lord Macaulay within the Indian Penal Code 1860, it eventually became Homophobia nationwide. As men can have fellow-feeling for other men "rather than emotional intimacy" (Choudhury, 2013), that is closely associated with sexuality, when Malek proposes to marry Chameli, she rejects him on the ground that she belongs to the same sex to that of Malek, acknowledging herself to be a man, "Marry you, am I not a man?" (Khanam, 1928), which is a form of hint towards compulsory heterosexuality that means that if both parties are of same sex they cannot enter into marriage since marriage needs to have opposite sexes. As the

dominant discourse of heterosexuality demands that men renounce “intimacy in all-male spaces” (Choudhury, 2013) emphasizing on the development of nonsexual relation between men, hence, in order to marry Malek Chameli is forced to reject masculinity and adapt feminine roles to become a woman through her refusal of men’s clothes, renouncing smoking and subsequently emerging as a beautiful Bengali woman in sari.

Although, the custom of early marriage was a common practice for Both Hindu and Muslim girls who “could be married any time after the age of ten” (DeLamater et al., 1998) but the female protagonist of *The Bond* is given into marriage in absence of her consent at the age of five. As Simon De Beauvoir observes in *Second Sex* (1997), within a marriage one man gives away the woman to the other man, where two men decides the transaction of her destiny - the present male guardian, the father and future male guardian, the husband or father in-law; in “The Bond”, Haleem’s father decides to get his son marry Naim, on the basis of a deal to educate her husband through her father’s fortune, unlike many families who enrolled their sons to acquire western education which was then a “prerequisite for employment in both the British government services and in the western-style occupations” (Walsh, 1990).

However, when Naim’s father failed to finance her husband’s education, she is also robbed off from her jewelleries by her father in-law which further reduces her to the state of a commodity as it makes her position highly stereotypical. Since the new man is reluctant about marrying an illiterate woman hence, “the education of wives and daughters gained acceptance among urban and literate Bengali families” (Walsh, 1990). As the presence of purdah restricted most families to send married girls to school for education, women were tutored at home by their family members. As a matter of fact since Naim was uneducated, Haleem takes the initiative to educate her in order to make her the fit companion of her husband, to be able to meet the needs of the colonized man. In fact, husbands took initiatives to “tutor their wives” (Walsh, 1990) to keep them under their influence as outside education is thought to create a clash between husband and wife. Since women do not receive proper education which in most cases “remains incomplete in every respect” (Walsh, 1990) and are incapable to read or learn any book like Naim, it can be seen as a strategy to ensure compatibility and retain subjugation.

However it should be noted that, even though marriage needs two sexes that agreed to a contract, but it never required the equality between the two partners because women have never been equal to men in any ways. Therefore, the new woman cannot be like the new man.

She is not allowed to go out in the western world and compete with him, rather the purpose for educating women is to provide “sufficiently qualified wives for the modern young men of Bengal” (Walsh, 1990), which is evident when Naim tells Haleem that if she knew English she would have become a teacher at a girl’s school, which in a way, echoes women’s lack of power to go for bargain or exchange. In fact, a man is defined by socially perceived notion of masculinity as an independent and complete individual. He is regarded as a producer within the economy and his existence is justified by the work he does for the group whereas women are given two roles, one is reproductive and the other is domestic since it is expected that “women would find their fulfilment only as devoted wives and mothers, living strictly within the dictates of social expectations” (Walsh, 1990). As Engels observes, with the emergence of single monogamous family the household management became a private service where wife acquires the status of the “head servant” (Smith, 1997). Therefore throughout the story, Naim is referred as a “maid” who wakes up early every morning, works hard to maintain her household, prepares food for her husband and does almost everything that is expected from a “dutiful and obedient” wife, depicting herself to be “*lokkhi* - the Lakshmi of the house” (Walsh, 1990). As the communication between husband and wife was restricted, for instance, Naim was not allowed by her parents to contact Haleem, the initial “years of marriage were potentially a period of such isolation and stress for young girls“ (Walsh, 1990) which can also be seen as a form of force to oppress women in a certain manner. So in a way, it can be assessed that “modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife” (Engels, 1884).

Similarly, in *Chameli* if we observe the relationship between Malek and Chameli, it should be noted that as long as she thought herself to be a man, did everything according to what is expected from a man, like smoking, roaming around in public place, etc. and remained a friend of Malek, her status was equal to him, but as soon as she rejected masculinity and thought herself to be a woman to take on the role of a wife, the persisting equality between them was shattered. Since women were expected to subjugate themselves from their husband, like Naim, who takes off the shoes of her husband and fans him to sleep, Chameli, after realizing that she was a woman and not a man, began to look after Malek as now she no longer preserve pieces of meat and fish of her choice for herself which she instead gives it to Malek which is quite interesting to note because if Chameli was a man and married Malek within the state of a man, she wouldn’t have to come to a compromise and continue to carry on with whatever she chose as before.

Since, both gender role and marriage is a performance, as a feminist it makes me ponder about the usual, the reality and the performance, which one is the self and which one is the performance - identity itself becomes fluid (Butler, 1999). As a matter of fact since a woman can tame herself to be a man by training bodies into ways that we are not thinking of the body, by constructing protagonists like Chameli, Khanam sort of attempts to break the sex gender binary and subscribes freedom from the essentialized gendered role; thus attaining the level of androgyny that enables me to reach a conclusion that sex and gender are trained in the body as suggested by Judith Butler which I will further explore in the following chapter, through another interesting short story written by a renowned Muslim woman writer of the subcontinent.

