

Literary Representation of Women in South Asian Writings

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Abstract

*This paper scrutinizes the portrayal of women in South Asian fiction by female writers who have been vocal and have been advocating the rights of women in general and the rights and position of Muslim women in particular. How society treats women at different phases of life: daughterhood, womanhood and motherhood have been the point of examination in this article. The paper employs the radical feminist perspective as a theoretical tool to examining the represented position of women in novels of Monica Ali and Taslima Nasreen who belong to Bangladesh but reside beyond the national territory. Ali's *Brick Lane* and Nasreen's *My Girlhood* have been undertaken as the primary texts to study about the depiction of Muslim women. Women are not inferior to men in any respect. However, through socialization, they are made to feel that they are subordinates to men and their lives are incomplete without the support of men. This feeling instead of capacitating women weakens their will power and ultimately they develop a psyche that men are superior beings and therefore, they must abide by the dictates of men in both personal and professional lives. Both of the novels portray women as daughters, wives and mothers who subordinate men and stay obedient to their counterparts to the extent they are devoid of their existence. When they realize their subjugated position and know the world around, they seek for their individual identity. Despite such portrayals of women's subjugation and marginalization in patriarchy fueled by doctrines of Islam, some feminist critics including Hosseini assert that the pathetic condition of women in Muslim societies is because of political Islam. Therefore, the generalized view of Islam is questionable.*

Keywords: Representation, Subordination, Submission, Reliance, Independence & Identity.

Introduction

This paper explores the adventurous journeys of the female protagonists in Taslima Nasreen's *My Girlhood* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Both of the texts portray pathetic lives of women in South Asian societies wherein they are subjugated and forced to abide the dictates of male members especially fathers and husbands one after another. The protagonists Nasreen in *My Girlhood* and Nazneen in *Brick Lane* undergo worldly examinations to make them appropriate for patriarchies. However, the female characters do not only bear torture and discriminations but also resist against patriarchy for their individuality. Gradually, they become aware of their lives and get to know how the male-dominated societies treat them as commodities. After recognizing the true facet of South

Asian societies, they interrogate and use their rationality. Their pursuit for freedom leads them to exploring and creating their world imbued with choice and freedom.

Nasreen's autobiography, *My Girlhood* pictures the traumatic experiences of a young girl who is sexually assaulted by her uncle. The torture of the small girl is unbearable. However, she keeps silent because of orthodoxy in Islam. The story reveals the suffering of a woman during her girlhood. The painful condition of Nasreen resembles with the status of women in South Asian societies especially those communities which are guided by fundamentalism and religious fanaticism as in the case of Nasreen, the author who experienced adverse conditions during her childhood. She is traumatized at the tender age of seven when she cannot express her views. Sexual violence as represented in *My Girlhood* grounds in the fundamentalist ethos of Islam. In this context, Rimi B. Chatterjee remarks about the text:

This is the world where physical violence by both genders, to women and children, but never to men is an everyday reality. Most things are said with skin in this world: even Nasrin's relations with girl classmates and servants have a physicality which would make most of today's parents rush her to the psychoanalyst's. But in the hothouse atmosphere of domestic relations here, where maximum prohibition coincides with maximum opportunity, it is quite understandable. (1)

Hence, the critic demonstrates the problems facing by innocent women in orthodox Islamic society wherein they keep silent to protect the family honor. However, there is deep psychological effect on young children primarily girls who cannot share their experiences in the family environment that is dominated by the conservative norms and values of patriarchy. Deprivation and prohibition are imposed on women more than on men because the former are considered subordinates and the latter are the masters who retain supremacy in almost every aspect of life. Hasan Mahamudul in "Nasrin Gone Global: A Critique of Taslima Nasrin's Criticism of Islam and Her Feminist Strategy" states:

