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CROSSING THE THRESHOLD: AN ANALYSIS OF TASLIMA NASRIN'S "REVENGE"

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ABSTRACT

Literature has been a meticulous medium to project the human psyche, human feelings, desires and ambitions, noticed and unnoticed societal activities in concrete form. A writer presents in her/ his oeuvre what s/he sees and observes happening around the social atmosphere with a purpose and a prospect. The women writers too are the parts of the community putting their experience, their observation and their views regarding societal norms and practices which are mostly patriarchal. Taslima Nasrin, the exiled writer of Bangladesh, is a human rights activist who advocates for the freedom of expression and women's freedom writing against the oppression of women.

Nasrin's feministic approach is very much expressed in her novel *Revenge* (1992) in which she knits the story of a woman named Jhumur, an educated wife who registers her protest against the domestic violence inflicted upon her by her husband, Haroon. Jhumur is falsely accused of infidelity by her husband, who thinks impossible of a woman to become pregnant in six weeks of the wedding and cynically compels her to abort the child. This kind of physical and emotional torture brews the seeds of hatred in the heart of Jhumur and she decides to take revenge against this oppression. She crosses the threshold to cheat her husband by having an affair with her neighbor Afzal, an artist and conceives a child from him, whom Haroon believes as his own child and in this way she completes her revenge though unconventional but in her own way. The novel is told in an angry and bitter manner, but not in self-pitying voice. Jhumur fights as an empowered woman in a society which is very much orthodox, hypocritical and male biased that believes in suppressing the voice and identity of women. My paper will discuss and explore in this context how Nasrin allows her protagonist to fight for justice by crossing the threshold no matter if it is a wild justice.

Keywords: Revenge, Crossing the threshold, Domestic violence, Patriarchy, Protest, Empowerment.

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Literature has been a meticulous medium to project the human psyche, human feelings, desires, ambition and noticed and unnoticed societal activities in concrete form. A writer presents in her/ his oeuvre what s/he sees and observes happening around the social circle with a purpose and a prospect. The women writers too are the parts of the community putting their experience, their observation and their views regarding societal norms and practices which are mostly patriarchal. They write, primarily, on women's issues, their position in the domestic territory, how they are treated by the family members, what are the means and reasons of their subversion that perpetuate women as "other" denying their "self". The Indian woman writer, Shashi Deshpande, in her article "No (Hu)man is an Island" says that "women are neither inferior nor subordinate human beings but one half of the human race. I believe that women (and men as well) should not be straight-jacketed into roles that warp their personalities, but should have options available to them". However, the women have been "straight-jacketed" into roles that has warped their personality turning them into the stories of victimization. But this story of victimization does not take place only outside but also within the liminal periphery of the "threshold" which restricted woman's place in family and society. Taslima Nasrin, like most of the South Asian women writers, talks boldly against the patriarchal system that perpetuates gender discrimination and violence against women in society.

Taslima Nasrin is an exiled Bangladeshi writer who has been writing about the stories of victimization of women in what Townsend and Momsen termed as the "classic patriarchal belt". She is a human rights activist who advocates for the freedom of expression and women's freedom. Famous for her master piece *Lajja* (1993) she has been acclaimed with numerous awards like Ananda literary Award, Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thoughts etc. for the literary contribution as well as the effort in enriching the world peace through her secular humanism. Her name is not unknown in the field of literary writing where she, outspokenly, writes about the oppression of women within the south Asian homes by the male oriented society. She argues that the cultural norms and traditions are set solely by men who have been in the practice of mastering over women and therefore, their area is confined within the threshold which is associated with a place of nurture, family solidarity, domestic ethics, in which the woman plays a determining role, while, the "world beyond the threshold is an unknown arena full of male activities concerning business, trade, politics and administration". Malashri Lal writes:

The threshold is a real as well as a symbolic bar marking a critical transition. Men have traditionally passed over the threshold unchallenged and partaken of both worlds, the one within and the other 'without'. Women have been expected to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries of home. (12)

In South Asian literature home is interpreted as a site that evokes emotions, sentiments, memories with its familiar, safe and protected boundary. However, the site fails to evoke these traits if the relationship of its inhabitants i.e. man- woman relationship is disrupted by the violation of one's right by the other on the basis of gender. It is a general concept as well as historically a fact that woman is treated as "other" inferior to their male counterparts in society. Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* describes that women were politically and socially oppressed by a patriarchal system that used sex for the purpose of domination. And, therefore, in South Asian literary horizon the contemporary women writers like Kamla Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Tehmina Durrani, Kamila Shamsie, Taslima Nasrin etc. started their voyage to redefine the position of women in the male oriented world. The life for women has not been easy in patriarchal social structure; however, the Indian sub-continental women are found more tight-rope in the tradition due to complex structure of the family. Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Sue clarifies women's position of the Indian Subcontinent:

It's hard for women everywhere and a little harder for Indian [sub- continental] women because the family really does claim you. It's not just the immediate family; it's the extended family, and most of the family duties are taken over by women. The men are the pillars of the family, but the work, including the emotional network and the bonding and all these things like bringing the family together—it's all done by women. (131).

