

“Love Among the Ruins”: A Study of Taslima Nasreen's Early Poetry

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Abstract: Taslima Nasreen, the much-discussed author who was banished from Bangladesh for her radical works, expresses her bitterness at the social-religious system that perpetrates the affliction of woman. The proclaimed feminist, Nasreen's sense of victimhood can be identified universally with the Third-world woman condition. But apart from the hatred and protest that gather in her early poetry, what is simultaneously present is the quest for love in the barren wasteland of patriarchy. Nasreen's poetry shows the glimmer of subversion of traditional gender hierarchy, but ultimately falls the prey of patriarchal ideology which the poet inheres unwittingly. This article addresses the issue of woman's subordination that is highlighted by feminist like Simon De Beauvoir and inquires how far Nasreen's poetry is successful in unsettling the 'sexual-politics'.

Keywords: love-poetry, patriarchy, feminism, gender-hierarchy, ideology, subversion

Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
Love is best.
—Robert Browning¹

I

The altogether refusal of involvement with men in general becomes one of the tenets of radical feminism, which often proximates to lesbian sisterhood, but not all forms of feminism purport to the same virulent agenda, as Ruthven cites, “Feminist terrorism is a mirror image of machismo” (Ruthven, 1984, p. 10) which is to be avoided. What is seen to be its dominant motto is the subversion of traditional gender roles within patriarchy which decidedly refuse to accommodate equal rights to both sexes, not only in matters of socio-economic transaction but in the formation of psycho-sexual identity. It is customary to divide the generations of Feminism into 'waves'. While the so-called First Wave Feminism, represented by Woolf (1929) and, somewhat ambiguously, Beauvoir (1972), was in general preoccupied with woman's subordinated role in society and culture maintained by patriarchy and its institutions the Second Wave, complicated by the issues of various woman's liberation movements of the 1960s and a growing vogue for 'critical theories', shows a general disbelief in homogenization of woman as category of study. The latter, especially the postmodern French feminists, moreover, combines multiple concerns of psychoanalysis,

deconstruction and semiotics to provoke a globalized dissent over the woman-question where the construction of gender is seen far from being a simple category of cultural manoeuvre. The Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen is usually categorized as a radical feminist in so far her works are assessed from liberal humanist or plain sociological perspectives sans theoretical rigour. Her early poems, which is going to be the concern of this article, embody the obvious characteristics of a woman whose sense of victimhood often unleash bitter hatred towards the system that does not only perpetrate but sustain it for self-interest. In her ardent quest for a room of her own from where to flare her agendas against society and religion, the two champions of patriarchy, Nasreen feels the threat of the age-old system which tries to choke her voice in a politically motivated counter-attack. It's obvious for any writer belonging to a Fundamentalist Third-world country, labeled as "feminist," to find surviving difficult if she is critical of the religion which the State shelters. Hence, the burning of her books and her ultimate banishment from Bangladesh.

II

The subjectivity of woman is skillfully crushed down by patriarchal culture where woman as a separate category does not exist; her identity is contingent the fulfillment of which lies only when placed in contrast to man. Within the ambit of essentialist or "biology-as-destiny" formula man is held to be a thinking entity or having transcendental qualities while women is passive, confined within the prison of her own body, as Beauvoir cites:

A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. [...] Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. (Beauvoir, 1972)

In the physiological formulation, man is considered to be superior and woman inferior who needs to be guided. The very idea of male dominance within the patriarchal society or its coercive heritage that maintains the subservience of the women seems so evident because it gets its validity from what it creates the illusion of the normative. The nexus of ideology entangles women in such complex relation within forces outside her control that the illusion appears real to her. The psychology of love that is determined by the foul-play of sexual politics whose opacity engenders an axiomatic stance successfully rendering the abnormal normal and making the subject that becomes its prey utterly perplexed as to what role is to assume. The early poetry of Nasreen, written before her exile from Bangladesh, bears the mark of this ambiguous meaning notwithstanding its apparent feminist implications. In the first volume of her autobiography she accounts the incidents of hair-raising sexual molestation within family she became a victim of

