CHAPTER IV

WOMEN’S OPPRESSION

Together with race and class, sex serves as one of the basic reference points around which the society is organised. Being born a male or female fundamentally shapes human lives. It determines the emotions one is taught to cultivate, the personality traits one develops, one's vocational inclinations, the goal one can aspire to, the way one relates to one's peers and authority, the responsibilities one assumes in the world and above all one defines one's individual identity. But these roles based on sex determination as man or woman have been so rigidly followed for centuries and have been so fatal during the course of time that the social standards turned man as ruler or master and woman as ruled or slave in spite of being equally performing different roles to make life a complete whole. Though women have always comprised half of the world population, but till a few decades back it was only a man's world. Woman’s place was confined to house. Female has been considered subordinate and subservient to the male. In her case, the dictum anatomy is destiny was applied and perpetuated, while the male conquered and ruled the world. Woman was only an object, a commodity or else `a second sex', or `the sex'. A woman had no independent existence. She
existed not in her own right but as an accessory to man. She had no definition, apart from the one that man gave to her.

There are basically two theories which relate the reasons for women's sufferings. The first one is feminist theory which bases its idea on the biological differences between male and female. Another theory which explains women's oppression is Marxist theory which focuses on the socio-economic reasons for it. In this chapter, we will attempt a synthesis of the Marxist and Feminist perspectives on the origin of women's oppression.

It was primarily woman's child-bearing and rearing role which rendered her domestic creature, leaving her undervalued and incapable of participating in the actions outside home. Her chastity and loyalty became imperatives as the male acquired property in order to ensure unhybridised lineage. This further chained her to seclusion and dependence. In the West women realised that the only way they could free themselves from the bondage of the body by limiting and controlling the birth of children. Although science had progressed and the industrial revolution had taken the western world by storm, medical researches paid no heed to this pressing need. It was not till the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth that effective birth control was propagated by Margaret Sanger in the United States and Marie Stopes in England. They
were confronted with hostility and the early clinics, which the former had set up, were raided, while she and her colleagues were sent to prison on charges of preaching immorality. Marie Stopes was ostracised for her outspoken views and work in freeing women from the burden of unwanted children. It is indeed ironical how the diametrically opposite opinion, which looks upon birth control as civilized, has become the order of the day and the countries which cannot keep a check on their growing population are now considered backward.

Further sanction to male domination was provided by all scriptures, which have perpetuated the myth of female servitude. The divinely ordained sphere of the Christians laid down to the woman. God also said in the Bible, ‘I will multiply thy sorrows and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under the husband's power, and he shall have dominance over thee” (12). She is still being punished for the original sin. Manu, the Vedic law maker, prescribed that a female matures, to her husband after her marriage and to her son if she is widowed. Similarly, in Muslim law a woman is seen as a vassal whose major function is to provide the male with sexual gratification, and progeny. A man can have four wives simultaneously.

These deep-rooted prejudices shaped the approach of all societies. Not only is the male dominance and superiority taken for granted, but in
certain societies complete self-effacement is looked upon as a virtue. In the Hindu society a woman's holy duty was to her lord and master, the husband. Sati, the voluntary immolation of the widow on the pyre of her husband, was regarded the highest form of prayer for which a woman was ensured immediate access to heaven. It was abolished only in 1829. Other myths such as idealization of woman as mother and condemnation of woman as mate are common Hindu values prevalent even today.

The awareness about this oppression and subservient condition dawned upon only in the later half of the 18th century when the forerunners of the feminist movement drew their inspiration from the revolutions seeking to free mankind from enslavement and cruelty. The French Revolution left an ineffable impact on Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, was the first feminist tract which passionately pleaded for the education of and opportunity for women, as well as the protection under the law as independent entities, so as to allow them their own means of livelihood, without demeaning their bodies and souls. She was the first woman who condemned and questioned women's role as “the wanton solace of man”, cultivating a ‘spaniel like affection’, and affecting weakness under the name of delicacy. Sentiment against the woman as a sex object is a neo-feminist stance which she was the first one to deprecate.
A few years later J.S. Mill published his treatise *On subjection of Women*, in which he realised the exploitation and oppression of women in the patriarchal system and demanded full equality for women so that the society could be made perfectly humane. The abolitionist movement in America provided the prime impulse to the awakening consciousness of women like Elizabeth Cady-Stanton and Susan Anthony, while the civil war gave women the impetus to manage their homesteads and work outside the home. The Industrial Revolution induced women into the labour force that shaped the destinies of millions of women all over the world. Having once crossed the domestic barriers to enter the grim and cruel world of industry as the lowest paid, though most hard working, women became aware of their situation. Though uneducated, they were able to become a part of organised labour. The two world wars heightened women's awareness of their capabilities and responsibilities and gave them the necessary confidence to demand equal status with men.

