

Retaliating Socio-Cultural Injustice Through a Clandestine Confrontation in Taslima Nasrin's *Revenge*

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Abstract

Exiled Bangladeshi English women novelist Taslima Nasrin's *Revenge* is a transgressive novel narrating the antagonist's avenge against patriarchy and patriarchal ideologies of an Islamic society. Exhibiting 'Negative Female Archetypes' of Carl Jung, the anti-heroine is an animus dominated transgressive heroine possessing an insatiable quest for security who achieves it by repressing her 'feminineness' and becomes 'tricky' in handling her life's circumstances. Portrayed as a *scheming woman*, the antagonist exhibits her vindictive knowledge which is considered to be ethically immoral in the society in which she lives. Persecuting the patriarchal and religious ideologies though being victimized, the antagonist recreates her self-image instead of being adhered to as an innocent victim of circumstances. She accepts the reality that women have no power to react, intervene and protest. She withdraws from societal norms because of insecurity both at home and in society. The inherent competence of her reflects as a self-defending mechanism in waging a silent protest against the religious and patriarchal ideologies.

Key Words: Antagonist, Animus, Insecurity, Patriarchy, Religion, Stereotypes, Victim, Self-defense, Transgressive.

Introduction

Exiled Bangladeshi English women novelist Taslima Nasrin's *Revenge* is a transgressive novel narrating the antagonist's avenge against patriarchy and patriarchal ideologies of an Islamic society. Taslima Nazrin is a Bangladeshi physician and a writer who has penned novels, autobiographies and poems advocating freedom, liberty, fraternity between Hindu-Muslim relationships and women empowerment. Some of her writings include, *Lajja* (1993), *French Lover* (2001), *Amar Meyebele* (1998), *No country for Women* (2010), *Revenge* (2010) *Exile: A Memoire* (2018) and etc. Taslima Nazrin was awarded honorary doctorate from American University of Paris and has bagged many awards such as Erwin Fischer Award, Edict of Nantes, Kurt Tucholsky in commemorating her extensive contribution towards freedom against violence in the name of caste, creed, religion and gender. She was expelled from her own country because of her controversial novel "Lajja" which has criticized the Islamic principle followed in Bangladesh. Because of this, she has been leading an exile life in many countries such as India, Europe, America and USA since 1994.

Literature Review

Ramanath, Keswarwani in his paper entitled "Crossing the Threshold: An analysis of *Published/ publié in Res Militaris* (resmilitaris.net), vol.13, n°2, January Issue 2023

Taslina Nasrin's "Revenge" opined that how Nasrin consents her protagonist permission to cross the line in pursuit of justice, even if it is a wild justice.

Singh, Manjeet in his paper titled "Subjugation and Marginalization of Women in Taslima Nasrin's "Revenge" portrayed the image of subjugation and marginalization of women in Taslima Nasrin's novel "Revenge" with an emphasis on men's pride, incompatible marriages and conventional norms of behavior and patriarchal social system as the existent forces to diminish and exploit the women.

Mccay, Jade in his article entitled "Narrativising the "Monster Woman:" Heroines who transgress the Feminine script" insists that transgressive novel of women writers have the potential to create awareness to alternative models of femininity and to foster a resistance towards limitations of femininity.

Ganga Ram Paudyal in his article "Religion and Patriarchy in Taslima Nasrin's Lajja: An Intersectional Approach" shows how the novel Lajja portrays female characters and people of color. It also seeks to demonstrate the societal domination of these challenges by examining them from many angles.

Jhumur, the Antagonist's Quest for Recognition in the novel 'Revenge

Literature through ages depicts heroines packed with morality possessing sumptuous virtuous characters. Since generations women writers across the world have attributed their heroines with a lot of ethical values but their men are depicted to be malevolent giving all sorts of hardships to women. But Taslima Nasrin in contrary has portrayed an antagonist described with the characteristics of an anti-heroine who is vicious through performing anything for winning her own accomplishments and thereby becomes a transgressive heroine in a highly orthodox Muslim country. Taslima Nazrin has painted her antagonist with a tint of exorbitant chutzpah in sketching her protagonist. Jhumur, the newly wedded young wife of Haroon, is the antagonist and narrator of this novel. Jhumur has been put in a joint family of her husband Haroon who is very callous and indifferent towards his wife though their marriage is completely a love cum arranged marriage. Approach towards an amazing romance in proposing his love aided Haroon to win Jhumur's love. On contrary Haroon, as a husband has turned to be very strict unromantic rigorous Muslim adhering to all the protocols of Islam. Having dreamt that life would always be smoother after marriage also, Jhumur encounters an unsatisfied married life where she is compelled to abort her fetus conceived at the very earliest stages of their married life.