from her childhood onwards (Nasrin, 1999, 60-63, 79-81). The ugly rituals performed in the name of religion that she witnessed made her acutely aware of the oppressive mechanism of Islam making prey of women. The restrictions imposed on women by laws of religion are validated by a fundamentalist patriarchal society without any regard for scientific outlook or genuine humanity. About two decades before Kate Millet (1969) demarcates the 'theories of sexual politics' which act instrumental in retaining woman disadvantaged and subjugated, Beauvoir makes the observation that the agents of patriarchy-legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists- collectively endeavour to prove that "the subordinate position of woman is *willed in heaven and advantageous on earth*" (Beauvoir, 1972, my italics). From her childhood onwards woman is made to believe in the supremacy of men and taught to identify her fulfilment in the subjection to the 'patriarchal gods,' i.e., father in her childhood and husband after marriage. The 'gods' chain her freedom and makes the domination appear as a shield of protection from dangers. But the price of 'protection' is often heavier than the damages which might have happened without the illusory fortification. The protector turns out to be predator, as Nasreen writes:

Man will be her tree / And provide her with cool shade, / Seeing the
generosity of man / Woman bows in respect. / The same man cuffed /
Her back in full force, / And just as a hawk / Ripped out her lustrous
eyes. (Nasreen, 2000, p. 56)

It is hard to assume that woman completely fails to recognize the sexual politics she has been a victim of for ages, but she is chained by the customs of patriarchal society which spares no pain in suppressing a voice of protest. Nasreen knows the dangers of criticizing the religion which is a principal architect in the design of gender-hierarchy, as Millett says: "Patriarchy has God on its side" (Millett, 1969). Religion maintains that woman is the 'initiator' of men into sexual sin, and she must face the consequences of her misdeed and suffer humiliation. Nasreen's poetry is an attempt to expose the bias of religious conventions that concoct woman's folly in order to facilitate man to establish his authorized domination over her:

He's my husband; dictionary explains,
He's my master, peer, lord, etc., etc.
The society identifies him to be my unique god.
My impotent husband has learnt very well
The familiar rules of domination.
He craves much to set forth for the enlightened realm of heaven
He longs for fruits, coloured drinks and delicious food
He desires day and night
To bite and such and lick golden body of a fairy. [...]
And I, a maiden most naïve,
Alone, all alone in the adorned garden of paradise
Gaze at the blatant adultery of man
And burn eternally in the tormenting fire of hell. (Nasreen, p. 126)

Notwithstanding her affliction, woman can not fully express her agonized mind because of her inability to talk. The silencing apparatus of

patriarchy seems strong enough to render women's voice unheard when she shouts, make her pen falter when she writes of her wounds, put her leg into chains when she advocates freedom. Nasreen's autobiography is an honest record of what she has witnessed within her family as well as in her friends-circle-the hideous and unabashed nature of patriarchal ideology which both coerces and coaxes woman in order to maintain her subordination. There is protest in Nasreen, as she writes: "I have broken the chains, and wiped out/From beetle-leaf the lime of custom" (Nasreen, 2000, p. 5), but it does not impart to her poetic credo a radical overtone as she is painfully aware of her limitations as a Third-world woman with finite potential. There is much hatred gathered in her poetry against men from different levels of society which reveals the 'subjective' emotion of Nasreen. They emit out of a sense of suffering she has been a victim of at the family level and the great male-dominated world outside. The poet-persona sometimes speaks from its own locus of self, sometimes in the guise of another woman which, however, does not render it impossible to identify her behind the mask. In both cases, the female self is one which experiences torture, exploitation and repression. The sense of betrayal in love manifests itself as a strong emotion in Nasreen, as evident in these lines:

I've lost my youth in love and non-love
 Nothing except dust and pebbles have I assembled.
 I search the incense of my teenage days
 I search and search and at the end of my search
 Only emptiness gathers round my eyes. (Nasreen, 2000, p. 31)

