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**Shodh, Aparpakkha and Bhromor Koiyo Giya: Reading Taslima Nasrin's
Clashing Notions of Tradition and Modernity**

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Article Received:09/4/2022,

Article Accepted: 23/05/2022,

Published online: 25/05/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.5.09

Abstract:

Taslima Nasrin, one of the most scintillating radical feminists of the contemporary times in South Asia, is an overwhelmingly powerful and uncompromising voice of resistance to oppression, subordination and demonization of the 'soft sex' and weaker section of the society. The entire oeuvre of her literary works throw concentrated reflective light on how the voice of women and the poor is silenced and throttled. She portrays modern, educated 'new woman' in her novels as protagonist capable enough to subvert tradition and traditional impositions on women.

This paper is an attempt to analyse and understand the clash between tradition and modernity as reflected in select novels of Taslima Nasrin. Hence, Nasrin's novels such as *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, *Shodh* and *Aparpakkha* are discussed with marked emphasis on the clash between tradition and modernity which these novels focus upon. Nasrin's concept of feminism has also been touched upon to shed light on her notion of forming a society free from male dominance. The research paper being qualitative in nature, employs close textual analysis as methodology.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Hybridization, Culture, Society, Hegemony, Modernity

Introduction

Taslima Nasrin, popular as 'Female Salman Rushdie,' had a meteoric rise in the 1990s through her blockbuster and statistics-studded novel *Lajja*. A doctor-turned novelist, columnist, autobiographer and poet all at once, Nasrin hails from Bangladesh and her series of deliberations and publications carved a niche for herself among the most prominent South Asian novelists of the contemporary times. Nasrin's novels exhibit a staggering clash between tradition and

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modernity with regard to society and societal norms. Tradition and modernity rarely interacts, and Nasrin avers that modernity through its undisputed and proven charisma can overpower tradition. Unscientific tradition pulls the society backward, while modernity adds momentum to the progress of the society. She opines that the society is dominated by man and therefore the societal rules and customs are pro-man with shameless negligence to women.

Nasrin believes that modern society should leave no room for suppression of women, superstition, blind faith, belief in stale and unfounded things. Modern age is the age of science and reasoning necessitating a critical understanding, a rigorous scrutiny of religion, culture, customs and rituals based on blind faith. This paper is an attempt to analyse and understand the clashing interventions of tradition and modernity as reflected in select novels of Taslima Nasrin. Hence, Nasrin's novels such as *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, *Shodh* and *Aparpakkha* are discussed with marked emphasis on the clash between tradition and modernity which these novels focus upon. Nasrin's concept of feminism has also been touched upon to shed light on her notion of forming a society free from male dominance. The research paper being qualitative in nature, employs close textual analysis as methodology.

Understanding Modernity and Tradition

Modernity tradition scarcely go hand in hand. Beyond the perceived image of a modern individual created by traditionalists due to a different set of sensibilities of the growing up eras, lies the pragmatic individual. Modernity is reflected in an individual's outlook. A modern person has an outlook molded by the state of society he is witnessing. His ideas are formed in a globalized world – a world which talks of gender equality, extremism and terrorism, nuclear states, electronics and IT sophistications and bridging the class-caste-religion divides. The variations in a modern man's thought processes from the ones which are traditionally carried over are bound to exist, but they should not become the reasons of animosity. Rather a blend of traditional wisdom and modern outlook must be aspired for to dispel the anxieties created by any clash of ideas. Tradition on the other hand resists modernity. It encourages a set pattern that has come down to a person through generations.

Understanding Society

Society is a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the works that need to be done. Mac Iver says that society is a system and that it is a complex of social relationships which is always changing. C. H. Cooley defines, "Society is a complex of forms or process each of which is living and growing by interactions with the others, the whole being so unified that what

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takes place in one part affects all the rest.”(Qtd. in P.B. Kar 1994 138) Cooley’s definition makes it clear that society is an integrated whole and it is a complex process. According to Morris Ginsberg, “Society is a collection of individuals united by certain relations or modes of behavior which mark them off from others who do not enter into these relations or who differ from them in behavior.” (136) Ginsburg defines society as consisted of individuals and these individuals are united by certain relations and patterns of behavior. Parimal B. Kar quotes Giddings, “Society is the union itself, the organization, the sum of formal relations in which associating individuals are bound together.” (1994: 136) These definitions point to certain common traits of society. Society makes our life systematic and binds us through some codes/norms. It is within us as well as around us. Society not only liberates the activities of men but it limits their activities also. It shapes our attributes, our beliefs, our morals and our ideals. Emotional development, intellectual maturity, satisfaction of physical needs and material comforts are unthinkable without society. Society is a part of our mental equipment and we are a part of society.

