

## **Deconstruction of Men in Taslima Nasrin’s “At The Back of Progress” And “Happy Marriage”**

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Taslima Nasrin’s poetry is widely and wildly known for its sarcasm and naked truth. Her poetry is so effective and unforgettable that it gets stamped in our mind. Taslima Nasrin is considered as a controversial writer for her outspoken and bold expressions. She reveals the realities of a woman’s life through her poetry. Being a feminist, she discusses several issues connected to women and provides solution in her poetry. The woman in her poems is a new woman who wars all the odds and is the epitome of independence, intellectuality, individuality and identity.

Taslima Nasrin’s poetry juxtaposes the social and psychological issues of women and men. The description of men in her poems is intrepid and realistic. She discusses several aspects connected to men and women like marriage, sex, love, harassment etc. She deconstructs the patriarchy and masculinity very elaborately and effectively. She exposes the bitter realities of man’s psychology and sadism. Some of her poems which deal with men are Acquaintance, Happy Marriage, Character, Run Run and At the Back of Progress. These poems reveal and expose the man’s mad ego, envy and brutality. Her poetry deconstructs the macho men into mere animals. This paper will throw light on how Taslima has deconstructed men in her poetry.

## Defining Masculinities

John Beynon defines masculinity in his book “Masculinities and Culture”. He opines that,

Masculinity is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location and in our time the combined influence of feminism and the gay movement has exploded the conception of a uniform masculinity and even sexuality is no longer held to be fixed or innate. As a result it is becoming ever more fashionable to employ the term ‘masculinities’ both to reflect our new times and to expose the cultural construction and expression of masculinity to closer and more exacting critical scrutiny. It is hardly surprising that when first encountered, the plural form surprises because it contradicts the widely held, commonsensical assumption that masculinity is a standardized container, fixed by biology, into which all ‘normal’ men are placed, something ‘natural’ that can even be measured in terms of psychological traits and physical attributes. But when we link masculinity to culture (itself, obviously, hugely varied) it immediately becomes evident that in terms of enactment masculinity is a diverse, mobile, even unstable, construction. So, let me emphasize this: whenever ‘masculinity’ appears it should not be read as implying uniformity but, on the contrary, variety and fragmentation. (Beynon 2)

Rachel Smith, a psychologist states in her article, the reasons for hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the normative ideology that to be a man is to be dominant in society and that the subordination of women is required to maintain such power. While there are individual differences in male gender role socialization, this

specific masculinity works to position men in a space of power, thus, it is often the ideal form of masculinity that men are socialized to achieve. To demonstrate hegemonic masculinity, men are expected to adhere to a strict set of prescribed masculine gender roles that work to promote male dominance through a subordination and overall distrust of femininity. Myriad norms of hegemonic masculinity have been advanced. For instance, men are encouraged to avoid displaying traits associated with femininity through restrictive emotionality, toughness, and aggressive behaviors. Levant, Rankin, Williams, Hasan, and Smalley established seven dimensions of hegemonic male role norms: restrictive emotionality, self-reliance through mechanical skills, negativity toward sexual minorities, avoidance of femininity, importance of sex, toughness, and dominance. Tactics for reaffirming masculinity have been shown to be maladaptive in nature with several negative consequences. For instance, masculine gender role stress has been linked to unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, increased anger, and anxiety. However, while men can perform a multitude of actions to reaffirm their masculinity, aggression may be the most effective method because it is often viewed as the most evident symbol of manhood. Indeed, perpetrating aggression is often times public, dangerous, and risky. Not surprisingly, research has demonstrated that masculine gender role stress is positively associated with men's perpetration of violence against women. For instance, Moore and Stuart (2004) found that men who experience higher levels of masculine gender role stress were more likely to report higher levels of anger, negative attributions, and verbal aggression in response to situations in which a female threatened their masculinity. Collectively, these data suggest that men who maintain a strict adherence to masculine

gender role norms react to gender-relevant stress through aggressive behavior. This is likely because men who experience such stress feel that they need to reassert their masculinity through behaviors that subordinate others (e.g., violence). One important example of this phenomenon is men's perpetration of sexual aggression toward women in order to establish dominance. (Smith, 2)

### **At the Back of Progress**

In the poem 'At the Back of Progress', Taslima deconstructs the man very realistically. This poem satirizes the man who has reached the phase of progress. But as the title goes, the man is interrogated at the back. This poem exposes the male officer or a boss who fakes to be very progressive. The celebrated masculinity of man is condemned and degraded through this poem. Throughout the poem the man and his activities are discussed in a derogative way to reveal the negative and real side of him. The man here is situated in several places and showcases his lusty shades.

In the beginning of the poem, the man is sitting at his air-conditioned office. He is designated in the highest position and Taslima knows how to get him down. Though he is the boss now, he was the one who had actually raped a dozen of girls in his youth, at different cocktail parties, where he lustily observed the bellybuttons of beautiful ladies. This reference deconstructs the man and his position from a boss into a rapist. Taslima very sarcastically reveals the personality, psychology and masculinity of men. She deteriorates the hegemonic masculinity and its misconceptions.

In the next stanza, she continues to explain how this man tries varieties of sexual tastes with different women at five star hotels. This line proves that, the man as a boss has been exploiting several women sexually but has hidden the reality to save his position. After enjoying the vivid sexual tastes, he goes back home but beats his wife because of an over ironed handkerchief or a shirt collar. These lines discuss how the man behaves with other women and his wife. Taslima explains through these lines how the man is exploiting the women by being a boss and wife by being a husband. Harassing the women sexually and beating the wife are the common traits of masculinity. A man struggles hard to prove his mistaken masculinity by trying to rule women through sex and when he realizes a woman's sexual abundance, he fails to accept the defeated ego and hence consoles his ego by beating his wife for silly reasons.

