

THE DYNAMICS OF FEMINISM IN TASLIMA NASREEN'S FRENCH LOVER

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Abstract - Taslima Nasreen brings in a different aspect of her writing in *French Lover*. Known for her radical writings, Nasreen hold up to her nature by bringing in the east and west in contrast where she discusses the issues even to the extent of lesbianism which is not appreciated by general people to be openly discussed. The difference in culture of the east and the west is blended in the text to shape the protagonist. Nila is exposed to the world of the developed Paris where the people can do anything they like. However, the freedom that the people exercise can also be of distain for some and destructive element. The protagonist is uprooted from Calcutta to Paris but her identity as a dependent woman remains the same. She is suppressed and succumbed to male supremacy even in a foreign land, away for home. Her quest to liberation and existence is the major concern Nasreen delves into.

Index Terms – Feminism, gender, liberation, suppression, hostile, oppression

Introduction

Nasreen, born in 1962 in a small town in Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, grew up witnessing gender bias within her religious Muslim family. Even within the walls of her home, she observed favouritism towards males, who were given precedence over females. Women were restricted from leaving the house without veils, while men enjoyed unrestricted freedom. Additionally, meals were served to females only after the men had eaten, underscoring their secondary status within the family. Nasreen's early exposure to religious texts like the Quran reinforced these gender disparities, depicting men as superior to women. These societal norms extended beyond the home, permeating various aspects of life and denying women equal opportunities. Nasreen lamented the prevalence of male dominance, evident in practices like early marriage for girls and their exclusion from education. In such a society, women were deprived of autonomy and the freedom to think independently. Being a witness to gender discrimination since childhood, Nasreen grew up to be a doctor, however, later, she took up her pen to protest against the dominance and suppression that women like her had to face in their day-to-day lives. Nasreen's *French Lover* is a tale of women liberation and her path to free herself from the male supremacy in a foreign land, far from home.

In *French Lover*, Nasreen suggests that due to the attention and care with which the men are brought up, they tend to believe that the world is centred round them. She argues that religion, social set-up and age-old démodé customs, which are out-dated, still shape them to be self-centred which can be seen in her novel, *French Lover*. The story not only revolves around an Indian bride's way to liberation but also relates to the plight of unfortunate women all around the globe and how they are considered objects of sex and gratification. Her characters in the novel live and suffer throughout the world highlighting the fact that the plight of women is the same worldwide. The subjection of women and the suppression by the male class nowhere seems to be lower at any part. Even the West does not lag behind the East in the case of women's suppression.

Feminism and Self-Liberation

The story of Nilanjana, a young Bengali woman from Kolkata, who moves to France with Kishanlal, a restaurant owner in Paris, is Nasreen's exponent in the book *French Lover*. When Nilanjana arrives at Charles de Gaulle Airport, she was welcomed by her husband, Kishanlal, his friend Sunil, and Chaitali. Nilanjana's arrival at the foreign land, away from home, the place she always dreamt of, read of, was now to become her residence. However, she could not find happiness, though she shared a luxurious flat with her husband, Kishanlal. She maintains the apartment like a gilded cage, however, her life in solitude and boredom draws her close to Benoit. Her sadness and dissatisfaction in her conjugal life leads her to Benoit, a charming Frenchman with blond hair and blue eyes. Nilanjana gives Benoit's love precedence. Despite the fact that she was unable to clarify it, she feels relieved and accepts him as her *French lover*, falling once more into a state of existential crisis. Existential crisis leaves her with no choice but to consider who she is and how her life unfolds in this new world.

Female characters in the book encounter a hostile environment. Together with her mother Molina, Denielle, and Monique, Nilanjana ponders the purpose of her life and the importance of existing in this world. They became depressed when they became conscious of their situation.

Nilanjana appears to be moving in a more radical direction. She experienced the feeling that nothing belonged to her when she first arrived in Paris. She serves only as a domestic worker and a source of enjoyment. Although she could not recognise and internalise the circumstances she encountered in the restaurant, when she sees that Kishanlal's staff members enjoy greater autonomy. Later, she departs from Kishanlal and begins living in the district of Paris, where other sex workers also sell their bodies to clients. She made this decision for her sexual freedom after studying the Parisian scene. She discovered that marginalised people can be free, as learnt from her husband, Kishanlal:

If on a Friday night girls of this age sit at home, if they don't have a boyfriend or sleep with a boy, it's then that parents would be worried. They'd wonder if something was wrong with her, physically or mentally. If the girl goes out, the parents sleep in peace and if she stays at home they'd have a sleepless night. Besides, most of them leave home at this age. They stay alone or with a boyfriend.

(*French Lover*, 47)

She began to detest the filthy, overweight, and hairy male body and sought the existential autonomy of the female body. She and her other friends discovered significant differences in their outlook on life. Another female character in the book, Mithu kills herself in front of her Bengali friends to escape this sort of life. In death, she discovered her existence. Nasreen's *French Lover* is an epitome of women's existence and their fight for survival. *French Lover* is not merely a piece of conventional fiction, but a mirage of the author's life herself.