The initial battle lay in convincing men and, strangely enough even women that they were by no means mentally, intellectually and spiritually inferior to men, and that the inferior status accorded to them was the result of lack of educational facilities and employment opportunities. The struggle for opening the gates of learning to women not only in fields like
home-making and teaching but in all spheres including science, physiology, mathematics, medicine and law, has been long and arduous. It is still not over, as many of them are even now discriminated against in medical and professional colleges in America. England, which had till recently a woman Prime-Minister, did not allow members of her sex even to vote till 1928. In terms of equal wages and equal opportunity for employment, even though the major victory has been won, prejudice still persists in allowing women into the hollowed precincts of industrial administration, engineering and architecture in all the non-communist countries. In India, though equal rights have been ensured to women by the constitution, yet the vast majority of women is still groaning under the yoke of the joint family system and the demands for dowry. There is a sharp contrast between what law provides and what traditions envisage. The lot of the working women is still the most unenviable as they have to conform to age-old patterns where domestic work is necessarily a woman's responsibility.

The right to vote should have been the first step towards women's participation in government and administration. But the first wave of women's movement dies in the twenties after suffrage became a personal issue in America. In England they were still fighting for vote. The depression gave a jolt to the mood of self-satisfaction in both the
countries and more women turned to leftist politics while the war brought them into the main stream of purposeful activity. To lure them back into domestic inanity after the war, *Feminine Mystique*, so admirably summed up by Betty Friedan, in her historic book of the same title, was devised and propagated. Femininity, good house-keeping, expert mother-hood domestic virtues were glorified with the post war baby boom, but the mood of sullen boredom deepened and suddenly the floodgates of female resentment opened. In the sixties, there was a rush of neo-feminist literature-rejecting traditional and Freudian concepts which limited the role of women. Shulamith Firestone succinctly defines the neo-feminist revolution in her book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, thus:

In the radical feminist view, the new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality. It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history. Its aim over-throw of the oldest, most right class-caste system in existence, the class system based on sex-a system consolidated over thousands of years, lending archetypal male and female roles as underserved sexual legitimacy and seeming performance. The western feminist movement is the dawn of a long struggle to break free from the oppressive power structure set up by nature and reinforced by man. (27-28)

This feminist movement revitalised in 1960s, gathered momentum from the radical feminists and their works. Generated by the enormous
changes in women's lives since the World War II, the contemporary
groups in women's movement in the United States finds some of its ideological
roots in Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxieme Sexe published in France in
1949, and in America as The Second Sex in 1953. In this seminal study of
woman and her historical and contemporary situation in the western
culture, de Beauvoir, a thinker with strong existentialist and feminist
leanings, examines her subject matter from social, historical, biological,
psychological, mythological and literary standpoints. Her thesis is that
women's development as free and independent beings and their
achievements in many of the endeavours they have generally been
enforced to occupy a secondary position in the world in relation to men,
not out of any biologically imposed necessity but because of the elaborate
educational traditions, cultural patterns, and social structures firmly under
the control of men.

One of the first politically active feminists at the onset of the
women's liberation movement during the late 1960s, Susan Brownmiller
is best known as the author of Against Our Will (1975), which analyzes
the use of rape by men from antiquity through the modern era as a tool of
oppression against women. In this bestselling work, Brownmiller
provoked widespread controversy at the time with her famous assertion
that rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation
by which all men keep all women in a state of fear”(151). This work proposes that rape is not a sexual act but an act of aggression determined by anatomical difference and used to assert men's dominance over women and women's subservience to men. Supported by research in diverse fields ranging from history, literature, and myth to sociology, psychology, and law, Against Our Will traces the history of rape in human society, documenting the politics of rape in times of war, rape, homosexual rape, and child molestation. So, it provides an overview of myriad ways that rape has been used by men throughout history to subjugate women. Thus, Brownmiller sees man's ability to rape women leading to their propensity to rape women and shows how this has led to male dominance over women and to male supremacy. Elizabeth Fisher ingeniously argued that the domestication of animals led men to the idea of raping women. She claimed that the brutalization and violence connected with animal domestication led to men's sexual dominance and institutionalized aggression.