But the enigma in Nasreen's early poetry is that notwithstanding its hatred for and accusation of patriarchy a number of her poems seek love among the shell of that nefarious territory which is responsible for the soul's tragic plight. Seldom has she been successful in finding a way out of the orbit she is placed in as her born-destiny. The heart gone astray with pangs of a futile love seeks refuge again in the very emotion's odorous bower. A number of Nasreen's love poems breathe this strange emotion; they bear the mark of a childish innocence still residing inside her poetic heart which yearns for the unattained love. Nasreen writes in a poem:

If pursued by con-lovers just once / I forget the plaintive song of old days
 / Forget cloudy sky, interminably long nights. / If summoned just once /
 Forgetting everything I approach to new blunders. / If loved only once /
 Forgetting everything I, a foolish maiden burst in tears. (Nasreen, p. 33)

Nasreen is often seen longing for the unsuccessful love without calculating the price she might have to pay for. In such a desperate yearning she invokes the bleakest of dooms to befall on herself so that she can earn her lover's sympathy which she can't attain in her health:

Let me possess by some incurable malady / Or be my hands and legs
 violently severed off by truck, / Bullets in the liver / Or kidney damaged, /
 Paralysis, or blood-cancer.
 I'll embrace any ailment if you come to me / If you tend my messy hair or
 forehead with your fingers / If you sit by my side, and touch my slender
 hand with utmost care. (Nasreen, p. 129)

Nurtured in a patriarchal culture Nasreen finds it difficult to move

beyond its influences because, willy-nilly, she has grown up to assimilate its customary practices. There is a sense of betrayal, there is regret of love, there is nihilistic tendency too, but still much of Nasreen's early poetry reverberates with overindulgence in romantic-melancholy love. Steeped in traditional milieu of love poetry it is passionate, and often frank in its treatment of sex, but the poet's intention of breaking the codes of gender hierarchy remains largely unattained. The romancing of a deceived, deluded heart bemoaning the very passion that propelled its desolation and wretchedness is an apparently odd but marked presence in Nasreen's corpus. In fact, the paraphernalia of language used by the poet are also patriarchal constructs, and, as the second-wave French feminists hold, the complicity between the two does not allow a woman to realize and demonstrate her actual condition. The psychological trauma of the betrayed soul seeks solace in another, resurrected relation in its almost impossible dream of moving out of the humiliation and neglect it experienced previously:

When I look at you / I wish again to begin my life from the beginning. /
When I look at you / I wish to die, transform into holy water after death /
So that you might touch the water at a moment of your thirst.
(Nasreen, p. 123)

III

Notwithstanding her strong disdain for the present social order Nasreen is an obvious product of the ideology of patriarchy and as a domicile of this society cannot dissipate fully its shrewd manipulation. Caught in the myriad operation of ideology that takes prominence in 'hailing' the individual to assume a role it becomes exceedingly difficult for that self to discern the motivating forces of ideology because it functions concealing its real motifs. Althusser succinctly defines ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1970), which envisages the illusion under which Nasreen writes her love poems. The suffering resulting from her sense of being a prey of a ruined yet forever tormenting love, and a simultaneous quest for relief from it are juxtaposed in Nasreen who nonetheless cannot distance herself from its disconcerting influences. In the wilderness of hopeless romance Nasreen seeks live-giving water. Her somewhat-ambiguous reaction to love is apparent in these lines:

You are a scoundrel, an epithet of infidelity,
I'm aware of all your promiscuity.
Yet, out of loneliness, I move towards you
Make myself filthy again and again
Sink in the dirty water to be willingly scandalized
[...] People mistake it to be love. (Nasreen, p. 24)