Chapter II: Are Women Naturally Heterosexual?

Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991), a contemporary of Fatema Khanam, was born in 1911 in Uttar Pradesh. Before going on to discuss her biography or her contribution, it is required to understand the time line and the socioeconomic condition of the place where she was situated.

During that period when she lived, education in India was considered not suitable for women firstly because Muslim women were supposed to acquire education confirming to the boundaries of purdah and secondly, it will instigate them to assert their own importance, making them unruly, reluctant about domestic affairs, or disrespect husband and parents in-laws; hence, institutionalized schooling became a very significant social debate in early 20th century. Therefore, women were taught to act like a woman, talk slowly, cook and clean, as she has to perform all these household chores after marriage, but progressive men of Aligarh came forward to contribute in the development of women's schooling. For e.g. Shaikh Abdullah established a Girls' school in 1906 for Muslim women at Aligarh and Karamat Husain initiated "women's section of the Muhammadan Educational Conference in 1896 and founded a girl's school in Lucknow 1912" (Hossain, 2011).

However, at that time, marriage was an important turning point for the women, through which parents used to get rid of their "pressing obligation on their part", to marry off their daughter to another house where she is expected to be taken care by a man that is associated with "high cultural value attached to wifehood" (Pradeep, 2013). Hence, Indian middle class Muslim women were given into marriage at a very early age, possibly in their adolescence, to men who were much elder than them; therefore, majority of marriages are arranged. Since, blood relations were encouraged, marriage was done between the cousins. Therefore, "love marriages, eloping with a boy or girl and inter caste marriage" (Pradeep, 2013) was not accepted by the society; so those who stepped against the decision of their parents, were deemed to contravene the laws of their society.

Further dowry was essential for marriage as it represented their status in the society. Since majority of marriages are arranged in almost all strata of the society, the bride or bridegroom did not have the option to choose their partners rather it was decided by the elders of the house. Child bearing was compulsory after marriage, therefore, women who are unable to produce children were not worth of being kept at home but maternity was accepted only in case of married women. In married life, women lived under the threat of getting divorced

because men had the right to divorce their wives for any “small reason” (Pradeep, 2013). As the women were uneducated and were only able to do household works, so after divorce, women depended on their parents, who considered it to be a shameful act for a daughter, once married. Since, woman depended on a man for “money food and protection” (Pradeep, 2013), it gave authority to the man to have full control over the woman, but yet, it was better to have a married life because women could not have a happy life without a man, since the unmarried woman’s life was more difficult as she had to face insults from the society, where she was not safe because she then becomes everybody’s property.

Although, friendship was accepted only between the two members of opposite sex, the middle class Muslim women developed friendship not only with women among their family members, but also with the neighbouring women which formed into a relationship between two women that was a taboo during that period, because homosexuality partially formalized as a disease “in 20th century European and colonial discourses of institutional medicine and psychiatry” (Katyal, 2013). However, movements lead by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi against inequality and subjugation of women alongside the influence of British on Indian culture, subsequently contributed in improving and thereby revived the status of women as it made legal reforms in Muslim women's right to co-habitation and divorce and ensured economic security for women that facilitated some of the woman to raise their voice for equality and freedom. As a consequence, women in India were able to become teachers, doctors, nurses, etc. and eventually took part in politics and administration. Simultaneously, as the Middle class Muslim women began writing in Urdu, “the role of print media became crucial in voicing the women's opinion and creating a discourse about the modern Sharif Muslim woman” (Hossain, 2011).

However, Chughtai grew up to be a rebel from childhood and did whatever she wanted. Since she knew women’s emancipation is impossible without education, she abstained from cooking and went to school in order to acquire education like her brothers. Further, she also insisted on a university education at a time when respectable Muslim girls studied at home or at best attended secondary school and ultimately became the first Muslim woman in India to attain both a B.A. and a teaching degree, and taught at girls' schools in several cities. She also got married to a man whom she chose by herself, despite having objections from her brother. Being a fiercely independent writer and a member of Progressive Writers Association (PWA), she is a prolific Urdu literature personality, but at the same time, a feminist of post-colonial writers in South Asia and all over the world. Even though, she was an Indian Muslim

writer and lived in Uttar Pradesh, but during the partition she did not go to Pakistan, wrote about very radical ideas and many other things. This particular short story, “The Quilt” published in 1942, is her cult writing, introduced queer themes and politics of female sexuality, what it means to be a part of patriarchal structure and depicts women’s expressions, desires that cannot be manifested and what it means for women, because of which “Lihaf”, was taken to court for blasphemy and initially became banned in many places. However, she went to the court, fought the case and won, as it was proved that there is not even a single sentence in her writing that explicitly expresses female’s same sex desire for the defectors. Whatever happens is under the cloth and she plays around with all these issues. Hence, with the aid of this renowned short story, “The Quilt”, I aim to examine how Chughtai challenges the two pillars of heteronormativity, a term used when heterosexuality becomes normative, that is practiced in socially sanctioned institutions like marriage.

