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Representing the Self: A Study of Taslima Nasrin's *Shodh*

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Abstract

Women have been the subject of ill treatment and discrimination in our society since ancient times. Representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive and irrational is deeply rooted in our society and influences actual social conditions where she does not have power and as a result of it, is treated as sex object or a procreating machine. Generally men all over the world look at women from their point of view. Being herself a victim of the fanaticism and patriarchal structure, Taslima Nasarin has observed the plight of women very closely as to how women are given the role of a subordinate where they fail to assert their right to freedom and equality. The central theme which strikes the mind in the novel *Shodh* is not only gender bias but also the representation of the self of an individual (Jhumur) who eventually breaks down all the hegemonic patriarchal shackles of the society and succeeds in establishing her own identity. Thus, the proposed paper intends to highlight the various aspects of injustice and maltreatment and their impact on the protagonist Jhumur who ultimately takes a stand to assert and represent her own identity in this crude male dominating society.

Keywords- Discrimination, Patriarchal Structure, Gender bias, Maltreatment, Identity

Women have been marginalised and discriminated in our society since ancient times and this practice is still rampant even in the twenty first century which is the age of science and computer. Generally, men all over the world look at women from a stereotyped point of view, said by social conventions. The social roles of wife, mother, housewife assigned to women go hand in hand with a division into the public and private domains, the first being the sphere considered proper to men, the second to women. Representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive or irrational is deeply rooted in our society and influences actual social conditions where she does not have power and as a result of it, is betrayed as sex-object or a procreating machine. In this context, one is reminded of Kamla Das's perceptive poem, "An Introduction" which outlines the jeopardy of woman's life where the natural has to be forcefully shaped in the social mould. Kamala Das says:

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. . . Dress in saris, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamla, or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. (42)

The most important issues of space and voice which decide a human beings importance and identity in a collective life remain devalued in the context of woman's existence. This denial has grown out of proportion and gained obstinacy and is the root cause of violence against women. Violence against women is an old age practice which has now become a major issue of concern in today's world. Writers like Anuradha Banerjee has outlined three broad categories of women in her article entitled *Imaging of Woman in Literature: the archetype, the stereotype and the real*. She says:

The use of the terms like 'archetype', 'stereotype', and 'real' in the context of exploring the identity of woman evince certain important attitudes. Three broad categories of women correlate with these. These broad categories can be stated thus: the first stands for the source-image the ideal-original image of woman and corresponds to the notion of the archetype; the second stands for the dumb, silent and suffering image of woman created under the normative pressure of the traditional society; the third stands for the image of woman breaking away from the stereotype. It is articulate and assertive against exploitation (114)

Taslina Nasrin belongs to the third category of women i.e. breaking away from the stereotype. She is vocal, articulate and assertive. She has been in the habit of raising her voice against all kinds of exploitation and injustice. Taslima's literary outputs are the examples of her struggle against any kind of subjugation and maltreatment meted out to women.

The theme which strikes the mind of the reader in the novel *Shodh* is gender bias which eventually results in revenge. Being herself a victim of the fanaticism and patriarchal structure, Taslima Nasrin has observed things very closely as to how women are given the role of a subordinate where they fail to assert their right to freedom and right to equality. In *Shodh* Taslima has not only exposed and dwelt upon this oppressive situation but she has woven a far more disastrous situation which is again the outcome of the patriarchal violence. Thus the novel *Shodh* is a blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish. This paper lays emphasis on the different dimensions of stereotyped violence meted out to women and the strategy of betrayal to

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counter the former. The female protagonist Jhumur, with this strategy ultimately takes a stand to establish her own identity in the patriarchal social milieu.

To understand the novel *Shodh* and the various prisms of violence connected with woman's life, one needs to understand precisely the nature of Taslima's creative output. It must be mentioned that Taslima does not imagine things. Her creative writing bears nothing but the experiences of real life. The divide between the real and the imaginary is nonexistent. Talima's writing is not the outcome of a fictitious mind. Every line of her writing draws its strength from the livid fire of her various experiences right from her childhood days. Mostly we put up our best masks because we want to get reverence and appreciation. We hide the ignoble whereas Taslima goes the other way round. There is no mask on her face. She exposes the bleak with utmost honesty. Her method is highly disturbing because she is a woman and the gender biased evaluations of her writing is happy to make her an outcast. Taslima is unable to compromise. What she finds to be hypocritical, she challenges, dissects and exposes. She is articulate and raises her voice against any kind of injustice and exploitation. The openness of her declarations especially when she talks about women and their stereotyped existence in the society makes us wince. A remarkable Taslima poem entitled *Charitra* (*Character*) reveals the essential Taslima brilliantly.