Embracing a Western secular ethos and denigrating and rejecting their religious and cultural base, a writer who attacked Islam from inside thus become 'alien to the Third World view of itself and complicit in the west battle against Islam. In return, they receive disproportionate recognition in the dominant media. Nasrin uses a stereotypical representation of Muslims, claiming that illiterate and uneducated people who have no scientific knowledge would believe in religion. According to her believers in Islam do not have any brain. When it comes to criticizing Islam many of her statements are charged with emotions, offensiveness and break boundaries of respectability and civility. (175)

Nasrin is adversely criticized and she is portrayed to be uncivilized. Hasan considers *My Girlhood* to be an anti-religious text. In his view, Nasrin has only pointed out the problems within Islam and has presented Islam as Western people love to receive it. Despite Hasan's remarks on Nasrin, she is condemned by the people who think that she has hurt Muslims' feelings and has insulted the principles of Islam. I think Nasrin has uncovered the root

causes of problems facing women in an orthodox society like Bangladeshi one. On a different note, Urbashi Bharat critiques of *My Girlhood* in her research article “Writing the Self: Taslima Nasrin’s Autobiography and the Silent Voices of Bengali Feminism”. Bharat asserts:

I believe that the violence of the response to Nasrin’s autobiography is due not so much to its perceived attacks upon Islam but rather to the discomfort and the fear caused by the way she asserts her right to construct her selfhood herself, by her refusal to accept the patriarchal norms of a society unable and unwilling to accept a woman who with searing honesty exposes male exploitation and oppression in everyday familial relationships in her own life. (215)

Bharat’s reading of *My Girlhood* unearths the endeavors of Nasrin to seek for her subjectivity in the society guided by patriarchal norms and values. The women including Nasrin are treated as consumable goods and accordingly, their counterparts take over them. The state of subjugating women triggers consciousness of Nasrin who can think and seek for her identity in the world led by the fundamentalist version of Islam. Of course, religions including Islam foster patriarchal norms and values which are as tools to retain the dominant position of men in society. Nasrin and Naznee have challenged all these complexities imposed on women in both Nasreen’s *My Girlhood* and Ali’s *Brick Lane* respectively.

Analysis

The paper unearths the journey of women in Muslim societies which impose rigid laws of Islam on women by confining them to domesticity. Archana Gupta in “Identity and Self-Representation in Taslima Nasreen’s *My Girlhood*” has examined Taslima Nasreen’s *My Girlhood* that moves around the growing awareness of gender subordination and female victimization in Bangladeshi society. The novel, an autobiographical writing narrates the story of a young girl’s pursuit for her personal space which she is deprived of. Taslima Nasreen’s pursuit for love and independence gets over in her search for identity “of what it means to be a woman” (189). Nasreen is a novelist who has been advocating for the rights of women from their childhood. The reflection of advocacy can be observed in her writing, *My Girlhood*. Gupta argues in her article:

Nasreen is an uncompromising critic of Islam as a religion that opposes women. Taslima Nasreen’s body was mutilated and her identity was crushed. She felt depressed and gloomy. The horror of rape taught Nasreen to detect lust in the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers when they looked at her young body. *My Girlhood* is also an account of religious hypocrisy and domination of women in the name of religion. Nasreen developed ‘childhood friendship’ with a senior school girl called Runi whom she found very beautiful especially her enchanting eyes. (189)

The victimization of women as represented by Nasreen in the text implies that brutality and infected mindset of men towards their counterparts in patriarchy. The way men are brought up and empowered in the society which is their kingdom as they generally perceive intensifies gender conflict which grows adverse and complicated for having a short and