Since heteronormative attitudes strictly categorize individuals under distinct and complementary binaries of either man or woman which views men as bread earners and women as stay-at-home members as their natural role in life, therefore the central character of “The Quilt”, being a Muslim woman, Begum Jan, through her act of remaining within the inner sanctum of the household, not only separating herself from men, but also from all forms of human contact outside the women of the immediate family (Deutsch, 1998), complies with the institution of purdah that was sanctioned by both religion and culture for Ashraf Indian Muslim women, during the period of British colonialism in India. Hence, as both men and women are taught to have characteristics that are “unique” from one another, Begum Jan, being dependent on Nawab Saheb for economic security and a passive recipient towards her husband’s homo erotic practices, whereas Nawab Saheb, being a prosperous wealthy man, able to perform Haj, frequently send people to Haj and bear expenses of his wife from a “poor” background and boys whom he kept at home, perform according to the parameters of the society. As a matter of fact, since within gender binary or sexual binary, man or woman is conceptualized within this binary, because of which one has to be either feminine or masculine, that does not give space to anything that is not within the heterosexual ideas; therefore as a girl child instead of desiring a “doll”, the narrator’s “favourite occupation”, of fighting with her brothers and their friends and being “so quarrelsome” unlike her elder sisters she kind of crosses the set gender norm. Moreover, in twentieth century North India, since, “the focus was on the proper conduct of the women in the household” hence, in order to teach her “the ways of behaving like a woman”, she is put into *zenana mehphil*, the inner

sanctum of the household, that is all feminine, in which she is surrounded by femininity, where women make pocket like agency, in which they twist and turn gender performances of certain role of a wife and daughter that represents femininity, which indicates that gender is not constructed, rather it is being constructed (Mitra, 2013).

On the contrary, as compulsory heterosexuality refers to the essentialized sexual desire between man and a woman which is seen as “natural, that condemns homosexuality as a “disease”, Nawab Saheb, despite having no appeal for the opposite sex, marries Begum Jan under societal obligation. In fact, through Nawab Sahib’s sexual attraction towards “young, fair and slim-waist boys” (Chughtai, 1997), instead of Begum Jan, Chughtai clearly states that just because one is a man, it does not mean that he wants to penetrate a woman, he might engage in any other kind of sexual behaviour. But this is seen as a “strange hobby” as his beliefs and practices does not confirm to the culture and orientation he has, that fails to understand that there could be something beyond normative erotic encounter and acknowledge the presence of deviant forms of sexuality. As a matter of fact, Nawab Saheb “never bothered to acknowledge the sexual expectations of his wife (Farooqui, 2014).

Hence, Begum Jan due to her discontentment, resulting from a wave of unfulfilled desire turns into a lesbian or indulge in other alternative ways of sexual fulfilment in absence of male penetration, thus rejecting the “oppressive heterosexual bondage” (Farooqui, 2014) subsequently confirms to Simone De Beauvoir’s observation that when man’s assertion of superiority tends to become annoying for a woman, she tends to look for a man within another woman with the hope to find a lover through whom she aims to replace the “male who has betrayed her” (Beauvoir, 1997). Therefore, even though, it is taken for granted that women are “‘innately’ sexually oriented only toward men” (Rich, 1980) but it should be noted that bodies are also gazed by Begum Jan which she desires them as functional body, as male body - bodies which Nawab Saheb can exploit, and fulfil his desires because he is in a position to do so and she cannot; thereby, confirming to lesbian existence which “comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (Rich, 1980).

However, sexuality is partly sexual activity that is bodily experience and the rest is actually the mind, therefore, one wants fulfilment of both kinds. In such a state, Rabbo sensed Begum Jan’s loneliness, her desire for all sorts of companionship, the burning sensation which transforms into itch who “ate, sat, and even slept with Begum Jan” (Chughtai, 1997). In fact, through Rabbo’s massage Begum Jan’s “emaciated body began to fill out” (Chughtai, 1997)

forming into a glowing beauty. Therefore, Begum Jan's itch symbolizes the itch of desire. She requires constant compassion, she overdoes it intentionally, and she needs to be massaged every single minute of her day. She needs some touch all the time, which "evokes female homoerotic desire" (Larossa, 2003). Therefore, even though Begum Jan could easily "scratch" a particular part of her body by herself, but yet in Rabbo's absence she wanted the child's "touch" guiding her hand "wherever she felt the itch". Moreover, despite having objection from the child, "'No, I protested weakly" (Chughtai, 1997), she began counting her ribs, clutching her closely against her "warm body". Therefore, as a form of establishing her autonomy, Begum Jan attempts to exploit the young body because she can, since she doesn't have a voice and lacks the expression to express what she is experiencing. But the interesting thing is that the "homoeroticism that the child notices between Begum Jan and Rabbo is not innate" rather acquired, as it results from the "innate homosexuality of the Nawab" (Mitra, 2013).

In fact, due to the presence of taboo "of having an unmarried woman in the house" and in order to "maintain his image of heterosocial normality and thereby exert power over his subjects and command respect" (Farooqui, 2014), the marriage between Begum Jan and Nawab Saheb can be seen as their act of confirming to gender performativity that itself bring problems. For instance, because of his socioeconomic condition, it is likely that Nawab Saheb would have a young beautiful bride of a very poor background as his wife and hence, women did not have a voice in expressing their choices in selecting their life partners, as it is determined for them based on societal perceptions and economic reasons. In fact, her position in the household is that of one of the furniture in the household. "After marrying Begum Jan, he deposited her in the house with all his other possessions" (Chughtai, 1997). Moreover, since Nawab Saheb considers himself responsible only for providing his wife's material needs, not her "emotional or psychological needs" (Rajakumar, 2005) according to the terms of marriage prescribed by the society, he cannot give up his homoerotic encounters and spends time with Begum Jan, further forcing her to a state of confinement and subjugation. As a matter of fact, Begum Jan helplessly suffers from a sense of loneliness and insecurity due to any other men who tend to impose heterosexuality through denial of "women sexuality", and physical confinement, curdling women's movement eventually "producing sexual inequality" (Rich, 1980). So, basically, she is a "prisoner" of a system, of a household, of a marriage, of her own desires, which subsequently makes her life "tasteless", thereby "legitimizing hierarchy of the male and repressive sexuality of the female" (Farooqui, 2014).

