CHAPTER V

FEMINISM AGAINST PATRIARCHY

The literature of the post-colonial era represents the urge for freedom and the awareness of independent identity of the oppressed and subalterns who maintain their silence because of the centralization of power in the hands of imperialists. A productive area of collaboration between post-colonialism and feminism presents itself in the possibility of a combined offence against the myth of both imperialist and national masculinity. In 1985 Gayatri Spivak raised the question of the identity of subaltern and threw a challenge to the race and class blindness of the western academy, “Can the subaltern speak?”(271-313). By ‘subaltern’ Spivak meant the oppressed subject or more generally those ‘of inferior rank’, and her question followed on the work begun in the early 1980s by a group of intellectuals now known as the subaltern studies group. The subaltern is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender or any other way. The question, “Can the subaltern speak?”(271-313) circulates around the self-conscious scene of post-colonial texts and theories. Post-colonial studies have come to represent a confusing and often unpleasant label of subaltern voices.

Edward Said’s intervention urges post-colonialism to reconsider the significance of all those other liberationist activities in the colonized
world such as those of the women’s movement which forcefully interrupt
the triumphant and complacent rhetoric of the anti-colonial nation state.

He laments:

“Students of post-colonial politics have not looked enough at ideas that
minimize orthodoxy and authoritarian or patriarchal thought that take a
severe view of the coercive nature of identity politics.”(264)

Bill Ashcroft is of the view that feminist and postcolonial theories
have followed ‘a path of convergent evolution’ (249). Both bodies of
thought have concerned themselves with the study and defense of
marginalized ‘Others’ within repressive structures of domination and in
doing so, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory.

Leela Gandhi expresses her views:

“Feminist and post-colonial theory alike began with an attempt to
simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they
have each progressively welcomed the post-structuralism invitation to
refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority
constructs itself.”(83)

It is only in the last few decades or so, however, that these two
parallel projects have finally come together. A feminist movement has
been a well-organized movement activating a new awareness among the
fair sex. It has been a silent by product of the female reaction a natural
one, to the dictatorial relationship imposed on women by a society
dominated by men. Religion and politics have failed to liberate them, and
even literature could not rescue them from their plight. Caged and battered they remained helpless for centuries. Constrained by the “fear of flying” they made an occasional flutter, till a few of them in twentieth century burst the cage open and sailed into regions from which sometimes a return seems to be impossible.

One of the topics Taslima Nasreen frequently discussed in her fictions as well as in her other pieces of works is the body. Within a cultural context, the foremost function of the body is that of a signifier of sexual difference. But the cultural perception of sexual difference is never understandable just as a biological state. Rather, it is a historically grounded complex ideological terrain across which are gathered a range of meanings comprising notions of biological sex, social gender, gender identity, and sexual objectification. There is a recent proliferation of writings concerning the body, especially since the publication of Foucault's works. Body has become a favoured subject for analysis in contemporary philosophy, sociology and anthropology. The body has been traditionally associated with femininity, whiles its opposite, mind, is the privileged field of the masculine. In recent years, feminists have been trying to redefine the term and situate the concept of body away from biological and reductionist accounts. They have been attempting to grant a history to the female body and discover the context in which bodies
move and recreate themselves. Because, `if the body is granted a history
then traditional associations between the female body and the domestic
sphere and the male body and the public sphere can be acknowledged as
historical realities, which have historical effects, without resorting to
biological essentialism'(Gatens,130). Nasreen takes up this position and
unfolds the social meanings of the human body. In Bangladeshi society,
discussion on or about the body in general and the female body in
particular is considered a taboo. It is so much so that in 1990, an issue of
an Indian women's fortnightly magazine Sananda (edited by the Indian
feminist movie-maker Aparna Sen) was banned in Bangladesh because it
focused on different aspects of female body—Physiological and
psychological aspects, as well as problems commonly referred to as
`feminine'.

Nasreen, in all of her work, obsessively comes back to the question
of the female body, and her writings pivot on an exploration of the female
body as it is constructed by the Bangladeshi patriarchy. Her focus on the
female body can be traced back through to her non-fictional works such
as the newspaper columns, her poetry and her novels which represent a
culmination of her exploration of female desire.

In fact, Nasreen initiates a break with the tradition of Bangladeshi
literature. The literature of Bangladesh is replete with instances where
self-sacrificing motherhood is celebrated. For example, in one of the classical texts, Shaukat Osman's *Janani* (1961), Daria, the central character, kills herself to expiate her sin when she gives birth to an illegitimate child as a result of her rape. Daria confronts the patriarchal imperative of self-sacrifice in the face of "moral duty." The sign of motherhood in Osman is invested with symbolic meanings, and is idealized through the self-immolation of Daria's body. But in Nasreen no such self-immolation can be endorsed. In Nasreen’s novels, we do not see a celebration of the metaphoric motherhood of *Janani*; instead we see a delinking of motherhood from the ideal of self-sacrifice. She invests the sign with a politics of subversion and protest. Unsanctioned pregnancies are endorsed in Nasreen’s novels with an agenda of empowering women, and an illegitimate child, the cause of Daria's tragic suicide is transformed, as a deliberate measure, to gain material ends. Reading Nasreen in light of Osman's hegemonic text brings to focus the strategies of her oppositional discourse. Such a comparison also underscores how Nasreen initiates an epistemic violence and foregrounds emancipatory possibilities for Bangladeshi women.

