

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author as Protagonist: Double Resistance in Taslima Nasrin's *Shameless*

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Abstract

The gamut of Taslima Nasrin literature may be arguably looked at as 'resistance literature', a term that has gained currency in literary studies following the publication of Barbara Harlow's book by the same name. The oppressive patriarchy of Bangladeshi society has made Taslima Nasrin a rebel who has risen to resist it through writings in such genres as poetry, fiction, memoirs and columns. Resistance is central to her fictional oeuvre that brings home the truth that it is the resistance against ills that makes them more visible than they otherwise would be. Her 2020 novel *Shameless* has come as a sequel to her landmark 1993 novel *Lajja* that has made Taslima Nasrin who she is today – a persecuted writer living in exile for more than three decades now. The sequel not merely continues the story of *Lajja* but also responds, through the craft of the novel, to the controversy arising out of the latter. The paper argues that Taslima Nasrin presenting herself as a protagonist in *Shameless* is, beyond being her foray into metafiction, a resistance against the narrative constructed around her. It is this resistance through narratological subversion that, along with the resistance against the hegemony of patriarchy and majoritarianism, constitutes the double resistance the novel documents.

Keywords: Hegemony, majoritarianism, metafiction, narratological subversion, patriarchy, resistance literature

Introduction

To create is to resist. To resist is to create.

- Albert Camus

The noted American academic and author, Barbara Harlow (1948-2017) has challenged the idea that art is apolitical. In what may be seen as a ground-breaking contribution to the theory of literature, she, through her 1987 book *Resistance Literature*, critiques the general tendency in the academia to project literature as being universalist. She sets out to foreground the historical specificity and temporality of literature. She further posits that there is a body of literature that defies the politically neutral definitions. It is this kind of literature that Harlow defines as resistance literature. Harlow, in her book, argues:

Whereas the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western literary and cultural studies, the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics. (30)

Harlow, however, owes this concept to Ghassan Kanafani (1936-72), the Palestinian novelist known to have applied the term 'resistance' while referring to what he specifies as a distinct genre of literature. Though Harlow's book arises out of her seeking to characterise the corpus of literature written under occupation and repression as a means of challenging them, the conceptual framework proposed by her may be seen as having ramifications beyond the body of literature of national liberation struggles. In other words, the literature that speaks truth to power may be read as what Harlow theorises as resistance literature. As Nida Arif says: "In her seminal study *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow drew attention to a body of literature that is written under occupation and with the avowed purpose of challenging it." (34) The Taslima Nasrin kind of literature can, therefore, be looked at resistance literature as her writings

confront and challenge patriarchy in a society under its siege.

This paper, in its study of Nasrin's 2020 novel *Shameless*, sets out to locate in the novel what may be termed as double resistance. Like other Nasrin novels, it documents resistance against patriarchal hegemony. However, unlike them, it registers resistance through narratological subversion. Thus, in the novel, resistance manifests through two ways – the subject as well as the narrative technique. Nasrin does the latter by becoming a protagonist in the narrative. Through metafiction, she uses both the content and craft of the novel to the end of voicing her resistance against patriarchy and majoritarianism on one hand and the severe backlash on her resistance in the wake of *Lajja* on the other.

Analysis

Art may not always be an escape from reality; it at times is an answer to reality. *Shameless*, the novel may be seen as an attempt by an artist to live in art the life that reality has denied her/him. Straitjacketed into a life of exile in an alien land under surveillance, the novelist seeks to live, literally rather than vicariously, in fiction a life denied to her in reality. Significantly, therefore, the novel is a classic example of fiction as resistance against the tyranny of reality. Far more significantly, though, the novel narrativises women's resistance against and refusal to be crushed by patriarchy. Nasrin has rightly dedicated the novel 'to women – who are not only unashamed of showing their faces, but also have no fear of what others might say'. The novel foregrounds both women's vulnerability and valour.