Taslima Nasrin’s Feminism Clashing with Tradition

According to Taslima,Nasrin, “A feminist is a person who considers both man and woman as complete human beings and believes in equality and equal rights of man and woman.” She holds that “feminism means being in favour of equality in political, economic and social spheres between man and woman.” (2007b: 73) She claims that she is a humanist and her humanism makes her a feminist because, one cannot be a feminist without being a humanist. “Feminist”, according to Nasrin “is one who considers man and woman both as two complete humans and believes in their equal right.” (73) She further defines feminism as “a political theory as well as a practice engaged in the struggle of liberating all women.” (74)

Nasrin has a strong aversion towards male dominated society and hence she comes down heavily on the society and the patriarchs:

It is considered usual and natural on the part of a man to be strong and sound. But when it comes to woman, the same becomes inapplicable. It behooves woman to be weak, if a woman becomes or tries to be strong, it is not her quality, rather a drawback. This is the society where we live. Women are called peaceful and passive. This is believed to be women’s birth right. No, this is not a woman’s birth right. A woman is a complete human, and this is her birth right. (74)

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Taslima Nasrin beams with confidence when she declares that a woman is a human and she should be treated as a human and not as a slave or sex object. If a man has the privileges and right to be strong, there should be no denial of the same to a woman. Being 'passive' and 'peaceful' are male-defined qualities of a woman. Nasrin intensifies her attack on the society when she sarcastically says, "A woman's life is worthless, meaningless compared to that of a man. When a woman lives with her tormentor, she neither gets opportunity nor time to realize the meaning and purpose of her life. A woman has to keep herself busy day in and day out in nursing, satisfying and entertaining man." (75) Nasrin holds the society responsible for perpetuating biased traditions and rules and therefore, she stands against it. She pleads that society must change and encourage all positive changes so that a civilized, progressive and beautiful society in true sense of the term comes into being.

The prevalent status of women in the society makes Nasrin encourage women, "Let women become men, let there be nothing called woman anywhere." (87) She feels that it is only by virtue of being a man that he can enjoy all sorts of co-operation from the society, the state, the law and the family. In a male dominated society, nothing is as unsafe and insecure as a woman. Therefore, in order to have peace and security, a woman should be a man, i.e. she must behave like a man and do things which are so far regarded as only man's monopoly. Nasrin accuses society of being a storehouse of rotten customs and rules. She calls the society a place fraught with fanatics and patriarchs. She raises a strong objection against the rotten society being deemed as 'modern'. While debunking the society, Nasrin says "In this so-called 'modern' society, there are physical, mental, economic and all sorts of atrocities meted out to women. There are female foeticides, condemnation to women for being unable to give birth to a male child and a horrible life for a widow." (88) She gives vent to her feeling and wonders how come the society be termed 'modern' if there are all sorts of old, outdated, barbaric and uncivilized rules belittling and humiliating women all the time. Salman Rushdie is in tune with Nasrin and says that women's causes should be protected and their rights preserved for a refined and better society.

Taslima Nasrin detests war and man's role in it. She says:

Men wage war and plunder the property and valuables of the vanquished. They plunder houses, women and everything. This tradition has been in vogue since ancient times. Man never acknowledges the separate identity of a woman. Woman is man's personal property for ever and ever.... I am dead against war. Inhuman things like nuclear weapons have swept over the world. The amount of money spent after such weapons; if a negligible part of the same amount is reduced there won't be any problem of food, education and health care in the world... I may not like the US President D.D. Eisenhower but I agree with his

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statement, ‘The money required for making every piece of gun, every war happen and for flying every rocket, is stolen from those people who are hungry, do not have anything to eat, experiencing pain in cold and who do not have cloths’.” (2007b:63)

Taslina Nasrin attributes the causes of war to man’s thirst for power and moves her search-light towards the inner recesses of man unraveling a fact that the under dogs of the society fall prey to such ambition of the patriarchs. Society as portrayed by Nasrin in her novels is the breeding ground of patriarchs who think it is their prerogative to rule and lord over women. The unpleasant wars fought in an age of nuclear weapons take heavy toll of lives and these wars are the brain child of the patriarchs. Therefore, Nasrin nurtures an idea that if women are at the helm of affairs, the society would progress better and a new, prosperous society would emerge.

