

Evolution of New Woman in Taslima Nasrin's 'French Lover'

Shailendra P. Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Agra, (Uttar Pradesh)
India

Abstract

The present research paper "Evolution of New Woman in Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*" focuses on Nilanjana Mandal's struggles to break free from the patriarchal clutches to become a woman that she chooses to be. In other words, Taslima Nasrin makes the heroine of her novel shatter the traditional roles of females so as to assert her identity of a "new woman" who dares to forge an identity for herself and in the process is ready to take up the suffering, instead of being trapped and suffering the whole life within the moulds of a claustrophobic marital relationship like that of her mother Molina. Nila, learning from her mistakes, evolves to assert her agency and to show the world how a woman who dares to shatter her own patriarchal beliefs can change the world for herself.

Key Words: Feminism, *French Lover*, Gender Roles, Identity, Patriarchy, New Woman, Taslima Nasrin

Feminism can be defined as "a political position against patriarchy" and feminist criticism as "a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism." (Moi 117) Female writers across ages, and more so in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries have taken up their "political position against patriarchy" to counter the sexism and sexist violence that existed in the patriarchal society. Taslima Nasrin, the writer from the Indian subcontinent is no different regarding her feminist revolt as she too takes up the fight against patriarchy in her writings, especially in *French Lover* (2002). The novel focuses on the inner life of a woman, named Nilanjana Mandal or Nila, who had to fight patriarchal acculturation to lead a life of her own choice which very few women in this

world can achieve even in the supposed modern world of the twenty-first century. The novel portrays her struggle to fight back the age-old traditions which had put chains all around women and had made them slaves to men.

Whether one looks at the western tradition or that of the east, patriarchy is prevalent across the world in differing degrees and finds manifestation in the suffering of women across the world, be it India or Bangladesh or France. Women are taught from their childhood that they are to behave in a particular way and grow up to be feminine by being submissive and obedient by nature. Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous essay "A Vindication of the rights of Women" talks about how education can be a means through which women can achieve some independence and she urges the

females in the treatise to be subservient not to men, but to “Reason.” However, when we see Nilanjana Mandal studying in the novel and dreaming of teaching in Lady Brabourne College or the University of Calcutta, she faces discouraging remarks, underpinning the reality of a woman in a patriarchal society: “You crazy girl, what's the use of all this studying? Eventually, you will have to handle the kitchen and your husband's house.” (46) From her childhood, a woman is made to learn that her ultimate destiny is her husband’s household where she has to handle the kitchen and other household chores, and therefore, she should learn those instead of thinking of pursuing higher education.

Nilanjana Mandal had witnessed this patriarchal oppression at close quarters in her home. She saw her mother relegated to a household manager, who was always preoccupied with household chores and serving her husband, without ever expecting any love from him in return. Her mother, Molina suffered from stomach ache for a long time, but her husband, despite being a doctor, could not pay any attention to his wife’s agony. Finally, it turned out to be cancer but her father, Anirban, neglected her and showered her attention on another lady. Nilanjana reflects:

It’s not that Anirban Mandal didn’t love anyone, he did. But not Molina. He loved Swati Sen. Once Molina had seen a Kanjivaram sari and exclaimed, “what a lovely sari. I wish I could wear one.” Anirban bought the sari, not for Molina but for Swati. (133)

Nilanjana witnessed other facets of

patriarchal oppression early in her life. She is born in a low caste but she fell in love with a Brahmin boy, Sushanta. She loved him with all her heart. They had a long and committed relationship, in which he exercises his privilege to make love to her whenever he wishes, but leaves Nila devastated at the end by succumbing to the wishes of his family to marry a girl of his caste. Her family members, seeing her agony, bring forth the proposal of Kishan Lal, a widower settled in Paris. He readily agrees to it for she too wants to escape this suffocation and start a new life in a foreign land.