Nasreen in her book *French Lover*, depicts a world of women that is distinct from the stereotype of typical Bengali women. They are conscious, and because of that, they are compelled to consider whether this world even exists or not. Maurice and Malik opines:

Bold in concept and powerful in execution, *French Lover* is a fascinating glimpse into the working of a woman's mind as the struggle to come to them with her identity in a hostile world"

(Maurice and Malik, 186)

Famous Indian Asian critic Ananada Sharma writes, "For myself, I am not afraid of any challenge or threat to my life," in the Atlantic Journal when discussing the book *French Lover*. "I'll keep writing and speaking out against discrimination and persecution" (3). Sharma lauds Nasreen's bravery and honesty, which he also found in this book.

The existential quest that Nasreen assigns to her female characters, however, is not a topic of criticism from any of the reviewers. The study briefly overviews the extensive and never-ending subject of women's repression, which is used and pervasive even in the West. The chapter emphasises the pathos of a combative woman in a foreign country and her struggle to forge an identity and come to terms with the person she is in a completely foreign country. The existence of female characters in *French Lover* who assert their existence through suicide or homosexuality also raises concerns among researchers.

Using female characters like Nila, Mithu, Danielle, and others, Nasreen evokes the idea of existentialism in this book. Nilanjana begins to love her *French lover* Benoir Dupont because she despises Kishanlal. However, she decides to leave Benoir and pursue an independent existence at the conclusion of the novel. Finally, she is in a position from which she cannot return to her previous stand. The next character, Mithu, also struggles to find herself and ends her life, while Danielle discovers herself through homosexuality.

Nasreen's quest to put forward the never-ending pathos of women and how every norm imposed by the society run by men, undermines women's position in society. The best example is found in the character of Nilanjana Mandal in *French Lover*.

Nila must fulfil the responsibilities of a hireling and a sex worker after she marries Kishanlal. She has to get down at Kishanlal's feet and use her delicate fingers to untie the shoelace. She has to bring the filthy socks into the bathroom because she thinks that at night she would make the perfect prostitute and sell herself like the whores do with their bodies. She considers a comparison between a husband and a whore's client and the main distinction she could make is that the husband can escape without ever paying his significant debt, however, the customer cannot simply flee after appeasing the whore. She believes the whore has more opportunities than the spouse in many different ways. She believes that a woman should be the best at being a mother, a sister, and a whore—or are they just the three people within whom a woman is conceived?

In male-dominated families, life is structured so that when a male member of the family suddenly falls ill, the entire family stays by his side and prays, hoping for a speedy recovery. Whereas, when a female member of the family who is married falls ill, everyone becomes upset that she is on the list of those who are unable to care for themselves. In order to carry out all of the duties necessary to care for the family but not herself, a woman must always be strong. When Molina, Nila's mother becomes unwell, Nila considers how and why she became ill. It was because, like the majority of women, she was expected to take care of the family but not care herself. In this context, the author narrates:

The illness isn't sudden; it was festering for a long time. It was only a bubble in her intestine at first, and that was haemorrhaging. It could have worked effectively. But since it was permitted to develop, it turned into cancer. This is the issue with patients' families. They don't begin treatment on schedule, and when it is past the point of no return, they apply pressure where needed.

(*French Lover*, 86)

The male-female interaction is a significant theme in the book *French Lover*, which calls for a rare level of depth and validity. In the context of conjugal and other conjugal partnerships, it might be summed up as a man-woman connection. As in the group of Sunil da and his wife Chaitali, we see the discord between Nilanjana and Kishanlal, two people with distinct preferences and emotions. Molina's connection with Anirban is snatched away by fate. Because Molina has long been ignored and her condition was not being attended to, she passed away. Danielle, a French national, had a difficult upbringing. Her father had violated her. She had suffered several times as a consequence of the sexual slurs used by the people around her, which led her to become a lesbian. Nila's relationship with Sushanta revealed the unfaithfulness of a romance that failed before marriage. Finally, Nila marries Kishanlal in the hopes of admiration and happiness, although she had multiple visions of a life supported only by devotion.

Oppression and Struggle

An excellent illustration of women's oppression in marriage is found in *French Lover*, where the author describes Nila's plight as a consequence of Kishanlal's harsh and repressive behaviour. Nila moves to Paris with her husband after being married in Calcutta and has a lot of vivid romantic dreams while there. But when her spouse treats her nothing less than an unpaid housemaid and a sexual object, her fantasy is crushed. Her sparkling dreams were crushed to dust after her arrival in the alien city of Paris. She had left behind everything to be with Kishanlal, however nothing seemed to be as she had dreamt. Simone de Beauvoir claims, in context to life pre- and post-marriage of a girl:

In the early years of marriage, the wife often lulls herself into illusions; she tries to admire her husband wholeheartedly, to love him unreservedly, and to feel herself indispensable to him.

