

# Taslina Nasrin's Poems: A Marxist Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Marxism focuses on the class conflict which results because the superstructure depends on base and thus creates oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisies or upper class. In a similar vein, Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin is a feminist author who writes in Bangla her primary language. In her poems, she exhibits the struggle between the male and the female, with the latter being always marginalized by the more powerful former. It is also seen that women follow the ideology as well as hegemony and thus they are easily controlled by their opposite sex. So, women contribute to their own victimization and are governed by the male-dominated society. Nothing has been done so far to examine the ideas of this feminist writer through the lens of Beauvoir. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze Taslima Nasrin's five poems: "Character", "The Female", "A Letter to My Mother" and "Happy Marriage" and "Border" in the light of Marxism. The paper argues that men contribute to making women the subaltern class.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Taslina Nasrin (born 25 August 1962), who is a physician and a feminist writer of Bangladesh sheds light on the secondary status of women. She addresses issues such as marital slavery, virginity, chastity and the preference for male offspring. As all religions are against women's rights by not allowing women to inherit property from their fathers or permitting multiple marriages of husbands (Hinduism). Women inheriting less property from their fathers or allowing four marriages of husbands (as in Islam), Nasrin remains a spokesman against fundamentalists (Duttgupta, 2016, p 2). All these thoughts led to the Islamic fundamentalists issue fatwa against her for blasphemy and insults to Islam. They also set a bounty on her head and made her live in exile (Pandhi, 2015, p. 3) from 1994 to Sweden, America, Europe as well as India.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German Philosopher and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German Sociologist were the joint founders of Marxism which emerged in the 1840s and 1850s. Marx noted in the "Foreword" to his 1859 *Towards a Critique of Political Economy* that "the mode of production

of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life" (cited. in Bertens, 2001, p. 81). Marx noticed that all societies are arranged in such a way that a large group of workers does the labour of production while a small group of owners reap the benefits and accumulates wealth (Ryan, 1999, p. 52). Moreover, capitalism thrives on exploiting its labourers and they become things (Bertens, 2001, p. 83). Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) a German Sociologist along with Marx argued that societies exhibit a battle of the classes where the upper classes (feudal landlords, factory owners, capitalists) sought to keep the working classes (serfs, factory workers, proletariat) under their control (Nayar, 2010, p. 122).

Many Marxist critics have focused on the terms base and superstructure which are present at the heart of Marxist theory. Base and superstructure in Marxist thought refers to the relationship between the economic and socio-cultural aspects of society where the economic base (which include factors and relations of production) determines, influences and forms the cultural superstructure (which includes arts, religion, the law, media, lifestyles) (Nayar, 2010, p. 136). So, the superstructure is the cultural world of ideas, art, religion, law and so on (Barry 158). As per Marx, the mode of

production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general (Waugh, 2006, p. 143).

Marx believed that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society (Tyson 54). Overall, the aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society (Barry, 2002, p. 156).

Other noteworthy concepts in Marxist discussion are the concepts of hegemony and ideology. Hegemony refers to the maintenance of power without the use, or direct threat, of physical force (Hawthorn, 2003, p. 146). Under hegemonic control, people actively work toward their own subordination though consent (Webster, 1990, p. 63). The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) came up with this and he argues that historically the ruling classes have been able to exercise leadership not through direct coercion but by indirect means (Webster, 1990, p. 63).

French Marxist theoretician Louis Althusser (1918-1990) defines ideology as-

Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society (cited. in Barry, 2002, p. 163).

According to him in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", the state is controlled by Repressive State Apparatuses or RSAs like the police, the armed forces, the government administration, the penal system and so on (Webster, 1990, p. 61). In contrast, the state is also operated by Ideological State Apparatuses or ISAs (religion, the legal system, education and culture, the media or communications, the various conventions of family life) which foster sympathetic ideas within a human being towards the state and the political status quo (Webster, 1990, p. 61). Religion, which Karl Marx called 'the opiate of the masses' is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquilizer might do (Tyson, 2006, p. 59). Nayar (2010) states Ideology enables the dominant classes to reinforce over the oppressed and the marginalized classes because ideology serves as a system of beliefs that naturalizes the unequal power relations, and leads the oppressed to accept it as natural, a given and as self-evident and therefore beyond questioning (p. 131).

So, there is an interpellation of the thoughts of the powerful class by the subject class. Marxist critics relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author and they also claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance (Barry, 2002, pp.167-168).