YADAV, RAHUL in his research article entitled "QUEST FOR LIBERATION OF THE SELF IN TASLIMA NASRIN'S NOVEL LAJJA" claims that Taslima's writings are generally written with an intention of raising questions against the stereotypical domination of patriarchy, religion, caste and gender:

The review of Taslima Nasrin's fiction shows that she writes with a motive and the motive is to raise questions against the misrule of patriarchy, religion and its oppression and gender bias. It mainly deals with the themes related with fundamentalism, feminism, home and homelessness and human relationships. The protagonists of her novels reveal tolerance, love and harmony and each individual has equal right to live on equal footing. Women were trained to be domestic and subordinate, but the women of today want to liberate themselves from the unwritten norms of religion and patriarchy.

In a patriarchal social framework, life for women has not been simple; nonetheless, due

to the intricate structure of the family, Indian subcontinental women are thought to be more tightly bound in tradition. In an interview with Sue, Shashi Deshpande clarifies the Indian Subcontinent's women's position:

Because the family truly does claim you, it's difficult for women everywhere and a little harder for Indian [sub-continental] women. The majority of family responsibilities are handled by women, not just for the immediate family but also for the extended family. While the women perform the work, the men serve as the family's pillars and are responsible for things like emotional support, bonding, and bringing the family together (131).

Jhumur's Existential Responsibility of Making Choice

The transition from independent-minded girlfriend to a more responsible Muslim wife has made Jhumur to be burdened with the oppressive duties of the new roles in the traditional Muslim family. The religious constraints such as covering the head, restrictions to visit parents, dumping all house chores, looking after the in-laws, preparing food for the entire family had made her to feel frustrated in her married life. Ineptness led her mind to be preoccupied with self-pity in considering her life filled with meaninglessness and disgusted: "my life had become meaningless, that I was disgusted with myself, and lonely." (R 100)

As a supplement to the thought of triviality, Haroon's negotiation of her pregnancy within six weeks of their marriage had intensified her depression. Jhumur's fidelity had been suspected by Haroon because of her boyish behavior during her college days. Because of Haroon's distrust in her pre-marital fidelity, she was forced by her husband to abort the newly conceived fetus. As a means to deviate from this domestic violence, she had schemed to have an illicit sexual affair with a young handsome '*sexual man*' (R 100) Afzal hoping to get pregnancy through him which may be a silent revenge against her husband. Every woman all over the world wages a silent / imperious battle against domestic violence and the survival strategies of individual women differ based on the circumstances and situations. The survival strategy of Jhumur is a silent battle of revenge which the victim, Haroon, is unaware of it. Sigma on the essay "Feminist Themes in Taslima Nasrin's French Lover" discusses that:

The institution of marriage, with all its expectations, falls heavily on a woman. However, when it becomes a battlefield between two egoistic individuals who are not ready for compromise, it proves that the fittest can survive; the strategy of survival varies from woman to woman; when she succumbs to the internal pressure of her own self and the external pressure from the society she either commits suicide or loses her identity. The brave one does not want to make a compromise and comes out of the shackles of the union. (3)

The antagonist triumphs by playing out her role as the respectable wife, while giving birth to an illegitimate love-child born to Afzal but not Haroon: "Haroon flood me with your sap . . . let your sperm run riot in my womb in a mad search for a fertile ovum. It won't find one, and you, Haroon, will never know! (R 132-133). The opportunist, Jhumur performs her adulterous affair surreptitiously so that her anger towards Haroon cannot diminish her love for him. Haroon was treated as a buffoon. Tiwari in her essay on "A Story of a Woman's Revenge – 'Shodh' by Taslima Nasreen" astonishes about the manner chosen by Jhumur in avenging her husband:

When we look at the revenge of Jhumur, a new face of womanhood is exposed. Jhumur cheats her husband so calculatingly. It is absolutely freezing. At the end, the same cruel husband who got her aborted, starts looking like a buffoon. She reduces him to being a puppet in the hands of her cunning ploys.

Trickster Jhumur had schemed patiently in winning Afzal's love and thereby satisfy her sexual desire when the whole family had concentrated Haroon's younger brother who was admitted in the hospital. Though unscrupulously and stealthily the affair with Afzal had been enacted, shrewd Jhumur did not indulge in breaking her marriage thinking of her life's security. Utmost care has been taken in her avenger against Haroon without leading to an anti-climax, "In my position as bou, I felt isolated and abandoned. Of course I was angry ... It seemed just as mysterious that I had barely hesitated to break my marriage vows ... Why was I not taking any step to leave Haroon and go off with Afzal? (R 123-124).