You're a girl
Remember very well
When you'll cross the threshold
People will look askance at you.
When you will walk down the lane
People will stalk you,
Whistle at you.
When you will cross the lane and step on the highway
People will call you lose character and hurl abuses at you.
If you are worthless
You will turn back
And if it's not the case
You will continue the way you are going (11).

This assertiveness in *Charitra* is the strength of Taslima's women who carry on their journey ahead. This journey starts with a positive note and remains so until the woman protagonist remains within the network of the stereotype, the dictates of age old practices. Taslima's women at this point of their journey explore the unexplored. The inevitable takes place. She becomes the hunted. In *Shodh*, a

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happy love marriage meets disaster because the husband, the representative of male chauvinism, the age old symbol of patriarchy is not sanguine about the purity of the foetus. Haroon, the bearer of the traditional male mindset sits on judgment and fails miserably to appreciate and understand Jhumur's truth. Haroon dictates sanitise Jhumur as the following lines say:

I was not put under anaesthesia. The doctor managed to scoop up from my insides all the gore which, in time, given way to a child's silhouette. I stared, dazed at the spilling of clotted blood – the vital fluid. If someone had burrowed into my heart then he would have discovered a sticky lump of blood there too. Happy at the success of the operation the doctor declared, 'The womb has been thoroughly cleaned out. We have left nothing inside. (85).

It is no different from the test of fire through which women traverse since time immemorial. Innocence is pierced with the surgical tools and proved immoral and sinful. Here the lack of trust vitiates the relationship between Haroon and Jhumur. Jhumur cannot prove her innocence and fidelity. Chastity of woman is too vulnerable because the society decides it to be so. Jhumur is silent and finds herself to have become worthless. Her identity has been silenced. This silence is ominous. Human mind in Jhumur's case gets an outlet in its encounter with an artist. i.e. Afzal. The latter enters Jhumur's life to give her back those colours which had been deleted from her life on the operation table when her love for Haroon and her foetus were butchered and scooped out. This Jhumur is dead. A new Jhumur is born with Afzal. She is not the well educated woman having masters in physics. One gets, it may be suggested, certain traces of naturalism, an echo of Emile Zola's *Nana* and remotely a touch of Lawrence. But the silence of Jhumur has another mission to fulfil. It is to avenge her humiliation and her death in the hands of Haroon. Jhumur levels the game which the arrogance of Haroon had started earlier. She equalises and brings herself to a point from where she can pity Haroon.

To state the story of *Shodh* in nut shell, it is a story of betrayal and revenge, dealing with a young woman Jhumur who is an educated girl and marries the man whom she loves. She breaks the news of her pregnancy to her husband, Haroon hoping to make him happy but to her utter dismay he accuses her of cheating on him by saying that it was not easy to conceive in six weeks and he puts an allegation that she wanted to get married to him hurriedly because she was carrying someone else's seed in her womb as he says, "...it's not possible to become pregnant in six weeks." (73). He forces her to get the child aborted which leaves a deep psychological impact on Jhumur, so that she becomes vindictive and decides to avenge herself. In spite of being an educated, courageous and open minded woman her voice in the house-hold matters is suppressed. Simon de Beauvoir says in her book *The Second Sex* that "a woman is not born but becomes a woman". (298) 'According to her, a woman is

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not born but becomes a woman which in itself lays bare the condition of woman in our society. Here important thing is that gender roles are predetermined and the woman is trained to fit in those roles. This means that roles like 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but social because the woman has to be trained to think, talk, and act in particular ways that suit the role. Simon de Beauvoir further states that woman's idea of herself as inferior to man and dependant on him springs from her realisation that "the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men" (273).

