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PORNOGRAPHY IN LITERATURE: THE TASLIMA NASRIN CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Taslima Nasrin is an illustrious South Asian novelist, autobiographer, poet, essayist and columnist. Her monumental novel *Lajja* catapulted her to unprecedented fame and controversy. A blend of post modernist and post colonialist traits, Taslima explores areas in her literary works which are generally deemed 'taboo' and 'forbidden.' This paper is an attempt to analyse and understand why Taslima is obsessed with pornographic details in her novels. All her major novels such as *Aparpakkha*, *Nimantran*, *Shodh*, *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, and *Forashi Premik* are considered for this paper. An attempt has been made to distinguish between pornography and erotica. Moreover, Taslima's conviction that education on the 'generally not talked about issues' of sex and sex life does more good to the society than the prevalent wrong notion that such education deteriorates the society and leads to promiscuity.

Taslima smashes the hegemonic view of the patriarchs that discussions of the taboos are only men's domain; she argues that women's desires and likes and dislikes should also get recognition in the society. However, Taslima's pornographic discussions in the novels have been bitterly criticized both within and outside Bangladesh.

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Literature is the projection of the totality of the society and civilization at large. Depiction of pornography is not anything new in literature. The pages of *Kamasutra* are replete with pornographic descriptions of sex and sex life. Novelist of herculean stature in English literature, D.H.Lawrence is often cited for incorporating pornographic stuff in his writings. Taslima Nasrin, a literary doyen of South Asia hailing from a tiny nation called Bangladesh is an author of a huge oeuvre of literary outputs. There is plethora of international and national awards including Simon de Beauvoir Award to her credit which speaks volumes about how her works have been received by the world community. Adored as an avowed social activist, staunch feminist and epistle of peace and justice, Taslima often faces the wrath of public for her iconoclastic stances. She shot into the limelight with the publication of *Lajja*—a document on how communalism defeated secularism in Bangladesh at the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 in India.

Pornography is often abbreviated as “porn” or “porno” in informal usage. It is the portrayal of sexual subject matter for the purpose of sexual arousal. Pornography may be presented through a variety of media, including books, magazines, postcards, photographs, sculpture, drawing, painting, animation, sound recording, film, video, and video games. Compared to past five decades hence, social attitudes towards the discussion and presentation of sexuality have become more tolerant today and legal definitions of obscenity have become more limited, leading to an industry for the production and consumption of pornography in the latter half of the 20th century. The introduction of the home video and internet saw a boom in the worldwide porn industry that generates billions of dollars annually. Commercialized pornography accounts for over US\$2.5 billion in the United States alone, including the production of various media and associated products and services.

Pornography is often distinguished from erotica, which consists of the portrayal of sexuality with high-art aspirations, focusing also on feelings and emotions. But pornography involves the depiction of acts in a sensational manner, with the entire focus on the physical act, so as to arouse quick intense reactions.

Oxford Dictionary defines pornography as “printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement.” Taslima, a doctor-turned- writer is adept in portraying human body in her writing faithfully. Hence, her writing invites caustic criticism from her detractors. A common charge against Taslima Nasrin’s writings is that she writes pornographic nonsense with a view to draw the support and attention of the young readers. She is often criticized as a writer of bawdy language whose propagandist idea of reforming the society actually pulls the wheel of progress backward as she has been constantly causing a moral cataclysm to the young generation of the

contemporary time. Shamsur Rahman, renowned litterateur and poet from Bangladesh says, “There is no room for vulgarity in literature. What Taslima has written, cannot be the act of a true writer. By writing such stuff, it is possible to create hue and cry in the market, but it does not benefit either party. It is an extremely shameful matter.” (Nasrin 2006:7) Rahman makes it clear that Taslima is desirous of creating space for herself in the market.

Taslima has shown her genius in almost every genre of literary outputs. Her poetry, novels, autobiography, columns and short stories are replete with pornographic descriptions. This paper is an attempt to highlight Taslima’s depiction of pornographic and ‘near pornographic’ staff in her novels and columns. An attempt has been made to understand why she feels that knowledge about the needs of the body should be given to the readers and why learning about the body should not be considered a taboo.