Epistemology usually is defined as the theory of the origin, nature, methods and limits of knowledge. The question of epistemic violence is related to issues such as who produces knowledge, or how power and
desire appropriate and condition the production of knowledge. The term epistemic violence could be reformulated to introduce the oppositional discourse of Nasreen, which has startled, baffled, and angered advocates of patriarchal power in Bangladesh. In Gayatri Spivak's formulation, epistemic violence results when in (post)colonial discourse, the subaltern is silenced by both the colonial and indigenous patriarchal power (204). I reformulate this concept of epistemic violence to characterize the resistant writings of Nasreen. When the subaltern(ized) speaks, he/she causes violence to the episteme of the dominant power both by the very fact of her/his articulation, and by posing a new knowledge contestory to the dominant one.

In the context of women's subalternization, how do Nasreen’s representations foreground a new episteme? In Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge dynamics, an episteme consists of the "unitary body of theory" which tends to privilege some knowledges while it subjugates certain others ranking them low in its hierarchical paradigm. These disqualified knowledges pose challenges to the power and organization of the dominant episteme by claiming attention to their oppositional emergence. Nasreen’s novels bring to the forefront such subjugated knowledges. As Hayden White in his interpretation of Foucault's tropology has explained, the dominant trope (metaphor, simile, symbol
characteristic of the discourse of a period) of a given community of discourse determines both "what can be seen" in the world, as well as "what can be known about it" (Qtd. in "Michel Foucault," Structuralism and Since: From Levi Strauss to Derrida, 94). Nasreen's writings intrude upon this tropological field with challenge. One crucial example is her assertion of female sexuality which is a taboo for the women of Bangladesh.

To understand how Nasreen empowers subaltern women in her new episteme, it is important to define female subalternity in the Bangladeshi context. There is a wide range of subalternity among Bangladeshi women. A poor woman is subject to extreme subalternization since her lack of education severely limits her access to power; male violence is also relatively more common among the poor. A middle class woman, on the other hand, might enjoy above-subsistence life style and in some cases might be highly educated (but not necessarily) and decently employed. However, in a patriarchal society, she is vulnerable to subalternity in terms of property, marriage, and divorce laws of which an expanded account will be given later. A Bangladeshi woman cannot prove any entitlement to her income since, as we shall see, there are no legal guidelines protecting her. If divorced or widowed without a son to support her financially, she may become a poor
woman herself, especially if she is not educated. Socially the upper class woman may be above the norm to a certain degree. For example, the constraints of family honour may be a little lax for the rich, but legally she is subject to the same patriarchal laws. As a physician and a writer, Nasreen belongs to the elite class, yet she inhabits subaltern space by virtue of her gender.

The system of dowry encompassing all classes very effectively sums up the different degrees of subalternity devaluing all women. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 outlaws dowry. But the custom has survived with extraordinary might and resilience. Although nobody calls it dowry, a bride's status in the in-law family is directly related to what she brings from the natal family in terms of money and goods. The value of dowry may vary across classes ranging from a watch and a bicycle to a television and refrigerator, to a car. Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act, dowry has been the cause of gender violence. Rabia Bhuiyan in *Aspects of Violence Against Women* has pointed out that although official figures are under-reported, between 1986 and 1988, eighty-six cases of dowry violence with murder were committed against women in Bangladesh (51).

In the pages that follow it would be explored how the marriage and divorce laws of Bangladesh subalternize women, erase their subjectivity
and establish male supremacy. In this chapter, it would be analyzed how her assertion of female desire outside the marital bond validates female sexuality in a society which is based on the systematic regulation of female sexuality through religion and other socio-cultural mechanisms. In my analysis, I investigate the utilization of the womb by the protagonists of Nasreen's stories to argue that they subvert and threaten patrilineality, the very foundation of a Muslim society, by conceiving babies outside of marriage and by openly claiming the desirability of such measures. The patriarchal inheritance law is at stake since a son is heir to his father's property. I argue that the system of patrilineal descent is rendered fragile by the unsanctioned pregnancies of these married women.

In order to examine how Nasreen's narrative technique institutes a rupture in the Bangladeshi epistemic tradition, it is important to look at her use of the first person narrator. The public assertion of her heroines on sexual self-determination of women and illegitimate pregnancies is narrated in the first person to shock the reader into rethinking the issue of women's self-determination and rights to her body. Finally, I suggest that whereas in Spivak, the subaltern women experience physical horror and even annihilation of their bodies, Nasreen's women represent a different oppositional model by enunciating and confirming the ecstatic pleasure of the body and by utilizing the womb to disrupt the male order. Although
the shadowy space of the gendered subaltern that Spivak focuses on is not synonymous with the subalternized space that Nasreen's heroines inhabit, I agree with S.M. Alam that "Nasrin's writings represent the issue of gendered [subaltern] self-representation in an era when it has been denied by both Islamic fundamentalists and the modernizing nation-state"(431).

The figure of the silent subaltern dominates the postcolonial terrain of Spivak's theory. In the postcolonial field, Spivak's model of the silent subaltern has constituted the overarching discourse. Her theorization of the postcolonial female body is primarily based on Mahasweta Devi's stories. Spivak analyzes Mahasweta's story *Breast Giver* in which Jashoda the female subaltern (poor and disempowered) dies of cancer, unattended and uncared for, after breast feeding at least thirty boys as a hired mother in the bourgeois Haldar family. Jashoda sells her milk excessively to the Haldar family to earn her livelihood. At the end her milk is depleted and her body is invaded by cancer. At this critical juncture she is abandoned by the Haldar family and she dies a gruesome death. In her analysis, Spivak demonstrates that Jashoda's body, rotting with one thousand mouths of cancer, inhabits a space which is violent and is marked by ultimate silence perpetrated by patriarchal mechanisms. In the end, Jashoda, a victim of super-exploitation, cannot articulate her own story or resist her annihilation.
Spivak's strategy as a postcolonial critic is to represent the effects of these subject-deprived subaltern positions and utilize these effects to point to the injustice of their disarticulation, and thereby to "reinscribe" positive "subject positions" for the subaltern. It is important to look at how the figuration of the female body in Nasreen’s novels represents a different possibility. Before coming to this, we would take a historical overview of Bangladeshi patriarchy, the account of marriage and divorce laws which are prevalent there.