On the contrary, Jhumur's case is entirely different because she comes from a liberal and an enlightened family. She has not been trained to talk, or act in the ways that suit the rule. But things go astray when she conceives early and is accused of carrying some other man's child in her womb. This allegation and mental agony shatters her spirit to live. Thus, through the character of Jhumur, Taslima Nasrin exposes the cruel face of the society which robs the happiness and mental peace of a woman. Through the story of Jhumur and Haroon, Nasrin lays stress on the need of love, harmony and freedom in relations, while before marriage Jhumur and Haroon seem to be a perfect couple but the relationship loses its charm once the egocentric, suspicious and chauvinistic male supersedes the lover Haroon. Eventually in order to avenge her, Jhumur gets intimate with Afzal, a paying guest in her house, and finally gives birth to a son, labelling him as Haroon's son. Haroon's love for the baby, thinking him to be his own son is highly ironical and serves the novelist's purpose of casting a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish. Jhumur feels elated and does not harbour any guilt feelings about bringing Ananda, her son into the world of Haroon and his family. She sticks to her line of action and says, "I took recourse to that to avenge the indignity I suffered. I'm not so insignificant, or of no account, that I'll swallow my utter humiliation in the hands of my husband and remain forever beholden to him" (227). She goes on to say, "My heart swells with happiness when Haroon cuddles Ananda and calls him 'Baba'. I have doused the fire of suspicion that had raged ferociously in Haroon's heart and left mine charred, with waters from the fountain of joy that has bedewed me from within" (227).

It is worth mentioning Marry Wollstonecraft, a great feminist critic, who in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) has rejected the established notion that women are naturally weaker and inferior to men. The unequal nature of gender relations, she proposes, is because of the lack of education that kept the women in a secondary position. This argument is very well accepted. Education is definitely a tool which helps a woman to progress but in the case of Jhumur, and in the context of Indian sub-continent, this notion is a myth. The unknown hinterlands of gender

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divide and the strong forts of immovable ideas do not budge and inch when one comes to the world of Haroon. Stereotypes have disfigured Haroon's perception. To him, Jhumur's academic qualifications or her parent's liberal teachings are of no value.

The fight of a woman for her space and her craving to be understood is shown in the life of Jhumur. This protagonist craves to speak up and situations make her articulate in her silence. Honesty is overpowered by deceit. Taslima shows how the traditional way of looking at women can create a terrible disaster for the well made society itself. Violence begets violence; distrust ridicules Haroon's own fatherhood. Jhumur breaks down all the shackles that comes in her way and represents her identity vehemently as she says, "I am Haroon's wife but not his slave. I may be staying with him to fulfil my own human needs, it does not follow my role is to dust and sweep, cook, bring children into this world, rear them, act as a sop to his physical or mental needs" (226).

Jhumur's character is a unique case study. One cannot say how far her silent way of avenging herself can inspire a host of women. But it is definitely a warning to the stereotype male way of sitting on judgment when the point of female chastity is concerned, that aggressive dictation can drive the weak partner to such an extreme where her back touches the wall and the retaliation which comes from her side can become blood curdling.

To sum up, it is apt to say that patriarchal system in the society is the root of male dominance where power is enjoyed by them only and as violence accompanies power, it does nothing except giving torture to a person who is powerless. Foucault has also supported this concept of power as he has said that power is dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body and it is aptly associated in the case of Jhumur where she is forced to get the child aborted because Haroon has power to which Jhumur is subjected and surrendered. The focus of this paper is laid upon the coercive impact of the abortion case on Jhumur i.e. how she becomes vindictive and eventually succeeds in avenging herself. The suppression of Jhumur's voice and her desires compel her to act in a way which ultimately gives her courage to establish her own identity. Jhumur's words show her taking a stand. She says:

I feel I'm strong. That I am someone, separate and distinct from me as Haroon's wife, Ananda's ma, Ma-in-law's Bouma, Dolon, Hasan, Habib's Bhabhi. . . No. I'm Zeenat Sultana, Jhumur, a teacher. I am not something to be flung away; I'm not a thing, something, and anything to add grace to a house, to embellish a family. . . Haroon recognises I won't tolerate his cruelty; that I am no his slave; that I dare. I have remade my own life. I love Haroon without surrendering myself, without doing away with all my aspirations. (227)

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So through this novel *Shodh*, Nasrin has tried to put forward her experiences regarding violence, exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination of women in the patriarchal society. Through her characters like Jhumur, Taslima relentlessly questions certain major pillars of faith which have made the exploitation of woman so easy in the context of the patriarchal society. She draws the attention of the reader to the horror of secretly administered domestic violence especially to women. She has broken the stereotyped ruthlessly unwomanly to some but to the deep satisfaction of many she has rescued the voice of the real woman.

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