Nilanjana Mandal immediately after her marriage arrives in Paris, with high expectations from her husband Kishan Lal, a restaurant owner in Paris who is almost double her age. Kishan Lal is a very dry and egocentric individual, who welcomes Nila with an order: “Today you're on leave, but from tomorrow you'll have to get down to housework, okay’? When Nila asks him to join hands with her he says, 'You do, you're a woman'.” (18) It is undeniable that he wanted a servant and an object of sexual gratification from India when he married Nila. Moreover, as a restaurant owner, Kishan leaves his house early in the morning and comes back late and expects Nila to be there within the four walls of the house waiting for him. He wants her to be completely dependent on him and turns down her desire to see famous places and appreciate the beauty of the city. Absentmindedly Nila sings – “Break free the doors and take me away” (26) which suggests the claustrophobic atmosphere within which she is thrust into because of

this marriage. He treats her worse than a servant, and she starts feeling that her marriage has degraded her to the level of a housemaid or even a prostitute:

... Nila sat at his feet and untied the shoelaces with her slim fingers and took off his shoes. She felt like the housemaid, who used to take off everyone's shoes and thought at night she'd have to be the perfect whore and sell herself just as they sold their bodies for money. ... The prostitute actually had more freedom than the wife in more ways than one. A mother, a sister and a prostitute- are they the three roles which a woman has to play to the hilt or are they merely the three persons that a woman is born with. (28)

Kishan Lal, wanting Nila to stay at home and wait for him, locks her in the house and leaves a set of keys with her to be used in case of fire or any other emergency. He does not approve of Nila wasting money for talking over the phone to her family in Kolkata. He having an extremely pragmatic approach to life does not have any consideration for Nila's aspirations and feelings. His opposition to Nila's taking up a job hurts her:

Am I not earning enough? If I didn't work, where would you live? What would you eat?" Nila retorts with a calm voice saying 'Are you doing all this for me? You were working even before we got married. You haven't started working simply to be able to take care of me, have you? (French Lover, 55)

Nila is deeply rooted in her Bengali identity, but Kishan Lal does not have any regard for it. He neither likes Nila talking in Bangla with Sunil and Chaitali nor can find any merit in Nila's fondness for tea and asks her to stop drinking it, as it darkens one's complexion. Even though he serves non-vegetarian food to his customers at his restaurant, he prohibits Nila from cooking her favourite nonvegetarian cuisines at home. It is in such situation that Nila is trapped and she was looking for some escape, to defy the unjustified authority of the husband. One day she comes out of her house and roams on streets:

... she wanted to lose herself, to go to a place from where she wouldn't know her way back. ... Nila saw the two young men kissing the woman and stroking her back lovingly. The two bodies were entwined. Nila wanted to be kissed like that, she wanted such a handsome young man to her, hug her and kiss her as deeply... Like a crazed being, she ran towards the museum. Nila forgot that she had go back home forgot that she had just one identity. She was Mrs. Lal, Mrs. Kishan Lal. (67)

However, by nature, Nila is not a kind of woman who can be dominated for long. She aspired for her freedom. She felt that if she can earn her own money, then she will get some kind of relief from the situation that she is trapped in. In a letter to her mother, Molina, she writes:

If I had money, ma, I'd have lived happily, my own money. Ma. Without your own money you have to obey the person who has

money for all your life. If you are a pauper, your wishes don't count. You can't live on someone else's money and also have your freedom. (French Lover, 68)

Nila is further emboldened by the French culture, where people cared about their happiness and felt entitled to have it. It was different from the patriarchal culture in Kolkata, where women were expected to make endless sacrifices for their husband and family. Nila feels sorry for her mother, who wasted her life, serving her husband, without ever receiving the love in return. She writes to her:

Ma, you have wasted your entire life trying to please other people. Now you should think of yourself, enjoy your own life. After grandmother died, the inheritance was split up and you got a fair amount of money from selling your share. Who are you saving for? Spend it on yourself. Life isn't forever. The people here have enough to eat and good clothes to wear. So they enjoy the life to the hilt. They laugh heartily. And we are afraid to laugh because we are in fear. Why? Because some stupid man somewhere has said that if you laugh too much you will pay for it with tears. (54)

Here Nila is voicing the concerns of the “new woman” who wants to be independent and does not want to remain as a “pet” of the husband – whishing her tail at everything that the husband says or does. She dares to take the unfamiliar path – the path full of perils as she does not want to live and die with one identity – that of Kishan Lal's wife. She quietly takes up a job in a factory.