Another theory related to women's oppression is of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels who located the origin of women's sufferings in the rise of class society. They gave the socio-economic reasons for it. Their analysis of women's oppression was not something that was tagged on as an afterthought to their analysis of class society but was integral to it.
from the very beginning. When Marx wrote the communist manifesto in 1848, ideas of women's liberation were already a central part of revolutionary socialist theory:

The bourgois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that [under communism] the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at (by communists) is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production. (71)

Marx and Engels developed a theory of women's oppression over a lifetime, culminating in the publication of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1804. Engels wrote the Origin after Marx's death, but it was a joint collaboration, as he used Marx's detailed notes along with his own.

The theory put forward in *The Origin* is based largely upon the pioneering research of the nineteenth-century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan's research, published in 1877 in a 500-page volume called *Ancient Society*, was the first materialist attempt to understand the evolution of human social organization.
Marxist theory approaches the question of women's oppression from a materialist standpoint. It is based not upon speculation, but upon piecing together what we actually know about the evolution of human society. Most importantly, we know that women have not always suffered oppression—in fact, the evidence shows that in a number of more primitive societies, women have been regarded as the equals of men. It was only recently in the evolution of human beings that the social position of women has fallen compared with that of men. In his introduction to the first edition of *The Origin*, Engels explains materialism as follows:

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. (38)

Marxist theory is both materialist and dialectical. It is based upon an understanding of history which sees human beings as both (1) products of the natural world and (2) able to interact with their natural surroundings, in the process changing themselves and the world around them.
Before class society, the idea of a strictly monogamous pairing of males and females with their offspring—the nuclear family—was unknown to human society. Inequality was also unknown. Humans lived in groups made up of people who were mostly related by blood, in conditions of relative equality.

Engels argued that the rise of class society brought with it rising inequality—between the rulers and the ruled, and between men and women. At first the surplus was shared with the entire clan—so wealth was not accumulated by any one individual or groups of individuals. But gradually, as settled communities grew in size and became more complex social organizations, and, most importantly, as the surplus grew, the distribution of wealth became unequal—and a small number of men rose above the rest of the population in wealth and power.

The crux of Engels' theory of women's oppression rests on the relationship between the sexual division of labour and the mode of production, which underwent a fundamental transformation with the onset of class society. In hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies, there was a sexual division of labour—rigidly defined sets of responsibilities for women and men. But both sexes were allowed a high degree of autonomy in performing these tasks. Moreover, women not only provided
much of the food for the band in hunter-gatherer societies, but also, in many cases, they provided most of the food.

So women in pre-class societies were able to combine motherhood and productive labour. In fact, there was no strict demarcation between the reproductive and productive spheres. Women, in many cases, could carry small children with them while they gathered or planted, or left the children behind with other adults for a few hours at a time. Likewise, many goods could be produced in the household. Because women were central to production in these pre-class societies, systematic inequality between the sexes was nonexistent and elder women in particular enjoyed relatively high status.

All of that changed with the development of private property. According to sexual division of labour, men tended to take charge of heavier agricultural jobs, like plowing, since it was more difficult for pregnant or nursing women and might endanger small children to be carried along. Moreover, since men traditionally took care of big-game hunting (though not exclusively), again, it made sense for them to oversee the domestication of cattle. Engels argued that the domestication of cattle preceded the use of the plow in agriculture, although it is now accepted that these two processes developed at the same time. But this does not
diminish the validity of his explanation as to why control over cattle fell to men.

As production shifted away from the household, the role of reproduction changed substantially. The shift towards agricultural production sharply increased the productivity of labour. This, in turn, increased the demand for labour—the greater the number of field workers, the higher the surplus. Thus, unlike hunter-gatherer societies, which sought to limit the number of offspring, agricultural societies sought to maximize women's reproductive potential, so that the family would have more children to help out in the fields. Therefore, at the same time that men were playing an increasingly exclusive role in production, women were required to play a much more central role in reproduction.