Bangladesh was part of Pakistan until 1971. Economic exploitation of Bangladesh by the Pakistani government led to the freedom movement and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. According to its present constitution, Bangladesh is a secular country. Yet marriage, divorce and property rights constitute a realm which falls under the category of Muslim personal law or Shari’a law. According to Shari’a law, a husband can divorce his wife by a triple pronouncement of the word talak (divorce). The woman has to observe a period of Iddat (three menstrual cycles) during which she cannot remarry, thereby also ensuring the paternity of a child if she is pregnant. The Family Ordinance of 1961, during the Pakistani period, introduces new guidelines into the shari’a law. For example, to initiate divorce, the husband has to notify the chairman of the local municipal committee and send a copy of the
notification for divorce to the wife. Within a month of that notice, a reconciliation committee is formed by the Chairman, and negotiation efforts start towards reconciling the two contending parties. If all attempts fail, divorce will take effect after a period of ninety days. But most women in the villages are not aware of such an ordinance; neither would women want to appear before committees for a hearing. In the villages divorce may still be performed by a triple pronouncement of the word, 

talak.

In post-independent Bangladesh one important change that has taken place is the 1985 Family Court Ordinance establishing the family court, for the first time, to resolve exclusively the issues of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Even now, however, the wife obtains the "privilege" of divorcing her husband only if the husband delegates it to her. A husband can divorce his wife on practically any ground, but a wife cannot divorce her husband at her will. However, a woman who gains the right of divorce or talak-e-tawfīz as set forth in the marriage document (at the permission of her husband) can dissolve the marriage following the same rules of notification through the Chairman as her husband. When the woman is given no such rights of divorce, she can only initiate it through the family court (through a legal suit rather than a notification)
and on appropriate grounds ranging from desertion by her husband to sexual impotence (The 1939 Divorce Act).

The family ideology of Bangladesh insistently glorifies women's suffering thereby exhorting a "good" woman to be heroic or stoic in the face of overwhelming obstacles in the marital relationship. For example, in Bangladeshi folk lore, a chaste woman is defined as one who surrenders all her needs at her husband's feet: "A chaste woman gives up her life for his [master/husband's] devotion/Her one goal is but her devotion/ In sleep, in dreams and when she is awake”( Nasreen, Selected Columns,77). This is a mystical relationship of worship and surrender as if the husband is a god, and a wife his disciple. Religious values are very strong in the popular imagination as well.

In Bangladesh, a family's honour or *ijjat* is dependent on the conduct of its women and their success in marriage. Virginity and chastity are the defining qualities of a good woman, and she can preserve her honour only under the guardianship of a man; the father is in charge of protecting her virginity, the husband her chastity. A divorced woman, no longer having the guardianship of her husband, severely damages her family's *ijjat*. She is not only an economic burden on her family, but also a sexual threat to society at large. Considering the overwhelming obstacles that beset a divorced woman, it is unlikely that anyone will
exercise the power of divorce even if she has that entitlement. Moreover, going to court for a divorce is extremely dishonorable for Bangladeshi women. Although an upper class woman is somewhat free from the norm, divorce stigmatizes her all the same only to a different degree.

Nasreen boldly violates the dictates of *ijjat*, and exposes the disempowering agenda of the ideology of women's dependence on man. She observes:

> Women can't go anywhere without a male companion [protector]. . . .
> If you want to board the bus, the conductor will ask, where is the man? . . . In so many spheres of life, women are harassed if they are not accompanied by men. If there is a male companion who is neither a husband nor a near-relative, trouble is inevitable. Who is this man?
> And if you are alone, the issue is why are you without a man?

(Selected Columns, 12)

A divorced woman is the prime target of such social harassment and she is likely to stumble against her single status at every step of her life irrespective of class. Divorce is more frequent among the poorer class who are ironically below the norm and hence somewhat free from the constraints of family honour. Yet divorce and desertion drive them to destitution often with children to support.
A married woman with children is normally entitled to one-eighth of her husband's property. But in the event of a divorce, she does not have any right to her husband's property. She is entitled to support from her husband only for the period of *Iddat*. She can receive *mahr*, an amount of money specified in the marriage document which is payable to the wife upon demand or at the dissolution of her marriage. It is usually a very low amount, and inflation reduces its value even further. A divorced woman can fall back on her parents if they are alive because a daughter inherits half the son's property, but as Kabeer has pointed out, “most women waive their rights to the land in favour of their brothers. Dependent on male protection, they bargain away their right to land in exchange for the promise of kin support in times of distress”(104).

It is important to note, however, that the enforcement of Islamic gender ideology has been weakened in Bangladesh by the political instability and economic crisis of the period after 1971 (Kabeer, 125). In the eighties, new economic pressures and the erosion of traditional refuge brought rural women to the garment factories in Dhaka for employment. As village women were gaining access to the industrial economy, women in the city were getting educated at an increasing rate. Consequently, they became more conscious of their dependent status (where the husband is the guardian), and of the deprivation of their rights.
At such a time, the formation and development of some feminist organizations such as Mahila Parishad, Nari Shangoti marked a breakthrough in the struggle of women against patriarchal oppression. In the rural sector, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) organized the village women towards improving their condition. Organizations such as Proshika and Saptagram succeeded in raising the consciousness of the poor women. As a result, there has been a definite increase in the number of wage-earning women, and in the number of women who have ventured outside the confines of their homes.