In the process of betraying her husband, her socio-cultural and religious institutions, a complete shameless manipulation can be traced from Jhumur. She never adapted to a sense of guilty in her attitude and her decision:

I had no remorse while I considered my strategy because I wasn't being a loose woman; rather, I was just getting back at them. With the exception of this falsehood, I complied with all social norms. I looked after Haroon and his family, making sure they were content and fed. (R 125).

Because of the egoistic husband who forsakes his wife for culture and religion, the deviated Jhumur is inclined to change herself by being detached from the traditional stereotypes of socio-cultural bond and familial bond. With the help of her newly found sexual companion, Jhumur had achieved extreme delight which would cause an unidentified pain for her husband as much as he caused to her. Though being moral to a certain extent, when opportunity comes, without hesitating to be deviated from cultural stereotypes, she has exhibited 'negative' facets of a woman for the sheer sake of physical pleasure and revenge: "As my sense of powerlessness grew, my anger smouldered, and I could feel Haroon move away from me. I felt the distance between us grow, and at the same time I found myself thinking of the handsome artist in the garden more and more." (R 96)

Being pictured as an uncompromised woman about the suppressing culture, Jhumur intended to be more successful in achieving everything without losing anything including her life's security as a wife. By being tricky, the triumphant Jhumur pretends as if not losing her morality though being amoral. And so, her personality has been transformed from socially restricted woman into one of a tricky feminine villains / anti-heroines in the history of English literature:

Though I'd had 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 divorce...I am content to wait things out with Haroon instead of turning to another man? For days, I struggled with my conscience, and at last the bou won out. I did love my husband, I decided. But there was something nagging at me. . . I would therefore not be offering him a body ready to conceive, but a fallow womb instead. It would be my pleasure to watch him wait foolishly, day after day, for his child to begin. (R 124-125)

Transgressive Elements in the Novel

Portraying forbidden immoral behaviors pertaining to culture and having illegal affairs form the crust of transgressive novels. Quest for self-identity, human condition, inner peace, personal freedom and sexuality are the main concepts of transgressive fictions. Many transgressive elements can be traced in the novel. As a transgressive antagonist, Jhumur plans to better herself, her surroundings and the urge to be unbound from the usual restrictions of conventional stricture followed in a particular society.

Transgressive fiction mainly focuses on characters who feel confined by the norms and expectations of society and who use unusual and/or illicit ways to break free of those confines. Because they are rebelling against the basic norms of society, antagonists of transgressional fiction may seem mentally ill, anti-social and/or nihilistic. The genre deals extensively with taboo subject matters such as drugs, sex, violence, incest, pedophilia, and crime. An anti-social antagonist who breaks social confines in illicit ways. (wikipedia)

Pre-marital independence enjoyed by Jhumur had been nullified after her marriage: “My mother and father had exhorted their daughters to become educated, to stand on our own two feet... But now ... it seemed I was bent over on all fours. I was merely an animal; I had nothing to call my own.”(R 89). Inner peace and satisfaction to achieve independence in sexual affairs have been achieved by Jhumur through pursuing Afzal’s love though being a married woman.

Quest for Significance and Power

Her ‘ego’ has been neglected by everyone in her in-law’s family including her husband, and so she became an attention seeking person. The thought of powerlessness had led her to wander in search of love through Afzal “...without marriage, I had escaped that tyranny. Desire led me to him. In the end I mortgaged my body to Afzal in order to purchase power. (R 157-158). Before avenging her husband, Jhumur’s heart had “been pierced by the stranger’s melancholy eyes”. From the balcony of her house, Afzal’s long hair, his ‘*languorous*’ eyes, his manner of sitting and smoking were watched by her who uncontrollably longed to meet him and to feel his warmth as a physical partner. Admired by his talent in painting, she had a sense of “desire rising” in her which craves for Afzal’s recognition in considering Jhumur as his lady love. Jhumur eagerly creates a situation to meet Afzal. Her head’s covering was made to slip off from her head allowing Afzal to admire her charisma with more intensity. Not only physical appearance, in terms of love and affection also, Jhumur was disappointed when comparing Afzal with Haroon that her husband “had never relaxed and let himself go like this since our marriages”. (R 99)

Insignificance and death caused by societal strictures, fabricated her to achieve omnipotence by becoming a trickster in betraying others for accomplishing the venture. Women characters of Nasrin’s novels endeavoured to liberate themselves from the subjugated status and avenging a husband in an amoral way has been considered to be one of the ways of liberation as in the novel *Revenge*. In the essay “Feminist Themes in Taslima Nasrin’s French Lover” Sigma, analyses that,