The rigid sexual division of labour remained the same, but production shifted away from the household. The family no longer served anything but a reproductive function—as such, it became an economic unit of consumption. Women became trapped within their individual families, as the reproducers of society—cut off from production. These changes took place first among the property-owning families, the first ruling class. But eventually, the nuclear family became an economic unit of society as a whole. In this way the notion of private property came.
Karen Sacks summarizes the impact of private property on women's overall standing in society:

Private property transformed the relations between men and women within the household only because it also radically changed the political and economic relations in the larger society. For Engels the new wealth in domesticated animals meant that there was a surplus of goods available for exchange between productive units. With time, production by men specifically for exchange purposes developed, expanded, and came to overshadow the household’s production for use...... As production of exchange eclipsed production for use, it changed the nature of the household, the significance of women's work within it, and consequently women's position in society. (216-7)

It was under these circumstances that the monogamous nuclear family—the family as we know it began to take form. The modern family arose for one purpose only: to pass on private property in the form of inheritance from one generation to next. All of the romantic imagery of “true love” which has since helped to idealize marriage in contemporary society can't change the fact that marriage is essentially a property relationship. Most people learn this all too clearly if they find themselves in divorce court.

From very early on, the nuclear family's materials roots in class society were crystal clear to Marx and Engels. In 1846, they argued in
The German Ideology that with the abolition of private property, “the abolition of the family is self-evident” (40). Engels understood the hypocrisy of contemporary ruling-class marriage and the degradation of women that went with it. In The Origin, he describes ruling-class marriage as typically, “a conjugal partnership of leaden boredom, known as domestic bliss” (134). But, crucially, Engels also traced the historical rise of the family as a property relationship which developed hand in hand with class society. He demonstrated this relationship by showing the meaning of the term “family” in the Roman Empire; the term was invented by the Romans to denote a new social organism whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with rights of life and death over them all.

Engels adds, quoting Marx, “The modern family contains in germ not only slavery but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains in miniature all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state” (121-22). But there was a further contradiction between earlier communal social organization and rising class society. Wealth was owned by men, but since most societies were matrilineal, inheritance was passed through the mother, not the father. Moreover, without strict monogamy, a man cannot be certain that his wife's children are also his own. Engles writes:
Thus, on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased it made the man's position in the family more important than the woman's and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in famous of his children, the traditional order of inheritance...... Mother right, therefore, had to be overturned, and other thrown it was. (119-20)

Engels argued:

The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children...... In order to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights. (120)

Engels' analysis is straightforward. The sexual division of labour which existed in pre-class societies, when production for use was the dominant mode of production, carried no implication of gender inequality. Women were able to combine their reproductive and productive roles, so both sexes were able to perform productive labour. But with the rise of class society, when production for exchange began to dominate, the sexual division of labour helped to erode equality between the sexes. Production and trade increasingly occurred away from the household, so that the household became a sphere primarily for
reproduction. Hence, the beginnings of a “public” versus a “private” sphere, with women increasing trapped in the household in property-owning families. The rise of the family itself explains women's subordinate role within it. For the first time in human history, women's ability to give birth kept them away from playing a significant part in production.

Engels makes it clear that the development of a family based upon strict monogamy has nothing to do with morality. “Marriage according to the bourgeois conception was a contract, a legal transaction, and the most important one of all because it disposed of two human beings, body and mind, for life”(143) He quips, “And if strict monogamy is the height of all virtue, then the palm must go to the tapeworm, which has a complete set of male and female sexual organs in each of its 50 to 200 proglottides or sections, and spends its whole life copulating in all its sections with itself.(98)

Thus, Engels concludes of monogamous marriage:

It was not any way the fruit of individual sex love, with which it had nothing whatever to do; marriages remained as before marriages of convenience. It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. (138)
Even then, the requirements of monogamous marriage have been in most societies more an ideal than a reality, even for women. Though men and women are legally equally bound to practice strict monogamy, with a wink and a nod, both sexes not uncommonly violate this obligation. The prevailing ideology is that men are “naturally” inclined to desire multiple sex partners while women's biology makes them more content with just one. Nevertheless, as Engels observed, with the rise of the family, “adultery” became unavoidable social institution—denounced, severely penalized, but impossible to suppress”(131).