The 'mistake' turns out to be that of the poet occupied by chimera and not of people around her. But, then, how to achieve love that is free from gender-hegemony? Is it at all possible to rise above gender discrimination in a heterosexual relation? Not all feminists look for a homoerotic romance to celebrate her womanhood in female bonding. Even within feminism a debate centers the return of hierarchy—which is supposed to be broken—in 'butch & femme' roleplay. Nasreen cannot be

identified with lesbian feminists not does her oeuvre exhibit theoretical diligence in her early writing although a sense of sisterhood with oppressed women is perceived. But, once again, what seems surprising is her sympathy with her mother as someone neglected and disgraced within family which falls short in comparison with her reverence for her doctor father:

Mom's life never attracts me a bit, papa's life does. Papa has immense power. If he wishes he can make us starve, if he wishes he can provide us all the happiness; if he wishes he can frighten the entire household with his fiery anger, if he wishes he can appease us with mild laughter. Nothing in our family happens at mom's will. Mom's world is too small. Torn saree mosquito-net torn quilt torn bed-sheet; spending days in blowing wind at earthen oven her life is devoid of the luxuries of hair-oil and soap. (Nasreen, 2002, p. 45)

Beauvoir is of the opinion that woman has no history of her own; her plight is not conditioned by "a historical event or a social change" (Beauvoir, 1972). Rather, she lays the blame on woman for her own subordinated condition: woman lacks any organized movement which is a result of her often self-contained life "dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men" (ibid). In fact, woman has never been a 'subject' for she is not only blinded by the ideology that endows her with 'normative' social roles (e.g., as sex-object and agent of procreation), but seldom cares for the attainment of reciprocity in the relation she lives in. Hence, the perpetuation of woman's subordination, which becomes strength to man, as Beauvoir says, "the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women" (ibid). Nasreen writes of her 'destiny' of sleeping with a 'eunuch' in a sexually unsatisfied marriage which is devoid of love and mutual care (Nasreen, p. 22). The man nonetheless yields power over her to express his superior:

At my head November's moonbeams / Sit wide awake, when keeping my head on his lap / The eunuch turns me on like sizzling fire / And goes to sleep. / Out of terrible thirst my entire body / Touches his cold, motionless stature and cry, / Asking in vain for a drop of water. (ibid)

IV

To read Nasreen's early poetry is often a disappointing venture which destabilizes the requisite balance of 'female' mode of writing as expected by an erudite feminist reader. The mode of writing her poetic oeuvre is built of exemplifies, according to Showalter's (1981) discernment, that of the *feminist*, frequently radical, but not the *female*. It lacks the disruptive jolts that confound the patriarchal construct of language; it distances itself from indulgence in the thematic shock that might have produced disturbing echo in the ear of the patriarch. Although Nasreen's plain style of writing has a natural flow it seems theoretically innocent to produce the exclusive 'feminine' effect of Cixous's (1976) vision. What is most frustrating is the immersion of her love poems in the very tradition it excoriates and declares to upset. The final achievement is not that it began its expedition for (to turn the gender-hierarchy upside down), but a sense of self-betrayal of the betrayed, a failure in reprisal, which turns

out to be banter of patriarchy at the face of Feminism. Labeled as Third-world feminist, Nasreen has sold well and own prestigious awards² for her literary endeavor but her conformity, at least in her early poetry, is distressing if one looks askance at her uncertain position which inevitably entails discomfiture. Mary Eagleton's (2003) concern that the most inquiring of theorists are commoditized and "firmly ensconced at the heart of the (phallogocentric) academy" (p. 126) to the de-marginalization of no feminist concern implicitly put into question the form that creative writing espouses in the name of 'feminist' writing. Taking into consideration the milieu of Nasreen's early poetry and the values it endorse one can hardly differ from Beauvoir who said "If women seems to be inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change" (Beauvoir, 1972).

Endnotes:

1. These lines occur in "Love among the ruins." For the full poem, see Browning.
2. Details about Taslima Nasreen's works and awards can be found at her official website: <http://taslimanasrin.com/>

Note On Translation:

All the excerpts from Taslima Nasreen are translated from Bengali by the author of this article for academic purposes. However, a number of books by Nasreen which have been translated in English and more than a dozen other languages to wide popular and critical success are available in India.

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