Nima Hoque, an eminent Bangladeshi writer says, “There should be a limit to enjoying freedom. Taslima has surpassed that limit. For such misadventure in the name of literature, she should not only be condemned, but also punished.” (8) Hoque claims that Taslima’s language in her novels and autobiography is unbecoming of literature, for, literature should be in unobjectionable language and Taslima is far from that. He further says that in the name of freedom of expression, Taslima has tried to over reach herself.

Samaresh Majumder from West Bengal says:

There was a notorious prostitute at Sonagachi, in Calcutta about ninety years ago. Her name was Nanda Rani. Almost all the noted big guns of Calcutta used to visit her. Had she wished, she could have written novels long back about these famous big guns who used to visit her. But she preferred to remain quiet and thus she maintained decorum and civility in the society. But alas! Taslima could not have a part of even Nanda Rani’s sense of self-respect. (9)

Taslima’s writings sound so unpalatable to Majumder that he compares the intimate physical relations that Taslima extravagantly describes with the overpowering sexual drive of the notorious prostitute of Calcutta called Nanda Rani. Majumder means to say that Taslima is worse than Nanda Rani because she is least bothered about her own self respect.

The second part of Taslima’s autobiography is *Dwikhandito*, where she portrays the relationship she had with various people, particularly with a renowned writer of Bangladesh. She is, Taslima claims, faithful to herself as well as to her profession as a writer because, she believes that the job of an autobiographer is to represent things as they really happened in his/her life. But Dibendu Palit from Calcutta comments, “You know why this book (*Dwikhandito*) will sell? Primarily because it is pornographic.” (13)

Dibendu raises the issue of pornographic descriptions of various relationships in the book and at the same time makes it clear that Taslima’s book would create ripples in the market because it would get wider readership which implies that there are readers whose needs are catered to by pornographic writings.

There is an all-pervasive and all-pervading pornographic touch in Taslima’s writings. She is a master in effectively using titillating and sexually attracting vocabulary which almost border on obscenity. She is a gynecologist and therefore she is well versed in the vocabulary of female body parts. She took up pen to spotlight century old deprivation of women in the patriarchal society. She wants to reform society and it is objectionable when a reformer unleashes a stream

of bawdy, pornographic and sexually exciting words in her writing because it leaves an adverse effect on the young generation. She is often quoted as a symbol of obscenity.

There can be no objection against sexology or literature of pornography because it is read by some specific readers for specific tastes. It is not preferred by the entire class of the readers, but when pornographic descriptions are incorporated into social or revolutionary literature, it affects the whole class of readers in the society. Abu Rida lists examples of obscene and bawdy words found in the novels of Taslima Nasrin:

Whore, vagina, hymen, menstruation, sex organ, rape, penis, sexual excitement, orgasm, woman-maniac, sexual prowess, sexual debility, breast, sexual pleasure, intercourse, kiss, naval, nude woman, erected, sperm, sperm- bathed-penis, nipple, lower part of the belly etc. (Rida 1995:102)

Rida holds the view that since Taslima claims that she is a social activist and a writer, she should be concerned about the readers who would be reading her writings- particularly, the youngsters. Instead of bringing about positive changes in the society, Rida feels that Taslima is creating sexual anarchy through her writings.

Another charge against Taslima Nasrin is that she is master of tautology when it comes to portraying pornography in her novels. There are frequent repetitions of the same pornographic issue or discussion in her novels. This goes to reflect that she is deficient in necessary materials or stuff to give newness to her writing. In *Nirbachito Kolam*, Taslima writes:

I know about some progressive, educated men who had spread white *chadar* on the bed while going to have first intercourse to get proof of their wives' virginity. They called in question the character of their wives for not seeing any blood spot on the *chadar*. There is an incomplete flimsy covering in the vagina of woman which is named after Hyman, the Greek goddess of marriage. At the time of first intercourse, the hyman is torn and consequently, there may or may not be slight bleeding. It is possible to enjoy intercourse without tearing the hyman. (Nasrin 2004:17)

Taslima here, refers to some people she had known in her society who used to test the virginity of their wives by spreading a white *chadar* on the first day of their intercourse after marriage. Patriarchal attitude of the husbands is also hinted at. The husbands want their wives to be virgin without being into physical relation with other men before marriage and the blood taint on the *chadar* confirms the status of virginity of the woman. Taslima objects to such attitude and claims that feels that women should not be subjected to tests of such type, because such tests are not reliable. Even a virgin may not emit blood in the first intercourse.