Engels argues that the frequency of sex between married men and unmarried women became institutionalized over time. It “flourishes in the most varied forms throughout the whole period of civilization and develops more and more into open prostitution” (129). Thus, side by side with the development monogamous marriage grew up the commodification of sex in the form of prostitution—both products of class society. “With the rise of the inequality of property”, he argues, “Wage labour appears ....... and at the same time, as its necessary correlated, the professional prostitution of free women side by side with the forced surrender of the slave”(139).

In this way, Engels locates the source of women's oppression as stemming primarily from their reproductive role within the family and the
family's role as an economic unit in society. He incorporated into his analysis all aspects of women's oppression—including domestic abuse, the alienation of sexuality, the commodification of sex, the drudgery of housework, and the hypocrisy of enforced monogamy. And most importantly, he emphasized the inequality between women and men within the family.

Taslima Nasreen has given both theories in her novels. She faced many dire circumstances in her own life. She described all the sufferings, pains that she had to bear because of being a girl. In her house, she grew up with much fear, having to keep inside her heart all her desires for freedom and curiosity for the outside world. Growing up, she naturally had the belief that girls surely must be inferior to boys, for boys could play in a big field whereas girls had to play with their dolls in a corner of the house. Her brothers could go anywhere they wanted, could watch any game, and could play anything they wanted to play. She could not. Her sister could not. She was told that girls were not made for such things that their role was to stay home, learn how to cook, make beds, and clean the house. Her mother was not the only woman who was oppressed, for she saw her aunts, her neighbours, and other acquaintances who played, the same roles, that of being oppressed. She observes:
In our minds, torture of women is not oppression, but, rather, is tradition. We become accustomed to tradition. As I grew, I realized that I was a part of the tradition but also that I was being oppressed the same as other women. I realize that whether women are poor or rich, beautiful or ugly, have blue or black or brown eyes, have white, black or brown skin, are unmarried or married, illiterate or literate, believer or non-believer, coward or courageous, all are oppressed. Everywhere women are oppressed. And all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture, and customs.

(Speech for Women’s Forum, 6)

Nasreen frequently brings it to the notice that the words commonly used and generally found in dictionary are highly prejudiced against women. The meanings which are imparted to these words are concocted by men to their advantage and are deliberately used in order to denigrate women. She gives the example of *Samartha Sabdkosh* which is a wonderful addition to the Bengali language and literature. In this valuable edition, there are a number of synonyms for a `man'—`purushmanush' `betachele' `manush' `marad', `manushya' and others. For a woman, the synonyms are—`stri', `meye', `strilok', `remani', `mahila', `lalana' and others. The numerous synonyms for `woman' however do not mention `manush' which simply means `human'.
Her discussions regarding the gender-biased words and expressions remind us that words are more than just words; these are acts by which men construct an oppressive society. Sexist language constructs the social reality that constrains the liberty of women. As noted by Toni Morrison in her speech while accepting the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature in Stockholm, Sweden, `oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence'. That is why the effort for elimination of sexist assumptions, symbols and words are in no way separated from the struggle against the gender violence.

She clarifies that the most unwanted thing for a married couple is a female baby. If a female baby is born, it is not uncommon that either the wife gets a divorce for her crime of having given birth to a female or the wife must spend her life in disgrace. As has been told in the first chapter, she believes that a woman's destiny is to be ruled by the father in childhood, by the husband when she is young, and by her son when she is old.

Nasreen has depicted the typical south Asian mentality by showing that the preference is given to male child. If a female child takes birth, there would be sorrow in the home but if a male child is born, there would be distribution of sweets among all the relatives. We can take the example of Kalyani and Jhumur. Kalyani has aborted three times before
giving birth to Jaisha, a girl. Her husband looks very gloomy in such a way as if Kalyani was to blame for what had happened. He makes her feel as if she was paying for her past sins—her life in Mymensingh? So, the birth of Jaisha could not make Anirban happy. But when Dipan came in the world, there was jubilation in the family. He came after twelve years of gap. During these years, Kalyani had been racked to make somebody suffer with worry for not being able to conceive a male. Doctors however, reassure her that she can bear more children and that she has to be patient. But Anirban continues to be rude and intolerant.