Back in his office, the man fakes as Mr. Big, puffs his cigarette, pretends to go through his files, shouts at his employees, demands tea and writes character certificates. These lines are full of satire and show how the man after such heinous crimes of sex could gain such a powerful designation and has the power to write character certificates though he himself lacks character. These points indirectly explain how a man in the name of masculinity gains power to do anything and attains courage even after committing crimes. Taslima through these lines reveals that this is the masculinity of men.

At his office the employees are afraid to raise their voice, but never know how he raises his voice against his family. With his friends the man enjoys a movie and loud ranting on politics, art and literature. He also shares with his friends how some women in his family, may be his mother, grand or great grandmother has committed suicide without feeling any guilt or shame. These

lines reflect the man's different behaviors with the employees and his friends. At his office he behaves like a gentleman but at home he is the opposite. With his friends he is indifferent and doesn't bother to shout and behave rude. This shows how he uses his power over his employees and family and indulges in enjoyment with his friends. Taslima brings out the layers of meanings of masculinity through these lines.

He returns home and again beats his wife over a bar of soap and baby's pneumonia. He doesn't bother to take up any responsibilities at home and targets his wife and uses her to spit out his frustrated ego. Next day, he goes to office, smokes, drinks tea, bribes and never tells anyone the shameful secrets of his life, i.e.

“that he divorced his first wife for her sterility,

his second for giving birth to a daughter,

his third for not bringing a sufficient dowry.

Now, with wife number four, he again has someone:

To beat over a green chili or a handful of rice.” (Nasrin, 16 )

The last lines at the end prove how Taslima deconstructs the masculinity by revealing the reality of men. The man here does clandestine activities and boasts of being a boss, bossing and exploiting his employees and wives. This is the result of patriarchal structure of society and culture where man can change his wives and exploit women sexually in the name of masculinity. The last lines reflect how he has been divorcing his wives over reasons like sterility, for giving birth to daughter, for not bringing enough dowry and with his fourth wife too, he is trying to find one or the other reason to beat and divorce her over a green chilli or a handful of rice.

Taslina has very powerfully noted down the reasons in these last lines where the man's psychology is exposed. The man here has victimized numerous women including his four wives and employees. A man in patriarchal society very easily gains power and can find several reasons to condemn and discard women. The man here discards his first wife for her sterility but divorces second for giving birth to a child who is a girl and the third wife for not getting dowry. These reasons prove that the man here is finding some silly excuses and rejects them as if they were some trash. He continues to do the same with his next wives. It's clearly substantiated here that a man boasts of his masculinity in the name of marriage and divorce.

### **Happy Marriage**

'Happy Marriage' is yet another poem where Taslima deconstructs the masculinity of men. This poem showcases how a man destroys a woman's life through marriage. Taslima exposes the psychology of men through this poem where she ridicules the relationship of a husband and wife in the name of marriage. The title of the poem is sarcastic enough and is deliberately titled as Happy Marriage. The poem begins with the narration by a woman about her married life and husband. The poem critiques the relationship of man and woman married to each other. Taslima criticizes marriage where a woman is degraded to darkness and powerlessness, where she loses her identity and life.

The poem begins with the explanation of how her married life has become a sandbar and is taken over by a monster like man, who wants to control her body, who wishes to spit on her face, slap on her cheek and pinch her behind, rob her clothes and take her naked beauty in his grip. The first few lines prove that marriage and masculinity are one and the same which man utilizes to

overpower women and her body. Marriage makes a way for man to display his masculinity by dominating over woman and her body.

The next lines reveal the humiliating experience she experiences in marriage. The woman here expresses her pains which are caused because of heinous crimes committed by her husband. In these lines Taslima exposes how a man chains her feet, beats for no reason, chops her fingers and sprinkles salt on them, throws pepper in her eyes, cuts her thigh with a dagger and string her up to death. These lines also signify the marital rape and how she is sexually assaulted by her husband. The activities of husband or man denote how ruthless he is and the same activities also define that they signify and symbolize masculinity. A man shows off his ego and manliness over woman through such actions in order to control her and her body.

In the next lines Taslima expresses how a man as husband expects his wife to behave with him. She explains that a man's desire is not only to control her body but also heart. He expects her to love him, wait for him sleeplessly at nights, clutching the window grille. But she would sob and cook feeling helpless at her own state, would drink the filthy liquids of his polygynous body as if it was ambrosia. Here, though the husband is having multiple mates he expects his wife to be very loyal and dutiful, which proves the degraded quality of him as a man. He is harassing her both psychologically and sexually. During sex he desires her to melt like wax and expects her chastity all her life by not looking at other men. This filthy attitude of man is the epitome of his masculinity which is very sarcastically deconstructed by Taslima through these lines. In the climax of the poem, Taslima writes how a woman commits suicide as a sudden burst of ecstasy. Loving him all her life like an unidentified slave, the wife could take a drastic step of death to



come out of his grip of masculinity. The last line also could be explaining how in his sexual ecstasy she would lose her life. The concluding line of the poem evidences that the masculinity of a man victimizes the woman to death.

To conclude, the poems 'At the Back of Progress' and 'Happy Marriage' represent the hegemonic masculinity and Taslima brings out the layers of masculinity through these poems and also deconstructs it by proving the truth.

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