Clash of Modernity and Tradition in Taslima Nasrin’s Novels

Taslina Nasrin’s radical concept of society finds manifestation in all her novels. The female protagonists in her novels are mouth-pieces of Nasrin herself. They are all ‘new women’ with revolutionary zeal and always ready to face any eventuality. They throw challenges to men and prove to the society that social discriminations and injustices can hardly mar their potential, ability and zeal. Thus Nasrin tries to impress upon her readers that the society needs change in favour of women. It remains to be seen whether her arguments would hold good in tradition-bound societies. Taslima Nasrin’s novel *Aparpakkha* deals with a defiant woman’s obsession with freedom at the cost of social and moral values. Jamuna, the protagonist is an educated wife of an opulent businessman called Saber. Her conjugal life with Saber ends with her friend Pasha’s frequent visit to her. Thereafter she marries Humayun, an administrative officer in the same NGO where she was working. In Humayun’s absence, Jamuna becomes pregnant through her friend Pasha and decides to give birth to the child with his real identity. Humayun comes to know about her illegitimate pregnancy and consequently divorces her.

Society and its traditions and practices do not approve of Jamuna’s behavior. Society calls it a deviant behavior dealing a fatal blow to social rules and customs. However, Jamuna feels that society must not be an impediment on the way of a woman in realizing her freedom. She argues that the society expects her to be with Humayun when he was transferred to Manikganj because it is a tradition generally taken for granted in the tradition-bound Bangladeshi society and such traditions make women slave to the patriarchs. She interrogates “Would he (Humayun) be ready to go with me if I am transferred to some other offices?” (2008a : 36) Jamuna’s query opens up wide variety of feminist speculations. She challenges the society by rejecting the traditions. She revolutionizes the concept of society by encouraging women to come forward and deal a death

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blow to the so called traditions framed by men only to subordinate women. Jamuna's illicit relationship with Pasha cannot be regarded as sign of being modern. She blames the society of being stuffed with rotten traditions, but throwing a woman's body to a man to whom she is not married exposes Jamuna's immorality and unfaithfulness to her legal husband. The society is apt to plunge into utter chaos if Jamuna's idea of 'modern society' is practised.

Jamuna says to her sister Nupur, "If you have a strong will, you can easily stand against different cultures and traditions." (2008a:38) Thus Jamuna encourages her sister to revolt against the social and cultural restrictions because she feels that tradition and modernity cannot go hand in hand. Tradition would not allow women a life that Jamuna dreams of. In order to pave way for modernity, she is all set to sacrifice century old social values and ethos.

Taslima Nasrin's *Shodh* is a love story focusing on revolutionizing the concept of marriage. Jhumur, the protagonist is married to Haroon. Her pregnancy gives rise to suspicion in Haroon and she is forced to carry out an abortion which breeds intense antipathy in her mind towards him. She is bent upon avenging on Haroon by giving birth to a child through a different man. With this intent, she establishes physical relation with Afzal, a stranger and becomes the mother of Ananda while Haroon was in the dark about the betrayal. Haroon mistakes Ananda for his own son and pours out all his love on the only son and Jhumur is much pleased by this sight because she feels that she succeeded in taking revenge on her husband for suspecting her chastity.

Nasrin's protagonist destroys the whole edifice of fidelity of a wife to her husband. The society and its norms are advertantly and purposely disrespected in the novel. Avenging on the husband by way of treachery and betrayal cannot be deemed victory rather, it is sheer licentiousness and immorality. Society prescribes norms to regulate both public and private life so that an individual leads a disciplined and ethically right life; but Jhumur represents a new woman with a new concept subverting all that is ethically and morally right. Jhumur says, "Haroon's attitude to society is quite traditional and reverential, which is diametrically opposite to mine. I believe in a society where there is no imposition, restriction and unwanted dominance of one over another." (2007a:134) Haroon accepts the social norms and regards them as binding and worthy of respect while Jhumur rubbishes them as mere "meaningless practices of a society reluctant to change and march ahead." (95)

Clash of modernity and tradition is perceptible in Jhumur's concept of religion also. Religion is a social institution and Jhumur accuses her husband as well as her mother-in-law of being victim of "blind and irrational faith." She holds that religion is for irrational and uneducated

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people. Faith in religion retards progress of the society and therefore, religion should be abolished. In place of religious institutions, there should be hospitals, parks, secular educational institutions and orphanages. Thus Jhumur represents Taslima Nasrin both in words and action and tries to cause a devastating collapse to the very fabric of society. Critics are full of opprobrium with regard to Taslima Nasrin's tirade against society.