In 1993, Taslima Nasrin published the novel *Lajja*, that has made Taslima Nasrin who she is today – a persecuted writer living in exile for more than three decades now. Her 2020 novel *Shameless* came as a sequel that not merely continues the story of *Lajja* but also responds, through the craft of the novel, to the controversy arising out of the latter. The paper argues that

Taslima Nasrin presenting herself as a protagonist in *Shameless* is, beyond being her foray into metafiction, a resistance against the narrative constructed around her. It is this resistance through narratological subversion that, along with the resistance against the hegemony of patriarchy and majoritarianism, constitutes the double resistance the novel documents.

Shameless has emerged out of Taslima Nasrin's inescapable loneliness of being in exile. Nasrin is haunted by her past, particularly the tragic turning point in it following the publication of her controversial novel *Lajja*. She seeks to reach out to the characters of *Lajja*, to re-portray them. *Shameless* can, therefore, be seen as both a sequel and a response to *Lajja*. The Dutta family continues to form the focal point in the sequel novel. Their story shifts from Dhaka to Kolkata just as the author has had to change her dwelling place from Dhaka to Kolkata. The author shares the misfortune of her characters in *Lajja*. Both are forced out of their homeland. She, therefore, assumes a dual role, in the sequel, of the author as well as a protagonist.

In *Shameless*, Nasrin has endeavoured to create a third plane, one that blurs rather than binarize the planes of reality and fiction. The author and characters of a previous novel come face to face in the sequel and extend the conversation that informs the previous one. The issue of communalism, majoritarianism and patriarchy in Bangladesh broadens beyond the border to India. What is offered in the sequel is secular Nasrin's artistic concern for the alarming communalisation in the subcontinent in the wake of the demolition of Babri Masjid. While in *Lajja*, Nasrin documents the course of events leading to the tragedy of the Dutta family, in *Shameless*, she intervenes in them as a protagonist and helps save the victims from being lost to communal hatred, majoritarian violence and patriarchal repression.

Effectively, *Shameless*, is a novel by an exiled writer about exiled people. "Did Suranjan

feel the same way when he was driven to exile?" Nasrin writes in the author's note, "That was when I decided to write a new novel about Suranjan and his family." (Author's Note, *Shameless*) She, however, faces the accusation from Suranjan and Maya of having played havoc with their lives by novelising them in *Lajja*, by creating art out of their tragedy. While the author has earned money and acclaim, her characters have been forced into stigma. Rather than run away from them, Nasrin embraces them with the responsibility of making a difference in their lives by serving as an anchor to them. Thus, the real merges with the fictive to create the work of art that the novel is.

In terms of plot and character delineation, *Shameless* is a far more nuanced novel than its predecessor. While both broadly address the same issues, the sequel adds layers not to be found in the parent novel. The novel opens with Suranjan waiting at the door step of Nasrin's Kolkata residence. The protagonist of a previous novel crosses the line of fiction, as it were, and meets his author. Both are victims of persecution. The former is a member of the persecuted Hindu minority in Bangladesh fleeing to India for shelter and safety while the latter is a persecuted author banished for her anti-Muslim views from Bangladesh, her homeland seeking asylum in India. The Indian city Kolkata becomes their meeting ground where Suranjan's life of rootlessness and misery and Nasrin's life of exilic surveillance criss-cross. It is this situation launching the plot that makes *Shameless* a metafiction. Patricia Waugh, in her path-breaking book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, says:

In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between 'creation' and 'criticism' and merges them into the

concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction'. (6)

Thus, through the narrative technique of metafiction, *Shameless* presents a fiction that encapsulates the real and the fictive into a single whole.

The central argument of the paper is on why Nasrin chooses to become a protagonist in the novel *Shameless*. Clearly, it is a deliberate narratological subversion rather than mere experimentation. The sequel emerges as a resistance against what the controversy arising out of the parent novel has done to her. She has been unfairly punished for her freedom of expression. Post Lajja, Nasrin lives within the cocoon of the narrative created around her- that of being a blasphemous Muslim woman defying the religious code and therefore in exile under several fatwas on her. It is precisely to resist this repression that she enters into the narrative of its sequel in her real persona. If in the parent novel, the author rebels against fundamentalism as an outsider, in the sequel, she does it as an insider. Nasrin shuns authorial neutrality in order to make her political statement loud and clear.