(Beauvoir, 496)

Kishanlal's icy and callous demeanour dashes Nila's hopes. Except at night, he doesn't spend much time with her. Nila, however, copes with his strict personality since she is aware that her family would never provide for her because she has always been seen as a burden.

Kishanlal sees Nila as a servant who was brought from Calcutta to take care of his home and fulfil his requirements. She feels deceived, when she learns the truth about his first wife, Immanuelle, one day. Kishanlal accepts it, reasoning that it gave him scope for French citizenship, when she challenges him about it. When Nila confronts him in a furious state, he belittles her by bringing up the task of her previous romantic involvement with Sushanta and remarks:

Because Sushanta, the great lover, had ditched you and I didn't marry you, no one would. News travels far and fast.

(French Lover, 62)

Through the enslavement of Nila, Taslima Nasreen makes it clear that marriage is just the anticipated conclusion in a patriarchal culture that acts as an enclosure, limiting a woman's progress towards self-autonomy. The fundamental causes of sex—typical actions are social structural characteristics of society, such as the unequal distribution of men and women in certain social positions and the gender hierarchy (Hinshaw, *Psychological Bulletin*, 883). Nila eventually becomes aware of her dependence on others and has an identity crisis, which eventually leads her to be independent. She resolves to gain economic independence as a result. However, her spouse rejects her option, which prompts Nila to state her choice as follows:

You should have married a dumb girl who'd silently do the housework and never protest at anything, who doesn't have a soul to call her own and cannot read or write.

(French Lover, 56)

The strong voices of women who speak out about their preferences and reject patriarchal conventions in marriage to obediently accept the decisions of men are echoed in Nasreen's writings. Nasreen has criticised this patriarchal social norm that keeps a woman within and limits her economic freedom. The gender stereotype that "truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights, independence, or opportunities" was criticised by Betty Friedan (13). Nila ultimately lands a job in a facility that boxes up computers. Her desire to live freely after seeing her husband oppress her, which ultimately leads her to leave him and his home.

Nila, who is alone by herself in Paris, meets Danielle at the same factory, and the two slowly grow to be close friends. After learning all about Nila's painful marital experiences, Danielle tries to assist her by inviting her to share her flat. Danielle is a lesbian who reveals her feelings for Nila and is physically attracted to her. Nila shares her feelings with her as the sole person she relied on and the one who provided her with

sanctuary. This gay connection lasts for a long time, but gradually Nila chooses to end it, since Danielle is starting to dominate her.

After leaving her husband's residence, Nila was alone until she met Benoir Dupont, a Frenchman, on a journey from Calcutta to Paris. He is drawn to Nila, and he is just as entranced by her appearance. When they arrive in Paris, they both declare their feelings to one another and get into an illicit romance, termed as an extra-marital relationship:

"She had never gotten such pleasure in all her twenty-seven years. She never knew she would ever feel such pleasure"

(*French Lover*, 170).

Benoir, as implied by the title, therefore becomes Nila's *French Lover*. Ironically, she misinterprets his feelings for her as love, which she later realises is really desire. Nasreen has highlighted the core reasons for a woman's sexually liberated conduct, which forces her to hunt for love outside the conventions of her marriage, by highlighting an illicit connection. Every person, regardless of her biological identity, has a natural urge to want to be loved; as a result, this instinct cannot be denied and needs a way to be satisfied.

Conclusion

The women in traditional Hindu society do not get any chance to share ideas, emotions, and feelings with their male members. The mother of Kishan was ill she could not get treatment though her son was a doctor; like that a father who invests lot of money for the daughter's marriage but the money is given to the hand of a husband and the daughter gets nothing. Women's situation in the Bengali society forces them to commit suicide like Mithu. Mithu, one of the characters of the novel, commits suicide because she wants to liberate herself from the humiliation. Nila tries to justify the cause of suicide and she spiritually becomes bold to fight against the domination and ready to choose anything for the sake of existence. Committing suicide is a way to attain the self-existence. It is the final choice of human being which helps him to exist in this world with some essence. The female characters of the novel do not surrender to manmade tradition, so some of them commit suicide and establish essence in this life.

Taslima Nasreen in her writing proposes that emancipation from the bondage of man is beyond the realm of imagination without economic independence and education since women's dependence on men is to a great extent responsible for their low status in society.

In short, the novel highlights the existential issues of women who deny to accept the humiliation although the struggle is not complete as well. The philosophy of existentialism and feminism appears in the life of Nila which forces them to do something in life. Values of individual freedom forces Nila to cut off relationship with Kishan and be settled with Benoir. After being a lover of a French man, she knows the hidden meaning of life where she found nothing except zero. The brutal truth about women being the second gender, and man being the first and foremost, has been well-depicted and portrayed by the life of the protagonist, who

by chance happens to be the shadow of the author herself. Nasreen's protest against the man-made society, wherein women are moulded in a manner to satiate the male counterpart, is wonderfully reflected through her major character, Nila.

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