This paper that I have written is discussed in the light of south Asian family structure in which a woman is constructed to sacrifice her individuality, her choices, her self-respect for the male members of the family and how a woman strives to assert her identity, to give dignity to the image of a woman and resists the domestic oppression forced against her by crossing the threshold.

Taslima Nasrin is a feminist reading and writing about women. The central trope of her writings tends to be the construction of gender and patriarchy in which she places the struggle and conflict of her women protagonists and their emergence as empowered individuals. Her novels provide a platform to understand the causes of women's subordination, the stereotypical roles allotted to them, the abuses that they encounter at social and domestic domain and how the women instead of giving up everything come out strongly against the odd circumstances. Her feminist approach is very much expressed in her novel *Revenge* (1992) in which she knits the story of a woman named Jhumur, an educated middle class wife who registers her protest against the domestic violence inflicted upon her by her husband, Haroon. Jhumur is falsely accused of infidelity by her "beloved" husband, who thinks impossible of a woman to become pregnant in six weeks of the wedding and cynically compels her to abort the child. The community, through social, economic, religious and cultural institutions, privileges husband with the mechanism for perpetuating his control over wife's sexuality, mobility and labor. However, this kind of physical and emotional torture brews the seeds of hatred in the heart of Jhumur and she determines to take revenge against this oppression, the narrow minded male concept of virginity. She crosses the threshold to cheat her husband by having an affair with her neighbor Afzal, an artist and conceives a child from him, whom Haroon believes as his own child and in this way she enacts her revenge though unconventional yet in her own way.

Nasrin's most of the works revolve around the theme of domestic violence, the universal phenomena and one of the most pernicious method adopted by a patriarchal social order to keep women subordinate. It is a bitter truth of the so called civilized society prevailing from the ages always overlooked and invisible because of the belief that whatever happens within the four walls of a house is a "private" issue and any interference in it was regarded as the break of the privacy of the person. However, the issue of domestic violence was taken into account with the emergence of women's movements with the opinion that what is personal is political and this kind of violence implies the misuse of power. Ameer Sultana in her article "Battered in the Safe Haven: Women and Domestic Violence" writes that the "patriarchal ideology perpetuates women's dependence and replicates itself through violence in the private domain, thereby men try to control or deny women's equality both in the public and private sphere" (43). The novel is told in an angry and bitter manner against this myth of male superiority but not in self-pitying voice. Haroon tries to control his wife's sexuality and motherhood whereas Jhumur struggles like a caged bird fluttering her wings in a society where women are kept in veil, where they are not allowed to call the name of their husbands, and have no independent identity. It looks as if a woman has no right over her body, her womb. No matter how much a woman suffers physical and mental agony it is the man who decides whether the child has to see the world or not and she is not required to be the decision maker about reproductive system. The baby was not only of Haroon but also hers yet she was his wife and therefore contracted to do what the husband commanded to no matter the accusation held no ground of truth consequently the mental trauma that she passes through due to forced abortion is revealed pathetically, "it was as if I was shrouded in a fog of silence. All feeling in my sinews was suspended, my body like mist beneath skin and bones, as if I no longer existed but had escaped from the prison of the physical to some obscure realm beyond human reach" (74). At this stage the all times created myth about the sanctity of husband- wife relationship looks like an illusion devoid of any love and care. His relationship with his wife more or less directs towards the relationship between master and slave where the former inclines to rule over the latter.

Nasrin's emphasis has been in propagating the secular and democratic ideals that every individual must have independent identity, self and dignity without any discrimination based on gender but this male biased society believes in suppressing them. She paints the true picture of the patriarchal mentality where even the educated husband like Haroon starts doubting about his wife's fidelity at not finding the blood stains over the bed sheet, that discloses a man's desire to have a woman as an object of pleasure and not as a