The crusader against majoritarianism, religious fanaticism and patriarchal violence that Nasrin has always been makes her voice stronger in *Shameless*. She, along with the Duttas, realises that India is no better than Bangladesh as far as fundamentalism is concerned. Muslims are in India what Hindus are in Bangladesh. The contagion of communalism spreads across borders. Nasrin foregrounds the predicament of women in societies influenced by religious fundamentalism. All religions being inherently patriarchal, women are the inevitable victims. Zulekha, a Muslim woman suffers in India what Maya, a Hindu woman does in Bangladesh. The core politics that the novel addresses, therefore, is not Hindu-Muslim enmity but patriarchy. And it is through Zulekha-Mayu bond, their sisterhood that patriarchy is challenged.

In the ultimate analysis, *Shameless* is a novel about four women, Zulekha, Maya, Kiranmayee and Taslima Nasrin, the author-protagonist. While Taslima is a passive onlooker, though a concerned interpreter and Kiranmayee, a passive sufferer, Zulekha and Maya are victims who emerge as victors. The author being a character in her real self continues her fight for women's rights and reaches out to other women seeking to contribute to their wellbeing. Kiranmayee has resigned to her fate. She continues to be in the sequel what she used to be in the parent novel. Only, she has become more pitiable in the wake of the death of her husband. Maya's struggle for survival continues from the parent novel to the sequel. It is the character of Zulekha that gives the sequel the power missing in the parent novel. She shares the misfortune of Maya, both being victims of rape and brutish husbands. Yet, it is she who eventually helps Maya out of the abyss of her existence.

Rape, as the chilling manifestation of the power of patriarchy at its worst brutal, constitutes a central motif of the novel. Though Suranjan enjoys Nasrin's sympathy as a persecuted Hindu in Bangladesh, he is indicted by the novelist for deriving a strange vicarious pleasure from his Hindu cohorts raping Zulekha, a Muslim woman. The novelist portrays him as a confused male seeming to be in love with Zulekha, as if to atone for the guilt of his complicity in the rape inflicted on her. He is projected as a narcissistic male living parasitically on his mother, Kiranmayee and sister, Maya. As a sign of disapproval for the males of his kind, Nasrin leaves Suranjan on the fringe of the novel's plot, though he is a major male character.

Maya carries within her the wound of the brutal physical assault perpetrated on her by Muslim fanatics in Bangladesh. She blurts out before Sobhaan:

Several Muslim men raped me. Several men of your religion. I would have died;

they had thrown me into the lake. I don't know how I survived. Ever since then, I hate every single Muslim in the world. This is the truth. (231)

Nasrin, through her narratorial comment, says: "Maya was not born a Hindu; she was never a Hindu, but she became one the day she was raped. She was now a Hindu with all her being." (229)

Gender and religion are two potent weapons in the hands of males with which to crush women. Misfortune has trailed Maya from Muslim-majority Bangladesh to Hindu-majority India. She undergoes the trauma of being assaulted every night by the man who gives her family refuge in India. Casting her spleen on the entire male-kind, Maya tells Sobhaan:

Men are all the same, Hindus or Muslims. They're swine either way. They will inevitably drive women to despair. Your wife is suffering as a Muslim's wife; I suffered as a Hindu's wife. You're not suffering; my brother isn't suffering. He too left his Hindu wife to fuck around a Muslim woman. He is having fun too. He is now making a name for himself for being secular. (234)

Maya, nevertheless, surrenders to the lure of love offered to her by Sobhaan. She is tempted to give herself a fresh lease of life with Sobhaan. She looks forward to erasing her past and rewriting her life anew. She has also overcome her doubt of a secret affair between Sobhaan and Zulekha after their meeting. However, to the utter dismay of her mother and brother, she eventually decides not to marry. Though she tastes love for the first time in her life through her romantic attachment with Sobhaan, she is scared of falling prey to patriarchy once more in her life after having been forced to it on occasions more than one. She tells Zulekha:

Sobhaan is a fine man, but after the wedding he'll become my husband, and then he'll do all the things that men do as

husbands. If I marry him, I'll have to go through the same pain that his wife does now. (274).