Taslima repeats her pornographic descriptions after regular interval of time. The novel *Shodh* is embedded in pages of pornographic scenes. But the same message she delivers is invariably the same. In *Shodh*, Jhumur describes how she had spent the first night of her marriage with her husband:

After marriage, I, a young girl of twenty four with an intact vagina, slept for the first time with husband. On the wedding night I noticed Haroon meticulously observing the bed sheet. I asked him what he was looking for, and he asked why is there no blood spot on the bed sheet? Even I donot know why blood did not trickle but I had experienced acute pain in the vagina at the time of the intercourse. Of course, now Haroon says that had lied about the pain, took medicine to reduce pain just to show and all that was just a drama. (Nasrin 2003:27)

Taslima's revolutionary protagonist Jhumur, in the novel *Shodh* describes how she consummated her relationship with her husband Haroon, who was meticulously observing the 'bed sheet' to spot blood stain so that he could be sure about the virginity of his wife. He found no trace of blood on the *chadar*. It is the absence of blood stain on the bed sheet that kept working in the mind of Haroon for a long time and thus his suspicion about her character started taking monstrous shape which ultimately resulted in his withdrawal of trust in her and forcing her to carry out the abortion of his own child.

In her novel *Bhromor Koiyo Giya*, Taslima makes the same reference to bed sheet being examined by Sheela's husband Altaf:

Altaf asked me grinning his teeth, 'Did you sleep with him? Tell me whether you had slept with Latif or not. You slept on this bed?' He examined the bed sheet and pillow minutely to trace if there was any sign of sleeping there or any spot of intercourse. (Nasrin 2009:56)

Sheela, a typical Tasliman heroine, makes a candid expression of how her patriarch husband wanted to ensure that his wife a virgin despite the fact that he miserably fails to satisfy her sexual urges. Taslima's heroines are educated young women who have strong physical needs and ruthlessly want them to be satisfied. They never shy away from what they think should be answered.

Taslima presents the same sexual experience in the novel with slight difference. The focus now is not on the hero or the heroine, but on some minor characters. The novelist narrates the husband's abnormal sex drive who desired to have sexual intercourse with his wife several times in a day:

In the hostel, there is a woman called Sufia. She is a divorcee. The husband used to demand her body too much. The fire of his lust was so much abnormal that it was impossible for her to quench his desire for sex. (71)

Taslima continues her exploration of pornographic scenes in the novel and certainly caters to the tastes of aberrant readers. She describes Altaf and Hira's sex life in the words of Hira:

The moment he (Altaf) comes to bed, he embraces me and says 'my wife, my precious and lovely wife like gold and diamond.' So saying, his kisses me deep and long. When he kisses me, I do not understand why I feel so

happy and excited. He says, 'My diamond, what have you worn? Please take it off.' I donot need to undress myself, he himself does it for me. (34)

The same repetition of physical contact of a man with a woman is discernable in Taslima's novella *Aparpakkha*. Jamuna, the protagonist of the novel expresses her anguish over her husband Saber's illicit physical relation with a young girl called Deeba. Jamuna says:

It is true, I experienced pain and despondency that night (the night when Saber brought Deeba to his house to torture and insult Jamuna) but this pain was not for me but for Deeba. Why this foolish girl came to spend the night of her marriage with her husband on an old bed that still bears the marks of her husband's sleep with a different woman. If I were in Deeba's position, I would not have been that foolish. (Nasrin 2008: 27)

Repetition of sexual encounters and titillating experiences are found unmistakably present in Taslima's novels. Her novels are replete with bawdy expressions which cater to the bizarre interests of the perverted sex maniacs. In an age when moral and ethical considerations are fast disappearing, some writers are trying to find their losing grip on the literary world in the name of being realists and unfeigning.