However, the ideology and the policy of the government has remained paternalistic. Although the Feminist movement in Bangladesh has fallen short of achieving its goal, certainly there has been a growing awareness of male domination which should be recognized. It is against the backdrop of such growing awareness of gender subordination as systemic, that Nasreen emerges on the scene of Bangladeshi literature. She appears at this time with a voice full of energy and rage.

Critics and reviewers sympathetic to Nasreen have observed that the pain and anger of Nasreen's writings are unique in the history of the literature of Bangladesh. These critics have equally emphasized that while Nasreen's articulation is unique; her pain is representative of countless other women's lives in Bangladesh. Meer Nurul Islam, in his
review, focuses on Nasreen's rage as a crucial necessity to transform society. He argues:

Within the bounds of our closed society, darkness reigns so strongly, that there is no fissure to let in light or air. If one cannot make a chink through a needle or a nail on that wall of darkness, one can only use a spade, or an axe, or a hammer and a chisel to bore holes for light. (89)

The metaphors of enlightenment used by Islam are problematic. By defining darkness as negative and light as positive, he participates, either willingly or inadvertently, in inferiorizing the people of colour. One of the major concerns of both postcolonial and postmodern discourse has been to foreground the failure of the project of enlightenment. Critics of enlightenment argue that in Western history, reason (which brings enlightenment) has functioned as a tool in the hands of the powerful against the disempowered. For example, colonizers have often justified their colonizing agenda by arguing that it will civilize the natives.

Within the above context, the rhetoric of Islam's review is problematic. However, it is important to take into account his positive contribution. He does point out that the crucial gender problem in Bangladesh is that women are constantly objectified and sexualized.
According to him, Nasreen is sailing against the tide with extraordinary boldness.

In the controversy surrounding Nasreen, critics who are unsympathetic to her have argued that Taslima is anti-Islamic, anti-male, and that she is too vulgar and commercial a writer in her representation of sex. Some have labelled her as "unscrupulous and market-oriented" (Islam, 21).

While critics opposed to Nasreen bring charges of obscenity, immodesty and anti-religious sentiments against her, her supporters praise the openness and honesty of the unvarnished mode of her representations. Her opponents cry foul and moral chaos when Nasreen wants to shake the entire structure of patriarchy; her supporters praise her courage and honesty and welcome the tremor which causes cracks in the patriarchal defence. Underneath it all, what comes across is that one group considers gender inequality a given, the other sees it as a construction and calls for its deconstruction.

How Nasreen's writings have drawn so much popular attention is one of the intriguing questions that poses itself for scrutiny. In his analysis of the Nasreen controversy, Ali Riaz has aptly pointed out that "she [Taslima] earned a 'notoriety' for stirring debate and creating controversy often for raising issues which are considered 'explosive' by Bangladeshi society, and at times for her provocative style of
writing"(39). The issues Nasreen raises and the way she presents them call for our attention.

Nasreen, at least initially, and on a superficial level, seems to be assimilable by Bangladeshi tradition. It is important to note that the system of veil and dowry and other socio-cultural practices subjugating women have been targets of attack in various writings long before Nasreen’s emergence. In that sense, one response of Bangladeshi readership has been to acknowledge Nasreen and allow her the voice of protest. Yet she is too troubling for many readers' sensibility. She defies assimilation into the Bangladeshi discourse of social criticism through her strangeness, so to speak, to the tradition of that discourse at least in two ways: by her provocative assertion of female sexuality leading to female empowerment, and through her uniquely aggressive style which is employed to celebrate the transgression of her writings ¹. She writes:

I adore to proclaim that I am a fallen woman
in the eyes of this society. . . . The first condition for purification of a woman is to become 'fallen' (in the eyes of this society). Unless a woman becomes 'fallen,' there is no way she can liberate herself from the clutch of this society. She is the real sane and
admirable person, whom people call 'fallen. (Nasreen, Selected Columns, 69)

By declaring herself "nastyā" or "fallen" Nasreen calls into question the patriarchal formulation of the categories of good and bad woman. She builds an alliance with the downtrodden by giving herself the title fallen. A fallen woman in Nasreen's economy is the one who initiates the agenda of claiming her rights (no matter how "immodest" it is), of defining herself and her sexual desire in her own terms as a subject, of rejecting male protection as oppressive and exploitative, of transforming society for her own emancipation. By the same token, a woman who upholds the notion of "purification" only contributes to her own subordination and self-effacement. Nasreen makes it clear that it is self-deceiving to claim "purity" and maintain the facade of a "happy" family life when a woman knows that it is based on the ashes of her dreams. Nasreen believes in pushing the prescribed parameters of modesty to reappropriate power from the Bangladeshi male. Ranajit Das has offered an interesting analysis in this regard. Das concedes that Nasreen has largely been successful in identifying the problems of gender discrimination in Bangladeshi society. But simultaneously, he argues and cautions that the nature of the resolution of these problems as demonstrated by the heroines of Nasreen's novels is unethical and
morally degrading. In his critique of *Aparpokkho*, he contends that Jamuna, the central female character of the novel, through her choice of having a child outside the marital bond with her husband, violates the ethics of the family. Her ethical responsibility is towards her husband. Das argues that 'Nasreen’s female characters fail to uplift the reader's moral sense through their failure to follow the ideology of "ethical motherhood" (75). What Das fails to acknowledge, along with other critics, is that ethical motherhood and morality defined by patriarchy are pillars to perpetuate female subjugation. While he agrees that there are some problems of gender inequality, he ignores that these problems are systematic. One cannot bring about changes by moving around some bricks and leaving the structure alone.