Zulekha, a woman from the margin of society belongs to the centrality of the plot of the novel. A poor Muslim girl married off to a cruel husband, despite her looks and education is at the mercy of the social and patriarchal forces. To Taslima, the author-character, she says, "Your social stratum is quite high. You have no idea how we have to live on the lower levels. Your reality and our reality are quite different." (276) She becomes a victim of a gang rape, in the wake of which one of the conspirators, if not a perpetrator saves her life and evolves as her lover. It is Suranjan Dutta. She tells Maya why she got attracted to and finally frustrated with Suranjan, her brother:

I clung to that rapist brother of yours because I felt I was damaged goods, I had no value for society, I was dead, I was a worm in a drain, I was a heap of garbage. Why else should I want to link my life with your brother's? I hooked up with Suranjan out of hatred for myself. I had no such thing as self-esteem. But I don't hate myself anymore. Your brother's a chameleon: a rapist today, a feminist tomorrow. Ask him to see a psychiatrist. (252)

Zulekha has learnt the hard way how to move on in life, with purpose. She has been disowned by her husband and not owned very much by her lover. She says, "If your boyfriend runs away even when you're deeply in love, out of fear that he'll have to take responsibility, whom will you trust?" (253)

Zulekha has been inspired by Taslima Nasrin's writings. She has learnt, through them, that women can explore living on their terms without male dependence. She calls Suranjan a rapist even when she is not sure whether he was one of the perpetrators of her gang rape. To Taslima's query, she says:

Why should he not be a rapist? You wrote in *Lajja* he raped a woman named Shamima. When a prostitute is raped, no one calls it a rape. Just as no one calls it a rape when a husband rapes his wife. These two forms of rape are not counted as rape. You counted it. That's why I salute you. (278)

After being dumped by her lover, Suranjan, Zulekha gets more committed in her attachment to her hostel mates. Together with them, she establishes an organisation in the name of Bold Girls. It is an organisation built on and for female unity. Zulekha shares the ideals of Bold Girls with Maya:

Once this was in place, the women who were forced to be subservient, who had no choice but to depend on others, who had lost their identity, would no longer feel isolated, they would know others were with them, they had many shoulders to lean on, many hands to lift them from dust. (252)

Zulekha has outgrown men like Suranjan. Having lived a life of self-pity, she is now out to live one of self-esteem. Her determination has given a steady direction to the rocky life led not only by her but also Maya. If Taslima's books have shown Zulekha the way, it is Zulekha along with her Bold Girls who has shown Maya the way. Maya and Zulekha, both victims of patriarchy join hands in a shared journey beyond the clutches of patriarchy. They embrace the epithet 'shameless' that patriarchy attaches with women defying its norms, as they are bent on shaming patriarchy out of relevance. They eventually emerge as survivors of patriarchy, who, through their resistance against it, find liberation from it.

Conclusion

We, thus, can discern how Taslima Nasrin has used fiction as a site of narrativising resistance of women against gender, religion, and majoritarianism in order to attain the

identity and independence, deservedly theirs. *Shameless*, therefore, remains a record of resistance against both anti-women agencies and ideologies as well as the ages-long silence shrouding them prevalent across cultures in the world.

Equally significantly, what doubles the trope of resistance in the novel is the author choosing to be a protagonist in it. Beyond being an experiment at metafiction, it is a resistance against the severe backlash against the author in the wake of the publication of *Lajja*. Rather than being silenced by the price she pays for being vocal against the injustice meted out by her homeland to the religious minorities, Nasrin becomes doubly vocal in this sequel novel. Unlike in the parent novel, where she maintains an objective authorial distance, in the sequel, she makes a significant subjective intervention, with a subversive explicitness, by becoming a protagonist. Thus, Nasrin, through *Shameless*, has used fiction both for and as resistance.

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