Bhromor Koiyo Giya is a novella focused on Hira's dissatisfaction over her husband Altaf's impotence and inability to satisfy her sexual demands. Although a handsome Engineer, Altaf fails to prove his manliness which brings about a permanent separation between the two. Hira leaves Altaf and develops illicit relation with Qaisar without being divorced from Altaf, her legal husband. Nasrin argues through Hira that the society makes ample provision for men to conceal their short comings. There are traditions to protect men from all embarrassments and inconveniences. The same traditions are used for women to suppress them. Hira cannot talk about her suffering because, the society looks down upon a woman who discusses sexual matters with others. Social norms are there to scorn a woman talking about her husband's impotence. Hira defies them and firmly holds that if Altaf has the right to have sexual gratification, she also has the same. Therefore, she walks out of Altaf's house to experience "orgasm" with Qaisar.

Altaf's attitude towards society reflects when in response to Hira's proposal to go to a Blue Film he says, "good and well-bred women do not watch Blue Films. Generally, women of loose moral watch such films." (2009:29) Altaf's conviction is that society does not appreciate woman indulging in activities that give a negative impression about her character. But Hira could not be convinced and she felt that Altaf does not reciprocate her love. Even her parents try to convince her that society does not like her behaviour and that she should live in tune with what the society appreciates. Hira's father says when she returns from Altaf, "How shall we show our faces to the society? And more importantly, what will become of you now?" (60) His query carries the apprehension in his mind that his image in the society would be tarnished because his daughter came back from her husband's house; and the society never praises such behaviour of a woman. Hira is defiant and says, "I won't go back to that house (Altaf's house) I will stay here, in my father's house." (60)

Hira further complains that she needs economic freedom, because she feels that as an individual, she should earn so that she is not completely dependent on her husband. Dependence on the husband opens ways for him to suppress and subordinate woman. When she is asked as to why she needs a separate earning, she replies, "Certainly I need to earn separately, since I am an

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individual.” (63) Thus Hira shows her iconoclastic nature and serves Nasrin’s purpose of a heroine capable of undermining society.

Regarding *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, Abu Obaida, an eminent critic says:

The novel is pornographic from the beginning to the very end. It is a shameless revelation of a sex maniac to satisfy herself and this is something strange in our society. Imagination in literature is one of the positives, but Taslima Nasrin’s imagination in the novel reduces her worth as a writer. (1996:132)

Syed Shamsul Hoque, an eminent poet of Bangladesh says, “Taslima’s concept of society is shockingly immature. She fails to understand the essence of society and her criticism of society is devoid of substance whatsoever.” (2004:65) Responses to Nasrin’s criticism of society as reflected in her novels can hardly be compartmentalized because, although the East almost does not relish her bizarre concept of society, the West on the contrary, is univocal in its appreciation and admiration of her works. It is therefore, no wonder when she received the coveted Simon de Beauvoir Feminist Award in 2008 and dozens of other international awards in recognition of her efforts to promote humanism. However, it is evident in Nasrin’s novels that she yearns for a sea change in the society so that a new society comes into existence from the debris of the old, out worn society of the past. The clash of modernity and tradition highlighted in her novels has been a great concern for the intellectuals and literary doyens. The way out as shown by Nasrin, to negotiate between tradition and modernity is to discard all social norms framed by men and accept women as their equals. Once women find themselves on equal footing with men, Nasrin believes that the conflict would end. One always has an iota of doubt whether women’s equal status with men would truly address the conflict. They would try to dominate men the way they feel they were dominated. The *status quo* would continue. There may be some more sensible ways to approach this conflict. Men must realize that women are often wrongly treated and that it is time to stop subordinating and repressive attitude. Women should also co-operate with men to find a plausible solution to the much vexed conflict between tradition and modernity in the society.

Conclusion

Taslima Nasrin’s fictional works unmistakably exhibit a natural clash between the world she envisions and the world she practically lives in. Nasrin’s female protagonists subvert tradition and embrace modernity which attracts social disapproval..Nasrin’s idea of a modern society in complete negligence of and disrespect to tradition is not generally appreciated in tradition bound society. Therefore, a blend of traditional wisdom and modern outlook must be aspired for in order

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to dispel the anxieties created by any clash of ideas. Being modern should not be mistaken for being oblivious of one's roots. Nasrin's idea of modernity and her inclination towards western culture clashes with how tradition bound Bangladesh views modernity. Jhumur in *Shodh*, Jamuna in *Aparpakkha* and Sheela in *Bhromor Koiyo Giya* deserve kudos for the resistance they put up against suppression and subordination; however, the strategy adopted for realizing their objectives at the expense of the social values clashes with traditional moorings of the denizens of Bangladesh.

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