According to the patriarchal view of morality, women have to live a spiritual life and give over the material world for men to negotiate. Within this moral economy, women's suffering is ennobled, and is considered to be the foundation of family life. I depart from such a moral criticism of Nasreen's work and engage in an analysis from a different set of concerns. It is the politics of power-deprivation of the female embedded in ethical motherhood which will propel my inquiry, and as a result my empathy is with Nasreen's heroines. The practicability of what Jhumur and Jamuna, the two heroines of her stories, do with their bodies
may be problematic, but this chapter concentrates on the measure of challenge such heroines propose through their lives. Fatima Mernissi has aptly noted "Curbing active female sexuality, preventing female sexual self-determination, is the basis of many of Islam's family institutions"(60). The pivotal importance of Nasreen's novels is the heroine's ability to reclaim the power over her body, tearing apart the ethical cover-up of the subordinating practices of Bangladeshi patriarchy.

In Nasreen's representations, the female body, far from being mangled (as in Breast Giver) is not only intact, but always a site of abundant energy and desire enabling us to ask whether it must be locked in a space of non-enunciation ². At the end of Breast Giver, Jashoda lay dying and "the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes"(Qtd. in In Other Worlds,260).Unlike Jashoda, the heroines of Nasreen's novels experience ecstasy and pleasure simultaneously as they engage in subverting the agenda of their husbands. For example, in Shodh, Jhumur is transfigured by her sexual experience with Afzal, a man other than her husband. At the same time she makes herself pregnant by him in order to subvert patrilineality.

It is important to underscore that in her novels, Nasreen's attack is consistently directed against the middle class, the professional, and the power elite. She points out that we can no longer relegate the problem of
polygamy and desertion of women to the village, its *peers* (religious figures) or the peasant men who inhabit a rather subordinate rank in the chain of patriarchy. Nasreen attacks where the attack is overdue. The middle class man, neither unenlightened, nor prejudicial, is brought to the spotlight as the practitioner of patriarchal oppression. In *Aparpokkho* and *Shodh*, the heroines' adversaries are such men. They are not religious figures but rather secular elites.

Written in an epistolary form, *Aparpokkho* (meaning the Opposition) traces the life of Jamuna who is divorced from her husband Saber, for allegedly having an illicit relationship with Saber's friend. Now reduced to the position of further devaluation, on account of her divorce, Jamuna remarries. Unhappy with her second husband, she becomes passionately involved with a lover and conceives. She boldly decides to have the baby and envisions a child outside patrilineal descent.

The story in *Aparpokkho*, narrated by Jamuna to her sister, represents Jamuna's shifting predicament and her progressively intensifying struggle as she goes through marriage and divorce. Her story documents the failure of the institution of marriage to protect women in a culture which is based on a concept of women's dependence on the male protector. It also foregrounds the failure of the legal reforms on polygamy and divorce laws to empower women within the existing socio-cultural
and ideological condition of Bangladesh. Finally, *Aparpokkho* uses the female body and the maternal womb (of Jamuna) as a site of contestation and challenge to the system of patrilineal descent which organizes Bangladeshi patriarchy. By transforming the womb into a material site, Nasreen undoes the foundational basis of Bangladeshi patriarchy.

The text of *Aparpokkho*, through its chronology, creates a paradigm within which marriage is a sign syntagmatically connected to polygamy, and divorce and displacement of a woman foregrounds the exploitative nature of marriage and divorce. The narrative contiguity of directly discordant themes like marriage and divorce or the juxtaposition of such opposing motifs creates a jagged feeling and brings to focus some discomforting questions. Such a paradigm calls into question the sanctity of marriage by wrenching the sign out of its affective predication and idealization (super-adequation). For example, the womb in this patriarchal economy is viewed as a site of reproduction through which patrilineal descent is perpetuated. Through her chastity, a woman protects the womb which is instrumental in ensuring proper descent and family lineage. In other words, a woman can (re)produce children by her lawful husband. Patriarchy's purpose of patrilineal validation through the female womb functions in conjunction with the ideological concept of motherhood celebrated through its cultural production as one of
extraordinary affects and self-effacing love. Nasreen abandons this patriarchally-delegated position, and contests its agenda by first foregrounding, and then destabilizing the patriarchal function of womb utilization for perpetuating proper male descent.

She questions the ideal of marriage which is considered a sacred institution in Bangladeshi society. The concept of marriage is sublimated as an eternal bond. In her novels, marriage is represented as exploitative, and it inevitably ends in divorce preceded by the husband's polygamous marriage. It is through the perspective of a displaced woman (Jamuna) that the institutions and practices of marriage and divorce are examined and critiqued in Nasreen's text. Her strategy is to use the daily events in the micrology of the domestic as premises for a logical argument and as evidence for the conclusion that subordination and economic exploitation of women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationships.

One day Humayun, Jamuna's second husband, demands his food, but Jamuna remains motionless. Nasreen offers the following dialogue:

Humayun asks, "Give me rice."

I said, "I didn't cook."

"What?"

"I didn't cook means I didn't cook."

"Why?"
"I did not want to."(43)

The above exchange between Jamuna and Humayun may have the appearance of a domestic quarrel, but it inaugurates a discourse for women that the conventional episteme has not allowed so far. Neither does a woman respond to the inequality in the domestic setting with such simple but bold language against convention. In other words, Nasreen puts new words in the married woman's mouth that is purported to unsettle the sign of marriage which signifies that woman's desires are subservient to that of man. The renunciation of female desire is the prerequisite for a successful marriage. In her anger, she realizes that the Bengali word for husband also means god, a transcendental signifier. Humayun is a "shaami," not a friend and, therefore, is hierarchically superior to her. Such a position forecloses the possibility of equality between them.