immediate solution. The religion, Islam as being considered as the source of patriarchal doctrines to keep women subordinates to men so that the latter can exploit, oppress and subjugate the former for their vested interests. Nasreen uncloaks the real facet of Bangladeshi society that discriminates with women just because the societal affairs are guided by the rigid rules of Islam. Nasreen's focus on the beauty of her friend's eyes demonstrates her satirical perspective toward male gaze that seeks for enchanting eyes females. Islam as the ideological source of women's subjugation is the prime object of Nasreen's literary creation. Rama Islam in writing on Taslima Nasreen, entitled, *The Literary Encyclopedia: Exploring Literature, History and Culture* has presented Nasreen's personality, "Nasreen criticizes women who use cosmetics to increase their beauty and to attract me. She thinks that these women collude in their treatment as commodities. In Bangladesh, women sacrifice their dream, life and youth for their husband. Moreover, they are busy fulfilling the demands of men and cannot talk loudly and walk freely" (3). Nasreen's objection against the use of cosmetics by women is because they do this to please men who are the exploiters and suckers of women's blood. In other words, women are not the consumable products for men. Besides, women should not sacrifice their personal happiness for the sake of men who treat women as commodities rather than humans. Nasreen's resistance against extant domination of men in both personal and societal affairs sounds logical and acceptable to anyone who can ratiocinate. Her writing embodies both women's submission and resistance as depicted in *My Girlhood*. In the similar line of argument, Priyanshi Mathur has asserted that men enjoy freedom that they rape many virgins, go to movies, parties and five-star hotels and beat their wives at home. Mathur adds that Nasreen supported the decision of the Sri Lankan government at issuing an order for banning women's coverings on 29 April 2019. The reason for her support was she takes burqa as a 'mobile prison'. Although there was a lot of pressure from the conservative people against Nasreen, she boldly faced. The reflection of her courageous spirit can be observed in her writing, *My Girlhood* as well, in which she opposes male chauvinism.

There is a different perspective toward the position of Muslim women in accordance with the feminists like Mir-Hosseini. She asserts that Muslim women face a difficult choice early on when feminism is intertwined with the politics of colonialism. In the early part of the twentieth century, in the course of Muslim countries' struggles for independence from colonial powers, women become both carriers of tradition and symbols of cultural and religious authenticity. On the one hand, colonial discourses interpret Islam as incompatible with the central features of modernity including women's emancipation. On the other, anti-colonialist and nationalist movements take feminism as part of the colonial project that they reject. Those Muslim women who acquire a feminist consciousness at the time are under pressure to conform to anti-colonialist priorities (111). Mir-Hosseini argues that Islamic feminism is the unwanted child of political Islam. In fact, it does not emerge because the Islamists offer a democratic vision of gender relations. Rather, they seek women to return to the Shari'a and they endeavor to translate the shari'a principles into policy the patriarchal gender notions intrinsic in classical jurisprudence provoke Muslim women to increased criticism of these notions (112). Thus, the genesis of the gender inequality integral to the

tradition lies in a contradiction between the ideals of the Shari'a and the patriarchal structures in which these ideals unfold and are translated into legal norms. This perspective implies that women in Muslim societies are marginalized not because of Islam because of political Islam that treats women as second class people. Hence, the generalized view of Islam by both Taslima Nasreen and Monica Ali as portrayed in their writings underrates Islam. Rather their fictional representation of women in Islam especially in South Asia is stereotyped view of Islam.

In the similar line of argument, another feminist critic, Umme Al-wazedi in her article "Postcolonial Feminism" argues, "The Muslim world has always been portrayed through colonial harem, the veil, and the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman. Muslim feminists have been talking about feminism for several generations, particularly those from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa" (162). She interrogates the representation of Muslim women as she finds the portrayal exclusive and unjustifiable. The portrayal of Muslim women does not cover Muslim women from all the countries and continent such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and others. The selective representation can point out only debatable aspects of Islam. Al-wazedi explains, "Many feminist scholars of Islam feel that Islamic feminism is just the opposite of Islamic patriarchy—one substituting for the other—and these scholars reject the possibility of any coexistence between Islam and feminism" (162). In her view, the critics of Islam do not think of the brighter aspect of Islam although they should have considered both aspects fairly. The very line of representation can be observed in the writing by Monica Ali especially in her *Brick Lane*.