As a matter of fact, being trapped in her own body, she tries to find solace in things like romantic novels, etc. Further, the role of Rabbo is significant, because she comes to Begum Jan's rescue at a stage when she is completely helpless and desperately need someone through whom she can at least get some form of comfort, "within the patriarchal constraints of the Indo- Muslim society" (Mitra, 2013). Therefore, Rabbo is not just a poor woman giving pleasure to the *malikin*, rather something more, because when Rabbo went for a day and did not turn out, Begum Jan's desire is not for the young body, rather, she is more interested to punish Rabbo for the absentee because this is the only relation she has, which rather echoes something more than "expressing desired genital sexual experience with another woman", and instead expands to "to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" behaviour, associated with marriage resistance (Rich, 1980). In fact, the shake of "elephant", that is formed by the quilt, is highly symbolic because due to its sheer size, it kind of tramples everything from beneath and blurs the essentialised gender identity, which can also be interpreted as an attempt to deconstruct gender binary subsequently attaining a level of androgyny, where the "boundaries between the heterosexual and the homosexual" gets blurred (Butler, 1999).

Therefore, through depiction of female sexual fantasies and representation of "transgressive desires within a homo-social zenana" (Mitra, 2013), in "Lihaf", as a feminist, I suppose that, Chughtai somehow clarifies "women also need more than the food or clothes" (Farooqui, 2014), and thereby, attempts to subvert the heterosexual institutions, that I will further observe in the next chapter through works by Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi writer of recent times.

Chapter III: Desire and Fear

Taslina Nasrin, accomplished writer, physician, feminist and secular humanist of recent times was born in Mymensingh district in the Division of Dhaka, Bangladesh which was then a part of former East Pakistan before its independence in 1971. However, through this chapter we will get to know more about this Bangladeshi writer, but prior to that, in addition it is necessary that we understand the time line and socioeconomic condition where she was situated.

Although, according to the present constitution the newly independent nation was secular but due to majority of population being Muslim issues such as, “marriage, divorce and property rights” (Khatun, 1999) were performed in accordance with the Muslim personal law or shari'a law that originates from Quran and Hadith. However, it should be noted that after its modification by the Family Ordinance of 1961, even though a husband was barred from divorcing his wife by a “triple pronouncement of the word talak”, (Khatun, 1999), since most women remained unaware of this ordinance, it still prevailed in rural areas. Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, the system of dowry prevails in the form of custom to determine bride's status; therefore from 1986-1988, eighty-six cases of women were reported to be murdered because of dowry. Moreover, because of being a highly patriarchal society, women are trained to depend on the male members of the family all through their lives, e.g. fathers, husbands and sons. Therefore, despite having a delegated right to divorce her husband under this Ordinance yet, in fear of becoming an economic burden on their family or to protect oneself from sexual harassment which is likely to occur in absence of male guardian, and subsequently retain their modesty and chastity, most women refrain themselves from exercising the given power.

According to the Bangladeshi family ideology, since a good woman protects family's honour or *ijjat* through her “conduct and success in marriage” (Khatun, 1999), women prefer to suffer and endure barriers with patience, arising in marital relationship. In case of absence of delegated right, the woman can dissolve her marriage through the legal suit in family court on appropriate grounds, but for a Bangladeshi women, going to court for divorce was considered disrespectful. Since women inherits half the property to that of her brothers and upon dissolution of marriage, she is just entitled to *mahr*, an amount of money which is usually very low and subsequently becomes lower as a result of inflation; most women with the hope of getting support from their kin in times of distress, give up their share to their

brothers. Further, as maximum women did not have “access to education or politics” (Deibert, 2009), many of them remained jobless. But the “new economic pressures and the erosion of traditional refuge” (Khatun, 1999) in the eighties brought rural women to the garment factories in Dhaka for employment, subsequently educating urban women at a higher rate. Though, sometimes middle class woman may be highly educated but that does not necessarily qualify her to get a decent job and cannot prove any entitlement to her income due to lack of legal guidelines protecting her.

Born in a Muslim family, Taslima Nasrin was brought up in a “highly restrictive and conservative environment” but yet apart from excelling in science, she was also fond of literature. As a feminist and secular humanist, through her works, Nasrin attempts to fight for women’s suffering, oppression and secure women rights against religion, traditions and the oppressive cultures and customs and hence advocates for uniform civil code which grants equality and justice for women which soon provoked not only Islamic fanatics but also different political and non-political organizations to carry out protests against her, suing her editors and publishers, banning and burning her books publicly, further alleging fatwa demanding her immediate execution, because of which she had been banished from Bangladesh and at present, reside in exile in New Delhi since 2011, under compulsion. Opposing to the phase, there is a brave, outspoken woman, who is making a bold effort to unveil the truth of orthodox society.