true companion. How ironical it is that a man desires for a virgin girl as his wife and takes the first night blood as the only testimony of virginity whereas this is no reliable method of judging one's chastity. This is the reason that when Jhumur gets pregnant within the six weeks of the marriage he blatantly points his finger at her character, "how would I know whose baby you had in your womb when you entered this house! You were in such a hurry to get married! You gave me no time to think" (66). It is pity as well as ridiculous that the husband, who loved his wife, gets suspicious at her immediate pregnancy, compels her for abortion and again starts caring and loving her. It is hard to believe masculine mentality that suspending all feelings and emotions of a woman can use her as a reproductive machine. If he had doubt about her constancy he could have turn her out of the house but he prefers to cleanse her womb as if the womb was corrupt not the woman he loved and more than that it is not the woman that he loved rather her body. Nasrin's protagonist stands against this kind of hypocritical approach of the male society and starts condemning it. That seems to be the reason Jhumur, who was brought up to believe in just one kind of female destiny—marriage and domestic adornment, neither leaves her husband, unlike the protagonist of Anita Desai's novels, nor stays with Afzal, rather chooses to take perpetual revenge against her husband by conceiving and carrying someone else's child that would always remind her of her husband's tyranny and give her some kind of sense of redemption from the guilt that she did not fight to save unborn child.

One of the recurring themes of Nasrin's novels is the search for true love. Her woman strives to seek true love, yearns for it, consume it and enjoy it. For some time she believes her journey for love is completed and she has achieved it fully but the moment she desires to dive deep in the valley of love she finds that it is her body that is loved not her "self", her mind, her imagination, her choice and the dignity of being an individual. In fact, she is not accepted with the dignity of a woman and as an individual entity by her male counterparts whether it is Nilanjana in *French Lover* or Jhumur in *Revenge*. Jhumur yearned for love in life from her lover cum husband Haroon but her hopes are smashed in his careless irresponsible treatment and she feels compelled to be enchanted by the love stream of Afzal to fill up the void perpetuated in her marital life. Any man or woman bounded in traditions and norms would normally declare this step of Jhumur as illegal and against the values of domestic ethics but what would a woman do when she is maligned and perpetrated with emotional and psychological torture by her husband. She takes shelter in the arms of a stranger because Haroon accused her of infidelity, a blame she never deserved and worst of all forced to kill unborn child for no crime. Therefore, the seeds of revenge were brewing in her mind that tempted her to avenge by cheating him. While bedding with Afzal she ponders over, "I had guarded my virginity in order to bestow a chaste body on my husband on my wedding night. I had never desired any man but Haroon" (119). But what does Haroon return in exchange of her pure love except branding her as a faithless woman? Although one may question if she was hostile and full of vengeance against Haroon why did she not leave him and break the marriage tie? But we cannot forget that her attraction towards Afzal was not out of love rather due to absence of emotional connectivity in marriage and more than that in the South Asian society it is considered shameful to carry the brand of a divorced wife, "Though I'd my suffering with Haroon, I was enough of a traditionalist to believe that marriage was for life. I couldn't bring myself to live with the disgrace of divorcee" (124).

Jhumur needed to resist the disgrace and the oppression by violating the conventional core of domesticity that happens in conceiving a child out of the threshold of marriage which she believed "would be the fruit of [her] independence" (124) and "a protest, a way of taking revenge" (159) One may object her decision but she has her own logic in stepping towards this revolutionary act:

As I thought about my plan, I had no guilt—I was not a loose woman, I was merely taking my revenge, getting even. Except for this deception, I followed all the rules of society. I took care of Haroon and his family, kept them happy and well-fed while living a desolate, friendless existence. I had the right to claim something in return. (125)

She loved her husband enough but there was something else nagging at her, she had to find "release from the mental and emotional prison in which tradition had incarcerated" her (124). Her second pregnancy bestows her sense of triumph because it carried the seeds of vengeance well planned. She feels empowered in this act like a typical Taslima heroine who succeeds in saying "no" to the forces that annihilate the freedom

and dignity of the second sex and consider her as a two-legged creature living on earth to keep men sexually satisfied, "I had achieved a modicum of power in my marriage. Because of my pregnancy I was no longer the object of Haroon's anger and spite, and I had become pregnant on my own terms" (142).

Taslima Nasrin's way of arming her characters with weapons to fight back the evils enshrined in society is unique. She leaves no stone unturned to oppose the oppression of women and the weak in the hands of perpetrators of humanity. Her writings strongly criticize and unsettle those power structures that prolong violence against women whether it is social, political, domestic or religious. She allows her "heroines" to raise their voice for justice against the injustices perpetrated by the custodians of patriarchy by crossing the threshold no matter if it is a wild justice. Although, her writings have been targeted most of the time for being radical and many times branded as obscene expression of sexuality and yet she has created a unique space in the secular feminist world. Her assertions in the public and private spheres, her notions of equality and her feminist ideas and principles are reflected through her women characters in her oeuvres.

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