During her first marriage, Jamuna wanted to have sole entitlement to her income. But such a proposal undermines Saber's authority, becomes counter to Jamuna's dependent status which is a precondition of marital happiness.

In Bangladesh, Muslim marriage has to be registered by filling out a contract by both parties. In this regard, the Registration form of the 1974 Marriage Act, with its twenty five columns provides an interesting
insight. In column 17 of this marriage form, a list of conditions is documented that the bridegroom has to abide by during his marriage. (Sometimes that column remains blank—meaning that the bridegroom disallows any rights to the bride at least in the formality of the contract.)

In the context of Jamuna's plight, what then are Jamuna's rights regarding her income? The marriage contract has no guidelines for that. When Jamuna claims the right to her income, Saber considers such a demand on her part equivalent to her committing adultery, and tries to circulate the story that Jamuna has an illicit affair with his friend which may disqualify her to remain his wife.

At this critical juncture, a scene follows in which Jamuna witnesses Saber's return with a new wife for whom she had to yield her own marital bed. Saber's polygamous marriage duly prepares the scene afterwards for Jamuna's forced exit.

Polygamy, even today, is a legalized institution in Bangladesh. The attempt to modify such laws has only helped in perpetuating it. According to 1961 Muslim Family Law Ordinance, the husband has to obtain permission from his first wife before marrying a new woman. Since women are subalternized in the familial structure, this new requirement can be fulfilled through coercion, and violence or threat of violence. A subaltern or subalternized woman will rarely want to undergo divorce,
desertion or defamation, and may agree to her own devaluation by allowing her husband to be polygamous. Furthermore, an unregistered marriage is not considered void in Bangladeshi society.

In the context of this story, we see that for Saber, law poses no barrier against his polygamous marriage. First of all, for Jamuna, the immediate concern is to secure an alternative space now that her position is more unstable. Divorce for her may be imminent as well. In such cases, a woman would rarely initiate legal battles about the violation of Marriage laws by her husband. A subaltern woman normally would stay in the marriage along with co-wives (she cannot support herself independently). Although polygamy is not a dominant practice, it certainly strengthens male control over women of all classes. In one of her essays, Nasreen challenges the Bangladeshi law-makers to raise a bill so that there can be "No marriage, contracted by any male person of the 'Muslim' religion, who has a wife alive’ (Selected Columns, 141).

Renewed by his polygamous marriage, Saber declares his divorce intentions at this point. Polygamy makes it possible for one woman to police the eviction of another. One's coming is syntagmatically connected to the other's going. Once divorced, Jamuna is driven to marry Humayun as she says: "I yielded my guardianship to man [through marriage] so that no one finds a chink to fix their suspicious glance at me"(50).
Aparpokkho is ultimately Nasreen's vote of no confidence to the patriarchal institution of marriage, and a bold critique of the institution of divorce. Jamuna, in the absence of Humayun, experiences ecstatic pleasure with Pasha, and she decides to have the resulting child. The political significance of her choice lies in her refusal to abort the baby and in her bold articulation of that choice to her sister. Through initiating such an agenda, she offers a challenging alternative to the system of descent that controls the legitimate space of Bangladeshi society ensuring the subordination of women. At the end of the story, although she already apprehends the gloom of ostracization approaching her from all sides; she ends by appealing to her sister for an alliance against societal judgment. Jamuna announces with determination: "I want a child over whom man has no entitlement. . . . Like me, my child will be free of the offensive control of patriarchy" (63). Jamuna's reply to the intrusive inquiry of her neighbor about the paternity of the unborn child is: "I'm nobody's land for cultivation, nor can a man use me as he wishes. . . ." (66). This is Nasreen's deliberate violation of the dominant episteme of which religion constitutes an important part. She directly opposes such male privileges through her articulation.

In Shodh, Nasreen's resistance to patriarchal marriage "rites" is brought into focus. Illegitimate pregnancy still figures as a key theme in
this story. But the politics of such a pregnancy is covert as opposed to her overt position in Aparpokkho. Shodh (meaning Revenge) is the story of the compulsory transformation of a girl into a wife and her angry revenge. The story explores the institution of marriage, its regulatory structure of surveillance and subordination. In this story, Nasreen provides a critical examination of the initiation "rites" of marriage, and the effacement of the female subject through those rites. Jhumur, the central character in Shodh, subverts the patriarchal agenda of appropriation and effacement of the female by conceiving a child outside marriage, and passing him off as her husband, Haroon's legitimate son. Through her covert strategies, Jhumur tries to undo the Bangladeshi patrilineal society by planting deceit at its heart.

One of the recurrent themes in Bangladeshi literature is the transformation of a girl who initially embodies the spirit of freedom, into a "normal wife" through the rites of marriage, so that the girl happily relinquishes exploration of life on her own terms and follows the new programme of renunciation to achieve the status of a good wife. Nasreen in Shodh calls into question such marriage rites and turns them into an object of deconstructive challenge to foreground the politics of that programme (of rites). Naila Kabeer has very nicely summed up the itinerary of a new bride as programmed by the patriarchal agenda:
[In marriage] she is sent as a young and inexperienced bride into a stranger's household where her behaviour is viewed with suspicion until she has been successfully integrated into the new household and has learnt to identify with its interests. (102)

So Jhumur finds after her marriage that her relationship to her parents has suddenly altered. According to the patriarchal norm "she is called not by her name, but bou (bride) of a certain man, a certain bari (house) or a certain poribar (family)" (Ahmed, 2). Haroon says with complacency:

Your name has changed now! You're Mrs. Haroon Rahman. You're now bhabi of Hasan, Habib and Dolon, and a bou of the house.