Within this circumstance, Nasrin wrote her autobiographical memoir “*Amar Meyebela*” or *My Girlhood* (1999) and novel “*Forashi Premik*” or *French Lover* (2002). *My Girlhood* is an account of Nasrin’s growth and development from childhood to adolescence in a small rural village during the partition of East Pakistan. But due to its anti-Islamic remarks and reckless comments against Prophet Mohammad, it got banned by Bangladesh government on charges of blasphemy. However, *French Lover* though not easily available in the bookshops in Bangladesh, depicts mostly the life of the central character who leaves India and goes to her husband in France, where she suffers from frustration and identity crises, as a consequence of her marriage and her relationship with men which eventually prompts her to become a lesbian in order to assert her individual self. Since, the central women characters are almost similar in terms of their scepticism, but yet antagonistic to one another, e.g. *Nilanjana* is a more matured woman of action compared to Nasrin in terms of challenging the given norms of patriarchy that are still taboo even today; hence, with the aid of *My Girlhood* and *French*

Lover, I intend to examine the extent to which Nasrin is able to question heteronormativity and the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and marriage in Bangladesh and India.

Since, gender norms vary according to “country and culture” (Bradshaw, 2013) hence, because of being a girl in a village, where survival skills such as swimming or climbing trees are considered unsuitable for girls, Nasrin is discouraged from going to shop, climb trees, play ha-do-do, go fishing or fly kites unlike the boys who were allowed to climb trees, pick “mango” or “coconut”, go for fishing, fly kites, etc. and thought that girls are good for nothing, except for assisting their mothers with the household chores and keep men happy, which can be seen as a form of complying to the gendered ways of the society through construction of home and the world, where women belongs to the inner space and men belongs to the outer space. In fact, by creating a public private dichotomy from childhood men like Nasrin’s father, Rajab Ali emerges as a doctor who works in the outer realm, whereas Nasrin’s mother, Idulwara Begum, being a woman is made to occupy the inner sanctum and depend on men for protection.

As a matter of fact, in *French Lover*, since Nilanjana belongs to the “home”, Kishan Lal does not allow her to either travel or work outside as he wants her to remain economically dependent on him and expects her to maintain the domestic affairs as an ideal Indian woman, “playing the feminine” (Rich, 1980). Hence, being an Indian man, Kishan Lal, is unable to accept Nilanjana’s inability to cook, firstly because she is a woman and he strongly believes that household skills, such as, cooking, sweeping, cleaning etc., are an essentialised characteristics of a woman. As women are “told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety”, is sufficient for them to obtain protection of man”, (Wollstonecraft, 1792), Nila is naturally taken to be soft, submissive, obedient, docile like her mother, Molina, who never had a voice, blindly committed to her husband, Anirban’s wishes and subjugated herself throughout her life. Therefore, when Nila tends to become assertive, Kishan Lal sees her as a child and expects her to compromise with all her desires. As a matter of fact, when Nila wished to walk beside the river or go to a museum, she is unable to act accordingly, as neither Kishan Lal will accompany her nor he will allow her to go by herself which is an evidence of what Wollstonecraft means in *A Vindication On Rights Of Women*, when she says that women can have their individual desire which should not be expressed.

In fact, the irony is that men can do whatever they want but women cannot. For e.g. in *My Girlhood*, without her mother's consent, Nasrin's father can develop an extra marital relation with another man's wife, whereas, her mother is not allowed to do anything without her father's approval. Similarly, in *French Lover*, it is absolutely alright on the part of Anirban to have a mistress outside marriage, even after being married to a woman, or Kishan Lal to conceal the fact of his first marriage from Nila, as these are deemed to be a natural part of masculinity, whereas it's not alright for a woman like Nila to fall in love with a man before marriage. What interests me is that although, Benowa initially appears to be a very understanding person who genuinely loves Nila, cares for her and equally takes part in maintaining the household as Nila, but later we see that like any other man, Benowa wants Nila to do everything beyond her will, for example, accept his wife Pascal and daughter Jacklyn and vice versa, whereas, he has the liberty to do whatever he wants without bothering about the desire of either Nila or Pascal. So, basically a woman has to do whatever a man wants., Therefore, it can be said that we basically do gender, as Judith Butler claims that gender is not natural and rejects the essentialised relation between the body and gender.

Since, a sexual politics is at work, by which one sex is dominated by the other, where, one has established power and thereby control over the other, hence, finding the gender roles, discriminating towards women, Nasrin questions the essentialised norms, "Who says they can't?" (Nasrin, 2000). Therefore, it should be noted that after a certain point, ignoring her restrictions imposed by her father, Idulwara frequently went to cinema, or by neglecting her household duties kept on visiting *pir's* house despite having objections from her father which can be seen as an attempt of fulfilling her individual choice. Similarly, through her denial of all ties with men and gain economic independence devoid of men, Nilanjana kind of dismantles the constructed system imposed by patriarchy in a radical way. In fact, through their act of denouncing control by men over women, in some way or the other, both Idulwara Begum and Nilanjana attains a feminist phase as it involves a form of protest against norms enforced through patriarchal value system.

Since "primary love" between two opposite sexes are seen as "normal" in which women require men for both social and economic securities and sexual satisfaction, thus views "heterosexually constituted family" as the "basic social unit" (Rich, 1980) hence while being sexually abused by her maternal uncle, Sharif, through reference of his parents and her parents, Nasrin is made to understand the significance of this erotic encounter as "fucking", that can take place only between every men and women, "Everyone in this world does it.