When Kishan Lal humiliates her for cooking Bengali non-vegetarian food for her friends, she protests against female subservience and self-denial and thinks that that she cannot live “within many restraints and strictures.” (80). She, therefore, leaves Kishan's house and starts wandering.

She, aware of her money-less and homeless status, takes refuge in the house of her factory co-worker, Danielle. Danielle had a single room accommodation, and she shares her bed with Nila. Nila gets to know about Danielle's lesbian proclivities and moves a step closer to understanding her sexuality. She is awakened to another aspect of herself:

All night long, Danielle's thirsty tongue played on Nila's motionless body. Suddenly Nila's deadwood body was flooded with life. Like a skilled painter Danielle painted her dreams on Nila's body. Nila was drowning in orgasmic tremors. (147)

On her way back to Paris, Nila meets Benoir Dupont, with whom she forms a relationship. Benoir is married and has a daughter, who is not willing to leave his family for the sake of Nila and moreover comments that he loves both his wife and Nila. Nila, having been fed up with Denielle's lovemaking, had walked out off the house and needed someone to survive. Benoir expresses his fascination for her brown and pulsating skin. Dupont immerses her with his love and makes her feel the most cherished, desired and beautiful woman of the world. Benoir makes Nila fly on the wings of sexual ecstasy and makes her forget the struggles of the world. Nila

receives her the money, inherited from her mother, during her relationship with Benoir. She buys a spacious flat and keeps Benoir's tastes and preferences in mind while furnishing it. He also moves away from his wife's home and starts living with her.

It is in this expensive flat she realizes the superficiality and phoniness of Benoir's love for her. He criticises Nila's expenditure in luxuriously furnishing the flat as wasteful expenditure. He fails to see in it Nila's love for him. He criticises Nila and tries to control her. Nila realizes that despite great sophistication in the art of love-making, Benoir is as self-centred and narcissistic as any other man. She realizes that he had never even loved Pascale and therefore she was now indifferent towards him. She realizes that patriarchal societies tend to make men narcissistic and incapable of giving themselves entirely to their spouses. Nila tells Benoir:

No Benoir, you don't love me You don't love Pascale, ... you love yourself, Benoir, your own self. No one else... you are no different from my father Anirban, my lover Sushanta, my husband Kishanlal and that Sunil ... all of you have same things in common... You need a Madame Buffer fly don't you, Benoir? But I have no desire to be her. (286)

When Benoir gets to know about Nila's decision, he starts sobbing and pleads with her to not leave him. He accuses and insults her and then turning violent physically attacks her and tries to strangle her. However, Nila remains firm in her conviction to leave him and start a new life.

The traumatic experiences of life have educated her, and she wishes to use this inner resourcefulness to carve out a future for herself independently:

"I had no self-esteem or self-confidence, and that's why I came this far for your love. Now you must let me go. I cannot spend the rest of my life in tears. I won't let you have that pleasure at least! You would love to watch the fun, the love and tragic grief of a stupid, silly eastern woman... I believe you - you will marry me. But I won't marry you and this child will not be born. I will have an abortion." (French Lover, 287)

At this point, Nila takes a brave decision that she will not marry Benoir and moreover will abort her baby. In an Indian set up, it is usual that a woman is meant to serve the wishes of every male around without any questions asked. However, Nila refuses to take up that role any more.