Your address is no longer Waree but Dhanmondi Residential Area; since you are the bou of this house, you cannot hang around the city as before. (135)

These initiatory "rites" of marriage also require that Jhumur be alienated from her natal family. Haroon wonders annoyingly, “Why do you need to go to Waree [Jamuna's parents live in Waree]? You now belong to this place; this is your habitat. It is not right to insist on visiting your parents so often" (147).
Marriage for Jhumur takes on the characteristic of penance for being a woman. In return, patriarchy will legitimize her position as a good wife. Nasreen in her denunciatory discourse against such practices has named such patriarchal strategies as *sangsartantra* (257). *Sangsartantra* can be translated as domesticism or familiarchy. *Sangsar* is a very material term, and it has a complex signification. It may mean a family; it also signifies the material world or mundane life. Sometimes it is associated with worldliness which fetters the spirit. It may also mean a wife through her association with the mundane life of the domestic sphere, but never a husband. A *sangsari* who can postpone or sacrifice immediate satisfaction for future prosperity is prized for her thriftiness. Nasreen, in her oppositional discourse, by calling *sangsar* a "tantra" or "ism" identifies the systematic oppression of women imbricated in the ideology and practices of Bangladeshi marriage "rites." In such a reading, the story of Jhumur's subordination in the Harun family becomes representative of the system rather than an isolated incident. By foregrounding the mechanism of patriarchal supremacy in the family, Nasreen brings to scrutiny areas of subjugated knowledges.

Affect plays a contingent, tentative, and conditional role in such marriage. Making the in-law family happy is instrumental in gaining the affection of a husband. In one scene, Haroon says in a tender voice, "try
to win their [my family] hearts. It will be your success. Isn't it your obligation to make this *sangsar* your own?" (148). In this regard, Spivak's theorization about the effacement of the female subject is important. In her critique of the Subaltern Studies work on communal modes of power, Spivak has pointed out how a programmed effacement of the female through marriage structures patriarchal power in Indian society. Although her context is the Subaltern history of India in the pre-capitalist world, her theorization has relevance for Nasreen's novels. In Spivak's language, "the figure of the woman moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister/wife/mother syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity." Patriarchal power, she argues, bases itself on "the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument"(220).

In *Shodh*, by removing the veil of affect from the marital relationship, Nasreen engages in foregrounding the politics of that relationship and that institution. The dubious status of affect in this story underscores the power relations that underlie the Bangladeshi ideology of marriage. It is important to note here that in Mahasweta's *Breast Giver*, mothering is exploded out of "affective coding" through Jashoda's gruesome death which remains unacknowledged by any of her children. But in Nasreen's stories, marriage itself is divested of the romanticism
utilized to seduce the imagination of Bengali women. The focus on the structure of domination and exploitation in marriage destroys the affect that mystifies marriage for Bengali men and women.

In a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal marriage in *Shodh*, the surveillance of Jhumur's chastity is crucially important to Haroon in order to ensure proper descent. After one and a half months of marriage, as Jhumur finds out that she is pregnant, and turns to Haroon for affection, and approval, he responds with displeasure and distrust and denies that it is his child. A pregnancy immediately after marriage, in Haroon's view, is the result of pre-marital relationship with someone else. (Didn't Jhumur attend the University with other young men?) He decides that the baby should be aborted. As a male, it is Haroon's prerogative to define and institute what is licit and illicit as it suits his paranoiac fear of the educated woman and her will to autonomy.

Driven by anger and pain, and determined to take revenge, Jhumur secretly makes love to an artist named Afzal (her neighbour) and appropriates the right to her body. She describes with passionate intensity her love for Afzal. Jhumur becomes pregnant again, but on her own terms (this pregnancy Haroon considers late enough to be caused by him), and establishes her legitimacy by giving birth to a son. The affect of a mother or the prospect of a boy or a girl does not move Jhumur, as she says, "this
is not my desired baby. This is the baby of protest and revenge. . . . The foetus of pain and agony" (181).

Jhumur and Jamuna become the spokespersons of the author, Nasreen, in the first person narratives of *Shodh* and *Aparpokkho*. Their complete defiance of patriarchal prohibitions against illegitimate pregnancy derives its power from the narrator/author whose passion for change against the system of patrilineality is well-known through her non-fictional writings. Focusing on the ideological significance of her first person technique, Nasreen herself explains, "Time and again, I come back to my stories; and I intend to because I'm a woman. I speak to every woman through my experience, my awareness and my vision" (emphasis mine) (Selected Columns, 102). In this regard Riaz comments:

Nasreen feels comfortable in writing in the first person. . . . Most of the time she deals with issues pertaining to oppression, harassment, and the like. To say that I have been subjected to harassment is to expose the self. In Bangladesh society, the common wisdom is to distance oneself from unpleasant events. . . . By reconstructing and rearticulating her own and other women's experiences of humiliation, abuse, and
discrimination . . . Nasreen connects the personal (or social) identity to the larger context of social relations.(82)

As Riaz has pointed out, Nasreen clearly violates the dominant narrative tradition by using the first person in talking about her sexual and family problems in public.