Your parents do, and mine” (Nasrin, 2000) which can be seen as an emphasis on compulsory heterosexuality. However, it should be noted that after being raped, Nasrin develops “bitterness toward men” (Rich, 1980) which prompts her to act as a lesbian. However, as “queer subjects both desire the objects of their gaze (others whom one identifies with an idealized version of oneself) and want to be their desired object, to be objectified by them” (Holliday, 1999), the relationship between Nasrin and Runi, in generic terms, can be observed as a homoerotic same sex relation. But she is not turning lesbian as it is not self-identified. In fact, nobody connects to Nasrin’s mind or her inner self and how she has to perform. So within that same sex relation, there is that kind of understanding, bonding, compassion, love and most importantly dignity and respect which she is searching all her life, which is evident from her acts of exchanging letters with Runi that turns to “a case of self-revealing and uninhibited confession” (Kar, 2014) that makes her feel comfortable and happy from within, that happened never before. “I stole writing paper from Dada’s drawer, paper bordered with flowers and creepers and birds and wrote letters to Runi myself, pouring my heart out. She sent me her replies. Her letters too carried the scent of jasmine. My dull, uneventful life had suddenly become heady with excitement as if someone had put me on a beautiful swing decorated with flowers and pushed me high up in the sky” (Nasrin, 2000).

Since, Runi is able to sense Nasrin’s inability to socialize and approaches her accordingly, “You’re very shy, aren’t you? You hardly ever speak. Why don’t you come to my hostel one day? We could talk for as long as you like!” (Nasrin, 2000) Nasrin realizes that Runi will be able to understand her emotional needs which will satisfy her the most. Therefore, Nasrin’s first crush on Runi with whom she eventually fell in love is worth exploring because with Runi, she could be herself that did not occur with any man she had encountered. Therefore, Runi serves as a medium via whom she intends to find happiness. Moreover, it should be noted that it is Runi who is able to make Nasrin realize the essence of love for the first time which she has never felt within her traumatic state of mind. Simultaneously, it is also essential to understand how educational institutions play a role in promoting same sex relation. For instance, the education at Biddamoye School encourages women to become lesbians through the process of dating one girl with another girl; therefore, educational institution also has a hand in creating homosexual relations, which kind of confirms to the fact that heterosexual women’s experience “can be located along a lesbian continuum” (Rich, 1980).

However, as Bangladesh was once a part of Indian subcontinent, Nasrin's erotic encounter with the servant girl Moni in her bed during midnight "looking at the wonder of the body with wondering eyes, the secret body in a body" where she lay fondling, kissing and smelling her breasts as though she is reuniting with her dearest friend after a long time, kind of refutes Madhu Kishwar's (editor of the most prominent feminist journal in India, *Manushi*) observation that "most relations between women in India are "ambiguous" and not as explicitly sexual". Similarly, in *French Lover*, Nila's intimacy with Danielle also develops within an erotic level. In fact, as a consequence of being raped by her father in her childhood, Danielle "feels a certain repulsion for the male body" and becomes a self-identified lesbian, through her denial of "penetration and masculine domination" (Beauvoir, 1997). As a matter of fact, she refuses to get into a relation with men and desires Nila as a "feminine flesh". In fact, to Danielle Nila's body is the same as for the male "an object of desire" (Beauvoir, 1997). Hence, instead of being aroused by a male, she gets aroused by Nila's body, a female body, which she kisses, licks and tickles, just as a man act on a woman's body.

On the contrary, since in general homosexuality does not allow conception and only aims for sexual pleasure, lesbian desire is deemed to be something unnatural against the basic tenets of Indian culture as it is condemned by both colonial authorities as well as the religion and due to her upbringing within very restrictive heterosexual and male dominated culture Nila does not readily accept the fact of having a same sex relation with Danielle and instead prefers to be loved by a man, which confirms to the assumption that "women are 'innately' sexually oriented only towards men" (Rich, 1980). As a result, within the erotic encounter between Nila and Danielle, even though Danielle is sexually charged but Nila is not. But it should be noted that, at a certain point when the "superiority", of all men becomes "annoying" for Nila, she prefers not to struggle with men and rather chooses to become a lesbian as "homosexuality can be for woman a mode of flight from her situation or a way of accepting it" (Beauvoir, 1997). But after embracing homosexuality, Nila no longer gives into men's desire and hence from a sense of "virile inferiority" rejects Benowa from her life through "arrogance and exhibitionism" as a lesbian, she is "unfulfilled as a woman, impotent as a man and her disorder may lead to psychosis" (Beauvoir, 1997). Further, since Danielle initially takes care of Nila and respects her feelings and desires unlike Kishan Lal or Benowa, though it seems that there is absence of domination within Nila and Danielle's household, but gradually by refraining Nila from going to her ailing mother or denying to go to a cinema or sit in a cafe as preferred by Nila, Danielle, unlike any other men, somehow attempts to

manipulate Nila's consciousness and thought process which indicates that "homosexuality however does not always seem to be an entirely satisfactory solution when a woman of dominating personality is concerned" (Beauvoir, 1997).

Since, arranged marriage prevails as a traditional practice in Indian subcontinent - in *My Girlhood*, Imam gets his daughter Khairunnessa married to Maniruddin where the woman does not have any idea about either looks or character of the man who is going to be her future husband. As a matter of fact, even though Nasrin's father was interested to marry her mother instead of proposing her mother, he approached her maternal grandfather to get the consent to marry his daughter. Similarly, in *French Lover*, Nila was married off to Kishan Lal, whom she did not really like or choose, subsequently consenting to the decision of her father. Hence, Nila sarcastically remarks that her transition is from her father's hotel to her husband's hotel. Thus, marriage is a social contract that is entered by the consent of two independent parties where two men decides the transaction of a woman's destiny, the present male guardian, the father who gives away the woman, "*stridhana*" to the next custodian, the future male guardian who is the husband, in which women gets reduced "as objects in male transactions" (Rich, 1980).