Ali's *Brick Lane* that was first published in 2003 portrays the life of Nazneen, the female protagonist who migrates from Bangladesh with her husband, Chanu to live in Brick Lane of London. She is at her tender age when she gets married off to Chanu who is twice older than her. However, she is consoled by her Amma that Nazneen is fated to lead the life on the mercy of the almighty. She believes in what she has been told by her family members including Amma and her husband later on. After reaching London, she is caught between two different cultural environments: Bangladeshi culture and English culture. She is puzzled and cannot decide which one is better. "When she had come [to England] she had learned first about loneliness. Then about privacy, and finally she learned a new kind of community" (*Brick Lane* 182). Coming to London is not her choice. Rather she has been brought to England by her husband after marriage. Therefore, she is obliged to abide by the dictates of her husband. She cannot decide what she needs to do. She just obeys Chanu. Even he wants Nazneen to lead her life as per his choice. The narrator states, "She did not often go out. Why should you go out? Said Chanu. "If you go out, then people will say", I saw her walking on the street. "And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. . . It is lucky for you that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck" (*Brick Lane* 45). Chanu behaves with Nazneen as if he were a great man with a lot of mercy and understanding although he is a hypocrite who imposes rigid doctrine of Islam upon his wife. He wants her to stay confined to domesticity and remains busy in household chores. His expression reveals his utmost bringing up in

Bangladeshi society that enforces men to control their women. As a woman, Nazneen has always thought of her relatives' choices and happiness.

However, her journey from Bangladesh to England awakens her and capacitates her to explore her individual identity as a human being. She grows mentally and starts questioning about her existence in the new environment. The new place endows her with the power of observing the world around rationally. The narrator avers:

Nazneen got up in the night and went to the Kitchen. She took a Tupperware container from the fridge and ate the curry cold, standing up against the sink. If she had a job, she would be able to save. And if she saved then they would have enough money to go to Dhaka . . . He would not know how much money there should be and she would be able to put some aside. (*Brick Lane* 187)

Nazneen ponders on her financial status which is much poor. She seeks to change it but cannot because Chanu does not allow her to come out. She is bound to the household chores. Their adverse economic conditions enforce Nazneen to think of the alternatives which can ease their life. Similarly, there is another instance that reflects on Nazneen's rationality. The narrator states:

There was a special dispensation for pregnant women. If she chose to, Nazneen could do nawaz from her chair. She had tried it once and it made her feel lazy. But it was nice that the imams had thought of it. Such was the kindness and compassion of Islam towards women. Mind you, if any imam had ever been pregnant, would they not have made it compulsory to sit? . . . What is wrong with my mind that it goes around talking of pregnant imams? (*Brick Lane* 69)

Nazneen questions the rules of Islam imposed upon even the pregnant women with fake mercy. She compares the situation of a pregnant woman with that of imams who made namaz compulsory for Muslims including pregnant women with certain dispensation. Despite her unwillingness and desperate condition during pregnancy, she is obliged to abide the dictates of Islam imposed by the middle men of the religion. Her hypothetical question uncloaks the hypocritical and discriminatory facet of both Islam and the middle men who rule Muslim women in one way or other.

On a different note, Nazneen's vitality is emphasized by Tawfiq Yousef in the article, "Cultural Identity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: A Bhabhian Perspective" who asserts, "The hybridity setting of the novel creates a good environment for Nazneen to develop a richer and more responsive identity that can respond to both her old and new cultural background. Unlike her husband, Nazneen understands the value of collaboration, assimilation and integration" (76). The capacity Nazneen possesses is the outcome of her journey from ignorance to epiphany. Her learning pushes her to being acceptable in the new milieu. Meanwhile, her husband fails to accommodate the changes in the new place because of his rigidity and conservative notion. Nazneen constructs her identity as a human being regardless of religion, nationality and ethnicity.