According to the Indian tradition, a relationship is deemed to last forever and to keep the concerned people happy, while encounters, where a man and a woman meet each other and find themselves indulging in certain actions (sexual) end only in unhappiness, regret and reproach, with no possibility of a compromise and happy solution. Because Nasrin’s women characters are all dominated by emotions, they are not ready to tune themselves to the domestic sphere ruled by man. Nasrin wants to show that her female characters have liberated themselves from their subordinate status. (2)

Anger against Haroon and the cultural stereotypes of gender predicaments dispensed courage in avenging against everything. By doing so, she assassinated her own reputation as well as her conscience by begetting an ‘illegitimate son’ for whom Haroon is not the biological father which is known only to Jhumur and god. The socio-cultural institutions of marriage, family, religion and gender has been deconstructed through her act of revenge against her husband who gains no insights into her sense of injury nor her revenge. : “In whose conception

you played no part”. (R 167) She was delighted in her new found power to cause pain to Haroon as much as he had caused her:

I made up my mind to be pregnant with Afzal. I didn't want to offer Haroon a body ready to receive his sperm. I wanted him to sow his seed in fallow land and wait foolishly, day after day, to see it sprout. I didn't have any sense of guilt about it. I wasn't a loose woman. I wasn't deceiving him. I was merely paying him back. (R 125)

Justifying Immoral Countenance of the Antagonist

Knowing very well about her condition as an Islamic wedded woman, Jhumur resolved to change her attitude rather than endeavoring at reverting the stereotypes of the world situation / religion / culture. In a venture to overcome the mental pressure and physical agony in aborting her fetus, “. . . I had to find release from the mental and emotional prison in which tradition had incarcerated me. Suddenly a shocking thought came into my mind. What if I became pregnant by Afzal, not by Haroon? My child would be the fruit of my independence.” (R 124). As a vent to her turbulent inner world, the betrayal has been enacted calculatingly which she justifies: “I do not harbor any regret for the manner in which I brought Ananda into the world. I took the opportunity to avenge the loss of my first child and the indignity I’d suffered as a woman.” . . . “This child was a protest, a way of taking revenge and its being infused with the pain and suffering of all the women I knew,” (R 186 & R 93).

Jhumur is a woman who refuses to participate in gender norms and the feminine script by decoding the expected cultural strictures. Her transgressive nature forms the focal point of the narrative of the novel. McKay, in her essay on “Narrativizing the “Monster Woman:” Heroines who transgress the feminine script” explains that,

The transgressive female characters are so important in terms of literary analysis. Novels foregrounding the experiences of transgressive women have the potential to not only create awareness to alternative models of femininity, but to foster a resistance towards current limiting definitions of “the feminine.”

The expected socio-cultural norms from a wedded Islamic woman made her to be confined. As a silent rebellion against the basic norms of the society, Jhumur enacted an anti-social performance. Being an anti-socialist, Jhumur had broken the social confines in an illicit way to be independent which actually requires punishment from the institutions of family, culture and religion. Tiwari in her essay on “A Story of a Woman’s Revenge – ‘Shodh’ by Taslima Nasreen” condemns the concept of Jhumur’s action of nullifying the human emotions such as love, affection and sharing:

Paradigmatically the novel enforces the traditional, conservative, and quite unfair view of women. It depicts a woman as secretive, cunning, revengeful, incapable of open and bold revolt, incapable of anything except carrying on a hidden relationship with another man in order to avenge the husband’s cruelty. The novel revolves around cynical sayings like ‘Don’t trust a servant, and a husband’ or ‘men go for physical relationships without love’ and all such absurd stuff. The novel does not elevate. It reduces. It zeroes down possibilities of companionship, love and sharing. It cuts off trust, the very basis of life. . . The novel tries to tear apart faith in human goodness.

Conclusion

The narrator, Jhumur seeks to overthrow the expected religious, cultural and historical cliches imposed upon women in a society. The elements of extreme wrath into the nature has

incorporated to the narrator though exploiting her female role by transforming herself an anti-heroine, and an anti-social female villain so as to satisfy her hunger in quenching her sense of inferiority through an attractive 'sexual' male other than her husband and finally converts that incident into an act of revenge. The story is completely inconclusive, as the punishment is not realized by the victim, instead it has become a mental tumor nagging the mind of Jhumur going to disturb her like an endemic disease. Morally courageous Jhumur had achieved her hidden purpose of winning multidimensional injustice in the name of revenge, by using her feminine artifices such as beauty, charm and sexual allure. Jhumur terribly fails to fit into the stereotypes of 'women' in Bangladesh, as possessing the highest instinct of 'evilness' in the Jungian dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil'. Taslima has heightened the facets of evilness through recreating Jhumur, her antagonists as an outrageous and immoral woman with an untold power of authority and villainy, at the same time projecting her with limitless possibilities of artefact a new niche for female villainy in Literature.

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