Have you waved the red flag again? He would ask her sarcastically hinting at yet another abortion. Kalyani died of shame when he spoke thus. She realized that a woman without a son had no place in society. (Homecoming, 79)

Anirban kept running to Torapith to pray for a son. His parents would express sympathy by pointing out that bou (wife) might be having some serious malfunctioning. Kalyani would ignore their remarks but Anirban did not. Like an average Indian male, he worried his head about who would carry on the family tradition when Jaisha marries and goes away, who would remain forever their own.

The same case is with Jhumur. When she asks Haroon what he wants a boy or a girl? He replies that he would accept her ‘gift’ (child) with gratitude. It does not matter to him. But in Jhumur’s mind there is an
idea that Haroon hopes for a boy. Haroon understands the advantages of being born a male. Men enjoy unlimited freedom and opportunity. Haroon has shared that luck being a man. He is also aware of the limitations imposed on women. But Jhumur becomes totally indifferent to what future holds out for her.

In her novels, Nasreen makes it clear that all the norms set by male-dominated society, are used for crushing woman's position in the society. Nilanjana Mandal in *French Lover*, Jhumur in *Shodh*, are the best examples of it.

After getting married to Kishan, Nila has to perform the duties of a servant and a sex worker. She has to sit at Kishan's feet and untie the shoelace with her slim fingers. She takes the dirty socks into the bathroom and thinks that at night she would have to be the perfect whore and sell herself just as the prostitutes sell their bodies. She wonders if there is any difference between a prostitute’s client and a husband. The only difference she could find is that the client can get away only after paying off the prostitute whereas the husband can get off the hook without ever paying his wife's dues. She feels the prostitute actually has more freedom than the wife in more ways than one. She thinks that a mother, a sister and a prostitute are the three roles which a woman has to play to the hilt, or are they merely the three persons that a woman is born.
Nila does all the work related to the home. She cleans the house diligently, waters the plants and cooks. She wasn't used to doing all this. As she works, she wonders if she is doing all this because she loves Kishan or to please him, so that he would be able to love her. There has to be a reason to love someone. After finishing the work, she showers. Not just qualities, beauty is needed as well and so she does her face, wears a nice sari and comes and sits in front of Kishan. Thus, Nila is the wife, Nila is the beauty and Nila is the homemaker.

A girl is like a burden for her parents which is to be disposed off as soon as it is possible. Mithu, a cousin of Nila, requests her to look any men for her because her father does not have anything to offer:

Mithu : Baba does not have the money to offer me a fat dowry. I am an eyesore. I don't want marriage for my sake, Nila I can scarcely look at my parents these days. Dark and hopeless. I see my skin colour on everyone's face. This is such a big crime of mine. Nila, if someone marries me and then treats me like a servant, I don't mind—at least please marry me. (136)

Ultimately, Mithu commits suicide because she could not get any satisfactory answer from Nila. After Mithu's death, the worry lines on his father's forehead were gone. Like Engels, Nasreen has shown that the family is the root cause of women’s pains and sufferings.
In *French Lover*, Nasreen has portrayed how Nila's mother, Molina, dies because of not being looked after by her husband, Anirban. He marries Molina who has dark skin, only for the sake of money. From Molina's parents, he gets money and from Swati Sen, he gets sexual gratification. Nila feels very sad when she sees her mother dying:

> Nila was scared to touch Molina. Under the whirring fan, Molina's feet were cold as ice even though it was summer. Oh, why wasn't Molina born as a foreign dog? (144)

In *Shodh*, Jhumur, the chief protagonist, compares herself with Rosuni, the maid of the house. She feels that they both are in the same boat as they share the same work but a wide gulf separates their social positions. Both cook the food, tidy the rooms but at times Rosuni is the luckier one as she can lift her veil whenever she wants but Jhumur has to keep her head covered whether she likes it or not. In this way, Nasreen has targeted the *purdah* system prevailing in the Bengali Muslim society.

Every restriction is imposed on Jhumur. She can't talk to any male outside the home. Her life is confined to the members of Haroon's family. She becomes a two-legged creature to keep Haroon physically gratified:

> I became a prisoner in my own house powerless to step outside to visit friends or relatives. I didn't hold a job although I was qualified. (111)
There is one short novel *Nimontron* (Invitation) which is taken from *Chaar Kanya* (a collection of short novels) which is based on four girls’ lives. In this novel Nasreen has shown how an innocent girl is raped in the name of love.