What Molina needed was a little love from Anirban, but Anirban cared little for her, and due to his negligence, her simple boil in her intestine turns cancerous, and she dies. She dies not because of the disease, but because of neglect. Molina could never free herself from the claims of the society, and she died pursuing those ideals of conformity, sacrifice and obedience while knowing full well that her husband had an extramarital affair and there is no love between her husband and her. However, she was caught up with the patriarchal notion of fulfilling her duty and never for a moment thinks of breaking free. She does not want to do so as she is taught by the patriarchal society that by nature, she is destined to accept things. Simone de Beauvoir aptly comments: "She

does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society, and yet she does not repudiate it completely. Thus, she is divided against herself.” (The Second Sex, 330). However, Nila is not so; she does not want to be cowed down by the societal strictures and live a life like that of Molina where there is nothing but the suffering. She wants self-reliance and self-dependence. It is not that her relationship with Benoir has been as she realizes: “I fell into the trap of love and came out of it myself... Time is never wasted. This time was spent in acquiring wisdom and I needed it.” (French Lover, 291). Nila made mistakes and from those mistakes, she learns to take firm decisions for herself which she will never repent in her life as they are her decisions. Women in India much like any other patriarchal societies are not allowed to decide things for herself. Nila, by making her own bold choices, is essentially taking up the role of the “new woman”, who rejects the traditional images and definitions of woman to take up the new role. Probably, in Nila’s case, her expatriate identity also makes matter complex as well as smoother as she is not in India and can take things in her own hands without the censure of her relatives and supposed well-wishers. In other words, it can be said that Taslima Nasrin consciously chooses to present Nila as an expatriate as that allows her to gain some agency and helps in the process of ascertaining her identity.

Nasrin in her own life struggled for the right of women to break free of those thought patterns, which enable patriarchy to perpetuate discrimination and exploitation. She says that she is not a misandrist, but

wants those women, who unconsciously adopt the patriarchal mode of thinking to “grow into sensible human beings”. She further says: “I want them to reject gender-based discrimination; I want them to believe in truth and equality with all their heart.” (Nasreen 2010: 244) She feels that in order to break free from the shackles of patriarchal oppression, a certain degree of willfulness is required. Women have to engage deliberately in this struggle to resist anti-women attitudes and lead a life of dignity and freedom. In *No Country for Women*, she makes a passionate appeal to all women to engage in a long struggle to acquire agency and liberty:

No one is ever going to gift liberty to women. Women have to fight and win liberty for themselves. Women themselves do not know from what they are deprived of and how. For centuries it has been drilled into women that they are a breed of slaves. How will women achieve liberty! Nevertheless I strain to listen. I strain to listen to the sound of women rising from a long long sleep. (31)

Thus, Nila, in Taslima Nasrin’s *French Lover*, wakes up from her sleep to come to an authentic way of life which is possible for women to achieve if they dare to take decisions in their own hands despite being cowed down by patriarchal demands and wishes. Nasrin aspires that women should be brave enough to question the standards set by the society and have the resilience of the character to face all odds to come up with an identity of one’s own. Gynocritics saw femininity as a social construct, as a creation of the social conditioning and attempted to theorise various aspects of

female writing. Elaine Showalter also points out how the patriarchal social conditioning, material circumstances, social and psychological pressures, economic dependence and the dominant notion of femininity in patriarchal set-up hinders women's creativity. Taslima Nasrin is taking up a gynocritical overview in the novel *French Lover* to show how women can

achieve a lot if they break free from the patriarchal chains and try to discover the world and sexuality themselves. Nila, through the struggles in her life evolves into this bold new woman, who empowers herself by learning from her mistakes and is courageous enough to chart her course independently.

Works Referred:

- de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, 1949, trans. by H. M. Parshley, Bantam, New York, 1961; Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974.
- Moi, Toril, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore Ed. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1989, pp. 117 – 132.
- Nasrin, Taslima. *French Lover: A Novel*. Trans. Sreejata Guha. Penguin, New Delhi, 2002.
- Nasrin, Taslima. *No Country for Women*. Visata Publishing, India, 2010