Besides Nazneen, other female characters in Ali's *Brick Lane* are portrayed bold and revolting who are proactive in accepting and assimilating in new milieu. Mrs. Azad expresses her views, "When I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business" (*Brick Lane*, 114). Mrs. Azad is mature enough to choose her life as per wish. She feels free and she is free in England. The expression implies that she is more relaxed in choosing her life in England than in Bangladesh. The depiction of Bangladeshi women reveals that they put on sari and veils that are the typical attires Muslim women wear in Muslim society. The contrast between English culture and South Asian culture demonstrates the degree of freedom on the part of women. *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary* edited by Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim mentions Ali's *Brick Lane* as a book that depicts:

. . . community which Ali conceives as largely self-contained, its chosen themes include the place of Islam which it is transposed to a secular society, as well as the complexities of Islamic thought, the experience of migration and the diversity of immigrant responses to the adoptive nation, systems of language and communication: the timeless question of what constitutes love, and the exploration of individual—mainly female—lives and spaces. (222)

The complications and challenges caused by Islamic thought that Nazneen experiences in London are portrayed in the novel. She represents Muslim women from South Asia who undergoes a cultural situation which they have never experienced before. The life of a female immigrant who does not know English and has ever been deprived of public affairs is narrated in the novel. Nazneen has not only been deprived of public life but also has had no access to recognizing selfhood. Her pursuit for individual identity is paramount in the novel. Murphy and Sim argue that "Nazneen's trajectory of increased selfhood through adulterous sexual discovery is a conventional narrative device, especially in the Western canon" (224). These critics also examine the novel through the feminist perspective. They state:

The theme of female emancipation through a growth in sexual consciousness is still relevant, especially in patriarchal societies, and it potentially gains a fresh perspective from being situated within a South Asian immigrant context in which a particular form of domesticity—again reminiscent of nineteenth-century social expectations of women as evoked in literature—is apparently enshrined. (224)

Ali's *Brick Lane* portrays Nazneen who seeks emancipation as women in patriarchal societies in South Asian context do want freedom from the caged state as metaphorically presented as domesticity. Their confinement to the household chores deprives women of public affairs. They are forced to the domesticity despite their intense desire for public exposure. The displacement of Nazneen from Bangladesh to England releases her from domesticity and capacitates her to the world open where she can start her own business of tailoring for economic independence. What is named adultery is the nomenclature by patriarchy to impose the boundary to women by confining them to marriage institution and

allowing them to have intercourse only with the defined male partner. However, Nazneen defies that dictation and has sexual relationship with Karim, a young man who consoles her mentally and satisfies her sexually. Their sexual and emotional bonding challenges the orthodox male-dominated society that curtails women's freedom and their natural right to sexuality as well.

Ali's narrative demonstrates the married life of Nazneen with Chanu desperate and desolate that seeks loyalty from both married partners. Nevertheless, the portrayal of infidelity of Nazneen in this conjugal life implies women's revolt—an outburst of suppression and repression of human feelings and desires—that emerges at the realization of her identity in London. Although her infidelity is considered impure and blasphemous in South Asian society especially Muslim culture, Nazneen does it for the sake of her individuality. She listens to her intuition and moves accordingly in her life ahead.

Conclusion

This article has undertaken Taslima Nasreen's *My Girlhood* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as the primary source of information to analyze the representation of women in Muslim societies especially in Bangladesh and in Brick Lane of London predominantly inhabited by Bangladeshi immigrants. Both of the novels have portrayed desperate and desolate condition of the women in patriarchy guided by Islam. Their depictions imply that patriarchy has been nurtured by the religious principles imposed on women to play subordinating roles at home and in society. In *My Girlhood*, Nasrin herself has been exploited, dominated and sexually harassed during her childhood and in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen has been married off to a man twice older than her. In both cases, girls have been forced to keep silent under the principle of Islam as portrayed in the novels. Nevertheless, the female protagonists in these novels begin to question the orthodox and illogical practices in Muslim societies controlled by rigid doctrines of Islam. The finding of the research demonstrates that all Muslim societies cannot be judged through a single parameter i.e. patriarchy. Only political Islam can be questioned as it has obviously put women to the margin and accordingly, the believers practice in their lives as portrayed in the novels by Nasreen and Ali. On a different note, both Nasreen and Ali have advocated for rights of women who are considered as commodities in patriarchy in South Asian culture. Their advocacy implies that women's rights are human rights which must be protected and for that women need to come to the front and stand for their identity as Nazneen and Nasrin do in *Brick Lane* and *My Girlhood*

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