Sheela is the chief protagonist of this novel who falls deeply in love with Mansoor at first sight. Mansoor meets her in a musical concert. Though her colour is dark, yet the people say that she looks pretty. It becomes her habit to write his name on the paper hundred or more than hundred times every day. It is her heart felt desire to see Mansoor once again. One day she gets Mansoor’s address from her aunt. She writes a letter to Mansoor by expressing her passionate love for him. But she does not get any reply. Not getting any response, she feels inferior and writes another letter. She says:

Why are you not writing? You did not like me? Mansoor, Trust me. I love you! I don’t think anything except you in the day and night. I want to be with you throughout the life……………………If you call me a foolish girl, I don’t have any objection. You can say. (80)

It is quite clear from the above passage that Sheela is passionately in love with Mansoor. She does not need any wealth or any happiness of the world except Mansoor. She feels as if Mansoor is the ‘*sur*’(music) of her ‘*man*’(heart). For Sheela, there is nothing more beautiful than love all over the world. Because Sheela could not get any response, Sheela can’t
hide the fact that she has become the victim of despondency because of not receiving any letter from Mansoor. She wants to commit suicide because she does not have anything to remember. One day, Sheela’s sister-in-law Tulsi informs her that Mansoor and his family have shifted to their new home. Now she comes to know that she has been writing letter on a wrong address for the last six months. When she gets the letter from Mansoor, she reads the letter time and again in the day and night. She kisses every letter of the word written in the letter. Next day, she decides to bunk the class in order to meet Mansoor. For her, the whole world is on the one side and Mansoor on the other side. She has firm trust in Mansoor. She feels that he will respect all her aspirations and expectations.

She purchases flowers for him. He comes in a blue car and takes her to his friend’s house. There, he introduces her to his friends. She feels uncomfortable and shy. She expresses that Mansoor is the man of her dreams for whom she has taken birth and her life is fruitful only when Mansoor is in her world.

After having some discussions with the friends, Mansoor comes to Sheela who was sitting in a separate room. He informs her that tomorrow is her invitation. She should come in the noon. All the friends would come together to have lunch.
Next day, Sheela wears a beautiful sari and prepares her face. She is highly excited that today she would talk a lot to Mansoor. She would discuss everything right from childhood to nineteen years she has passed. Nasreen describes her enthusiasm for the invitation in these lines:

Am I looking like a bride? Perhaps when we will get married, Mansoor will decorate the entire Dhaka city with light. He is a young man full of liveliness and zeal. He has many friends. He will surely inform everybody when he gets married. (94)

The above lines show how Sheela is unaware of what is imminent. She sits beside Mansoor. As she is lost in these ideas, Mansoor clasps her suddenly and starts kissing her. After kissing her he leaves her from his grasp. She feels insulted. She makes complaints and asks Mansoor what he has drunk. Haroon smiles and says that she is just a child and would not understand. He snatches her sari and throws her on the bed. He forcefully puts off her clothes. Sheela cries and requests but of no avail. He rapes her. Nasreen describes the pathetic condition of Sheela after the rape:

My whole body was panting. I tried to stand up off the bed but Mansoor pushed me towards himself. (110)

It becomes very clear to Sheela that her dreams, desires, aspirations are destroyed. She feels parched because of fear and pain. After sexually exploiting Sheela for half an hour, Mansoor wears his
clothes and goes out of the room. She feels very thirsty and has unbearable pain in every part of her body.

In the meantime, another boy enters the room. His name is Chishti. He undresses himself in haste. He does the same as Mansoor did on her body. She looks helpless and tears start rolling down from her eyes. Again, she cries for help from Mansoor but she asks herself can he really save her? In fact, he is responsible for all these things. One by one, every friend of Mansoor rapes Sheela.

Thus, Nasreen has blamed the patriarchy for women's oppression. As she is Marxist by conviction, she agrees to Engel's point of view that economic condition is also a factor in women's subjugation to men. In the next chapter, attempts have been made to point out how Nasreen has responded to this subjugation.
Works Cited