On the other hand, it should be noted that since, both Nasrin's father in *My Girlhood* and Kishan Lal from *French Lover*, are the sole earning members of their families, they are allowed to stay out as long as they chose, as they are regarded as producers within the economy, and their existence is justified by the work they perform for the group whereas, after her marriage, Nasrin's mother stays at home where she is forced into a job of rearing her children, "get them educated" (Nasrin, 2000) and take care of her husband like Nilanjana from *French Lover*, who is comparatively a new bride, assigned to take care of Kishan Lal's household, prepare breakfast for her husband and stay indoors according to the orders of her husband who does not allow her to venture out on her own. Hence, both women seem to support the idea of women being ascribed with two roles, one is domestic, while the other is reproductive "which equates her with *Shakti* (goddess within the confines of home)" (Kar, 2014) as women are seen as land to till, where men have the liberty to cultivate whenever they chose. Therefore, because of the presence of power dynamics within the household "Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman" (Beauvoir, 1997). As Engels points out, a woman is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband. Hence, if he kills her, he is simply exercising his rights over her. As Bangladesh has a very high prevalence of violence against women, in *My Girlhood*, Nasrin depicts how her

mother is brutally beaten by her father, “What I saw happen was horrible. Baba sprang on Ma, just as a tiger attacks its prey. I had never actually seen a tiger jump on another animal but was sure that that is how it happened. He caught Ma’s hair, threw her to the floor and kicked her chest and stomach” (Nasrin, 2000). Since Quran depicts men superior to women and gives men authority over women and the right to beat women if found disobedient, women are prompt to male violence which was relatively common among poor - Getu’s father beats Getu’s mother because she fails to obey every command of her husband.

In fact, as physical abuse is acceptable under social norms, women do not report violence that is inflicted upon them. However, if we analyse these situation we see that it is symbolic of men’s greater physical strength, that makes them react in such aggressive manner simply because he knows that he can exercise power over a woman or due to religion that prevails as the hegemonic power in the society which allows men to beat their wives or drive her away from bed whenever they are found to disobey their husbands. In fact, as the husband has total control over his wife, being “masters, rulers of the wife’s body and soul” (Pradeep, 2013) in *French Lover*, Nila is compelled to live according to the desire of her husband as women have never been equal to men in any ways.

As a matter of fact, marriage never required the equality between the two partners. So there is a sense of passivity in the woman’s part. Hence, in Kishan Lal’s household, Nila does not exist as an active social member who prohibits her from taking part in any kind of agency, choice that is based on her needs, desires, and aspirations. For instance, when Nila wants a job to gain her autonomy, she cannot because Kishan Lal does not want her to work and become self-sufficient, thus enforcing “economic dependence of wives” (Rich, 1980). Therefore, her performance becomes very central, subsequently reducing herself to a “vessel” as she has no other job apart from maintenance to providing everything to her husband. Since religious leaders are men, religious “man uses religion for his comforts and pleasures” (Pradeep, 2013). As Quran permits a man to have four wives and considers a woman to be a “martyr, who does not become jealous when her husband takes another wife” (Ekbote, 2006), in a sense it reduces women to the position of a subaltern. As a matter of fact, infidelity on the part of man is taken as something normal which keeps woman under constant anxiety. For instance, in *My Girlhood*, as Nasrin’s mother depends upon her husband for food and shelter, she is always tormented by the fact of losing her husband as she feels threatened that he is going to marry another woman with whom he is having an illicit relation outside the

marriage, “I’ve lost everything. My life’s over. Noman’s father is now going to marry Chakladar’s wife. Where am I going to go with my children?” (Nasrin, 2000).

Likewise, Nasrin’s grandmother faced similar crises when her “Grandpa had suddenly turned up with a new bride” (Nasrin, 2000) can be seen as a way to make “women to feel that male sexual 'drive' amounts to a right” (Rich, 1980). However, it should be noted that although Nasrin’s father willingly married her mother but after their marriage, he attempts to find solace in bodies of other women like Razia Begum which shows that Nasrin’s father wanted her mother only for sexual pleasure because when she has been able to meet his sexual needs, he desires some other woman, as he no longer remains interested in his wife. Hence, women were just the “body of sexual pleasure; they had no state in society” (Pradeep, 2013).

Thus, Nasrin’s mother can be seen as the slave of her father’s “lust and a mere instrument for the production of children” (Engels, 1884). Similarly, in *French Lover*, Nila is obsessed with her act of becoming a pimp every night for her husband, as every time Kishan Lal forces her to indulge in sexual encounter despite having reluctance from her side, which can be viewed as a form of marital rape. Therefore, even though sex is part of marriage which is supposed to be pleasurable, but the pressure of virginity is so much on women parts it takes all the pleasure out of marriage. As Wollstonecraft points out, that woman is expecting love all the time. So a young girl like Nila who was brought up with “idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage” (Rich, 1980) becomes unhappy because life is not like that. In fact, the marriage between her and Kishan Lal has nothing to do with love. Rather, to Kishan Lal Nila is like the body of any other woman, which he can sexually exploit and attain pleasure. But however, it should be noted that one can be heterosexual and not be heteronormative at the same time by challenging social structures based on a heterosexual patriarchal monogamous family unit, mostly within the framework of marriage which includes acts remaining single, being sexually active outside marriage or have children out of wedlock, etc.