There are sensual descriptions of lustful activities in *Forashi Premik* which would close the eyes of even a shameless sex- maniac. Benoir Dupont, the young French lover of Nila, is presented in the novel as a paragon of sex-life who could be a sex guru for the Indian males. Taslima says appreciating French society: "Over here, girls and boys kissed anywhere in public." (Nasrin 2002:117). She feels that Indian society is awfully restrictive and conservative. Nila refers to her father Anirban's love of beautiful and "nubile heroine's undulating hips." (144) Nila's amorous sexual exploits with Benoir is depicted in the novel with unrestricted interest and care by Taslima, " Suddenly, without warning, the Himalaya penetrated her shores and entered her deep waters. Nila shrieked and her body arched like a bow." (185) Taslima compares Benoir's sex organ to the hugeness of the Himalayas whereas she feels that the Indian males' sex organs are like the tails of rats. Taslima says about Nila:

She had only ever been touched by two male organs in her whole life. Sushanta's she had not even looked at for shame and Kishan's, when her glance fell on it once by chance, was the size of a little finger or the tail of a rat. If his penis was an anthill, Benoir's was the Himalaya in comparison. (184)

Taslima describes Nila's sex relation with Benoir through unnecessary pornographic details. After Nila's first physical encounter with Benoir, the novelist describes the French lover, "Benoir, naked with a limp and sated penis, set there stunned as Nila walked out." (187)

The over exuberance of pornographic description can be seen in the novel when Nila and Benoir enter into physical relation without marriage and Nila experiences great sexual gratification:

She closed her eyes. Benoir kissed her closed eyelids. Nila perceived her love with all her body and soul. The deeper within her he penetrated, the more she realized this wasn't mere sex, it was genuine love. It soothed the body, relaxed it and cooled it. It cheered the soul, broadened and brightened the spirit. (205)

Similar description of sex scenes are found in plethora in French Lover. Taslima says about Benoir's lust, " Benoir gave Nila everything, much more than her body needed. Not once, but many times, all night long." (223) Intensifying the same effect Taslima shows Nila saying to Benoir, " Don't you want to sleep? It's been seven times already." (223)

Taslima colours Nila's imagination with pure pornographic touches. After leaving Benoir, Nila imagines in her own room Benoir showering love on his legal wife Pascale:

At night she lay in her bed, stared at the black sky and thought of benoir kissing Pascale, just as he asked Nila. Pascale came into the bed room after putting Jacqueline to bed and Benoir hugged her and *said je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime passionment*. Then he stripped her just as he took off Nila's clothes. If Nila's nipples were cherries then Pascale's were lingonberries. He was stroking her white skin and saying, 'what a lovely colour, how smooth your skin is!' His penis was erect and impatient to enter Pascale; all night long he pleased Pascale the way he did Nila. (224)

Taslima crosses all boundaries of decency and principles of literature as she goes on describing Nila and Benoir's sex experiences, " At first a feather touch on her breasts. Nila felt he was no Benoir, this was her Apollo loving his Aphrodite deeply, intimately." (183)

In similar vein, Taslima goes on exposing her absurd obsession with sensuality through Benoir-Nila relation:

...Please let me drink it. Slowly he prised apart her thighs. Nila covered her eyes in shame. Benoir soaked the lips with his tongue and went deeper in search of more overflowing rivers. In the dim candlelight, he looked like a deep sea diver. He began to suck her dry like a blind maniac as if he had come upon a fountain of life and if he didn't drink it all, he would die. (186)

Nila, a replica of Taslima herself defies all social, cultural or religious norms and expresses her bestial desires in a manner that a tradition-bound society like India does not permit. The question that arises here is: Is it that Taslima teases the sentiment of the patriarchs by making Nila talk so frankly and without least inhibition about sex and sexual intercourses? Or is it that she simply likes to talk

about sex life because she herself remained unquenched in all her relationship with different men? Probably, it is both because, she herself admits to the fact that her first husband the great poet of Bangladesh of the 1970s and 1980s, Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah could not satisfy her sexual desires.

Taslima's depiction of pornography in her novels brings out her notion about treatment of sex and erotica in literature. She is of the view that the days of taboos are bygone days and are no longer relevant and that the young generation should be made familiar with physical changes and biological needs of mankind. She finds no reason why youths should not be imparted education on sex which is a vital part of life. Sexual crimes and violent cases of rapes, Taslima feels, could be minimized in the society through right education imparted to children on sex.

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