This paper attempts to study Bengali writer Taslima Nasrin's poems through the lens of Marxism. For this paper, I have used five poems of Taslima Nasrin namely "Character", "The Female", "A Letter to My Mother", "Border" and "Happy Marriage" and connected them with the concepts like base, superstructure, hegemony and ideology of Marxism. Women

are thought to be the proletariat class struggling with the bourgeoisie (men) and ideology and hegemony of the society is destroying their ability to slug out the male supremacy.

### 3. ANALYSIS

Men believe that they are the ruling class. That also gives them certain privileges like commodification of women or making them the subject class. In Nasrin's "Character", she shows that men will look at girls when she crosses the threshold of her house (p. 23). On the lane, men will follow and whistle at girls and the situation aggravates on streets where men will call girls loose women (p. 23). If a girl protests, she has no character and if she avoids such abusive words, she has character. In a similar vein, "The Female" addresses that girls are supposed to stay in an obscure corner of her home. She must keep her hair in a tight knot, and hide her swelling breasts as she needs to be kept in chains and move only in her home (p. 60). Hence, it can be seen that women have consented to the socially accepted belief that they must confine themselves to their houses. This stratification is also accepted by women. The hierarchical diminution, however, does not allocate these kinds of norms for the men who are considered the upper classes.

In Nasrin's "The Female" she reveals that only humans consider the birth of a female as undesirable (60). All the other animals of this world do not have partialized preference for any offspring like human beings. While workers work only for money and become alienated from their love for the job, mankind feels alienated towards women who as a product will be sold to another family after her marriage.

Nasrin's "The Female" focuses on men who look for fresh virgins (p. 60) only to maul and tear them on the plea of love or marriage. The marriage market considers the consumption of women's bodies. This reveals the negative minds of men who might not be themselves pure or virgin, but they always crave for girls who had no physical relationships before their marriage. The mindset of men is like that because the ideology is ingrained in their minds from childhood that virgin women are an asset or wealth for the family.

In Nasrin's poem "Happy Marriage", she compares the life of a married woman with a sandbar taken over by a monster man (p. 33) who wants the body of his wife under his control. The master husband can spit in her face, slap her face, pinch her rear and also rob her of her clothes. Thus, the husband can chain her feet, chop her hands and fingers, sprinkle salt in her open wound and throw ground-up black pepper in her eyes. These images point out the social manacle of slavery imposed on women through marriage. It is like the wage slavery of a capitalistic world where a worker like a woman has no freedom. Additionally, a dagger can slash her thigh and she can be hanged in order to control her heart as well connote the physical as well as psychological turmoil of a bride. A bride groom can be polygamous but the chastity of wives is important because this is a social hegemonic concept to subjugate the females. Nasrin states that the married women

will commit suicide in a fit of ecstasy out of sheer pressure of their family lives by loving their husbands because they have been instructed to be submissive to their husband from childhood. Females are sometimes not conscious that there is a struggle going on between the two sexes. Even coercive force is not needed to let them down as they have already assented to their inferior role.

In "A Letter to My Mother", Nasrin focuses on the subservient role of a mother who like a magician (p. 8) cured the diseases of all the family members. She cooked, cleaned, and became a slave for the happiness of her child. Unfortunately, she bore all her pain and misery alone as no one cured her. No one was there to take care of the mother and so Nasrin was surprised whether her mother was at all a human being? (p. 8). In materialism, the consumer is only a commodity to gain money and here the mother is an object to fulfil all the household activities. Like the consumers, she is also used in the home for profit and she cannot leave the marriage because tension is present in her mind about her duties towards marriage as a wife and a mother. As society thinks that home responsibilities are only for females and outside work is allocated for men, men never divide the tasks or labour of their wives at home.

The shackle of marriage (husband blocking the door) and motherhood (child pulling the sari-end) hinder the swim (p. 18) of a woman in Nasrin's "Border". The poem ends with the tone of hope as the protagonist decides to go (p. 18) or leave her family affairs behind to seek emancipation from all traditional duties of a wife and a mother. Finally, there is a woman who decides to let go of the hegemonic ideology and become liberated.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

All in all, it can be seen that the poems of Taslima Nasrin demonstrate Marxist ideas. It is notable that in spite of the fact that Marxism is a Russian theory and Nasrin is a Bengali writer, both are dealing with the same issue: women's' hegemonic internalization that men are superior and men's' ideology that women are their proletariat or the working class of their home. Restricted childhood, preference for male offspring, virginity, marital slavery are topics which display the poor condition of the have-nots or women as they are governed by men. So, it becomes clear that like that in Marxism a class struggle is visible in all her poems.

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