As a matter of fact, even though, maternity is accepted only in case of married woman, Nila’s act of coming out of the social boundary of heterosexual marriage and develop sexual relations and eventually conceive in absence of a marital bond, she somehow challenges heteronormativity by coming out of the system of marriage normativity as heterosexual relationship before or outside marriage is not socially accepted in either Bangladesh or India.

Hence, as a feminist, even though I realized that while asserting their free will, the female protagonists in both *My Girlhood* and *French Lover*, at times appears to become militant, but if we analyse their circumstances, we understand that due to their lack of proper education, neither Nasrin's mother nor Nilanjana has any alternative means to claim their independence. So, Idul Ara Begum, by ignoring the household chores and almost starving her children and husband or Nilanjana through her approach of ousting men from her life and taking a radical step to abort her unborn child, they aim to assert power in some way in their process of challenging "some of the methods by which male power is manifested and maintained" (Rich, 1980) which ultimately implies to Nasrin's message of overthrow of the patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

This thesis tried to explore how Muslim women writers in the subcontinent have worked around in resisting compulsory heterosexuality within the society that strictly bases itself on heteronormativity. As a matter of fact, through analysis of historical research and intertextual references from selected works by Mamlukul Fatema Khanam, Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasrin, I attempted to examine the ways in which the writers challenge the concept of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and the institution of marriage. Through breach of normative conventions, we observe how these Muslim Women writers situated in different era and living in separate territories challenges hegemonic assumptions of heteronormativity that “pivots on the privileging” (Jackson, 2006) of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage.

Hence tracing back to Showalter’s three distinct phases of feminine, feminist and female, the female protagonists, within the selected works, such as Naim, Nasrin’s mother, Nilanjana and Begum Jan at one level through their performance of household chores and independence on men for socioeconomic security appears to be feminine but simultaneously at another level, Chameli’s attempts to the “denaturalize gender” binary, Begum Jan’s pervert sexual desire and Nilanjana’s rejection of marriage normativity, categorizes them to be feminist. Since the chosen text incorporates both feminine and feminist elements, these literary pieces are neither feminine nor feminist; rather these can be categorized under female.

Further, in order to provide answers to the specific research questions which has been raised, it seems that these Muslim women writers by constructing a stark contrast in gender roles, through their characters that is distinct for man and woman, for instance, the initial training and grooming of men as bread earners appropriate for outer space whereas women simply as wives, belonging to the inner space are dependent on men, which to some extent depicts the ways in which gender norms can be associated under heteronormative practices. On the contrary, although at first within the same sex relation seemed to grant equality between partners, which was almost impossible relations between opposite sexes but the women writers through their works suggests the form of domination and control still persists within homosexual couples, where one of them tends to acquire a superior position. For instance, within Nila and Danielle’s relationship the same sex relation did not actually work out as Danielle made attempts to subjugate Nila. Similarly within Begum Jan and Rabbo’s relationship, a sense of superiority is always at work as Begum Jan belonging to the higher

stature of the society can exercise power over Rabbo; on the other hand, through her denial of providing sexual satisfaction to Begum Jan for a day or two asserts some form of control over Begum Jan, thus portraying the operation of power through various channels as suggested by Foucault. Hence, homosexuality cannot be seen as an alternative solution to break gender hierarchy.

In fact, since, sex is a tabooed topic it is not much widely talked about, despite being an integral part of our life. However, in my case, while pursuing my M. A. in English literature as part of feminist course I encountered these issues relating to the concepts of heteronormativity, sexuality, diverse sexuality, etc., that has been worked around by feminists, scholars, activists, particularly from the west. Although, LGBT movement did take place in India, due to the culture, religious values and the law imposed by Section 377, Indian Penal Code of 1860, which is still in force in India, individuals within the south Asian context even today fail to become vocal about their sexual desire and hence come out of their closet. Therefore, since my research is based on works by Muslim women writers who mainly concentrated with issues relating to heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage with the subcontinent, I believe that the area I have chosen is worth exploring. Moreover, as literature is one of the means to give expression to one's realities of life, I suppose that if further studies can be conducted relating to these issues, not just using literature, but also incorporating, interviews, films, songs, and other modes of popular culture, that depicts transgressing sexual margins, will provide a zone of comfort to people living in south Asia to realize and become more open in expressing their individual sexualities, which is still being suppressed in some form or the other. However, due to time constraints, in this research, I have narrowed down my focus to the literary works by a few Muslim women writers from the subcontinent, such as, Fatema Khanam, Ismat Chughtai and Taslima Nasreen, but there are other both non-Muslim and Muslim women writers, like Suniti Namjoshi,, Manju Kapur, Kamala Das, Anita Nair as well as male writers such as, Vikram Seth, Firdaus Kanaga, Bhupen Khakhar and Abha Dawesar has worked around issues relating to forced heterosexuality, deviant sexual desires and marriage normativity, which gained "wide attention" (Kahlon 2013, Vanita 2009) and hence can be observed in relation to class, race, etc., within a further research.

To conclude, I can say that further revival or more feminist analysis on interpretation on women's writing may be a way of introducing younger, post-feminist generation like mine into a more sensitive awareness raising activity.

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