Stylistically, Nasreen's deliberate and bold use of the first person narrative against the embarrassing micropractices of Bangladeshi patriarchy sets her apart as a writer. In Bangladesh, a social critique is usually launched in the third person objective style. Her narratives and poems are more compelling and all the more threatening for her first person characterization. The threat is that if a female physician/writer can speak in the first person, it will enable other elite women to come out and speak in the first person about their shame, their experiences of male oppression. As a result, the middle class home will turn into a site of confusion and undoing of the male.

Nasreen observes that Bangladeshi women who submit to male domination live a deceitful life. It is that very self-deception that she strikes against by writing stories in personal terms. While Bangladeshi women might share their life stories in private, public articulation is not a choice. Her narratives might motivate others to make that choice.
In Nasreen's works, the first person narrator has multiple personae. Sometimes she is a doctor looking at a patient who has been coerced by her husband into an abortion, or a member of an intellectual group (which includes famous names in Bangladeshi society) encountering sexist views on her own writings or a wife struggling against an imprisoning life. However, what unifies all her works is the compelling agenda of bringing Bangladeshi patriarchy to a serious scrutiny. And never does she abandon that project. The recurrence of the first person narrator with her relentless focus on gender issues demands the attention of the reader and disturbs his/her sense of complacency. The "I" in her works is the name of a political platform.

As she points out, most Bangladeshi female authors write about love and familial happiness. The story of gender oppression evades them. In this regard Fazlul Huq Rippon comments, "It is in accordance with tradition that a woman should write about her experiences ingratiatingly, with modesty-clad words, and not represent man as her opponent"(88). Nasreen rejects the ingratiating style violating the epistemic tradition. One of the important poems that constitutes the Bengali imagination is *Natorer Banalata Sen* by Jibanada Das. Das defines and identifies the Bengali woman as the eternally waiting, loving/serene figure bequeathing home to the age old wanderer—the Bengali man. Nasreen contrasts that
passive image by speaking for herself, voicing her own demands and calling into question the exploitative ideology of that romanticized home.

*Shodh* and *Aparpokkho* cannot be read in isolation from her non-fictional works (which are also full of anecdotal elements). She is an activist in her non-fictional writings calling upon women to rise against their subordination. *Shodh* and *Aparpokkho* bear the imprint of that activist "I" of the newspaper columns. The burning pain of her personal suffering breathes life into her writings. She deliberately rejects the third person narrative voice of omniscience typically used in Bangladeshi literature; she reinvents her narrative voice as a woman. Although she is from an elite class, subalternized women of her inquiry are not her other; by utilizing the first person technique, she emphasizes that she is also the other in a patriarchal society.

In *Shodh*, the material womb, a signifier of male control, and patriarchal continuity has been appropriated by Jhumur to show how the surveillance fails to safeguard its interests. The entire system malfunctions when Jhumur appropriates power covertly, and renders the surveillance futile.

Within a patriarchal ideology, a woman's sexuality is instrumental for reproductive purposes, and after giving birth to children, especially sons, she rises in her status in society (for example as mother-in-law) and
commands some respect for transcending the ordeal of her early phase of life. Nasreen's work counters such representations by following the trajectory of female desire and deconstructing the image of the desexualized good wife. In other words, Nasreen renounces the conventional image by enunciating female desire.

In her reading of Breast Giver, Spivak employs Marxist Feminism to theorize Jashoda's body. Spivak interrupts Marxist Feminism itself by inserting new significations as she focuses on the exchange value of Jashoda's milk. In order to produce breast milk, Jashoda undergoes repeated pregnancies. Thus the female womb in Mahasweta's story is a means to produce milk which in turn earns a livelihood for Jashoda. Spivak argues, Jashoda's selling of excess milk to the Haldar family for exchange value "introduces a stutter in the pre-supposition that women's work is typically non-productive of value" (Qtd in In other Worlds, 249). She explains that the womb is utilized in Breast Giver for exchange value which goes beyond the reproductive rights of the Western feminists raising new areas of interrogation.

Whereas in Spivak, the womb figures only as a means to reach the final product—breast milk to which a price value is added, in Nasreen’s stories, the focus on the female womb as a signifier is more direct. She has inserted in the liberal feminist struggle a new dimension by
conceiving babies outside the sanctioned space to contest patrilineality and patriarchal heritage. She has brought to the forefront women like Jhumur and Jamuna as legitimate figures in spite of their reappropriation of the womb from the hegemonic order. Nasreen, through such an approach, has moved beyond reproductive rights to contest the system itself, and to undermine the system's foundation. In the economy of her stories, the womb is transformed so that conception takes place as a strategic move to destabilize patriarchy. Although in *Aparpokkho*, Jamuna's decision to keep the illegitimate baby instead of aborting it falls within the purview of Reproductive rights as conceived in the West, her political agenda encompasses much more than a claim to the product of her own body. Her womb is not (only) a site of reproduction in that sense.

The context of Nasreen's writings is a Muslim society which considers female desire as enticing and destructive; hence the need to veil women or to promote the idea of family honour which revolves around protecting women's virginity (before marriage) and chastity (after marriage). In this regard, Mernissi comments, "while Western women's liberation movements had to repudiate the body in pornographic mass media, Muslim women are likely to claim the right to their bodies as part of their liberation movement"(168). Nasreen's reappropriation of the womb in a Muslim society is groundbreaking in many ways. The children
that her heroines conceive outside marriage are also the products of passionate relationships with men other than their husbands. These children thus give permanence to the transgressive desire of her heroines in a Muslim society which is based on the regulation of female sex, specifically in the family unit. *Purdah*, modesty and family honour all originate from the fear of female sexuality and the need to establish patrilineality. Nasreen strikes at this very foundation of a Muslim family. For example, in *Shodh*, the child who becomes an heir to Harun's property is not his own. In this novel, Nasreen utilizes female sexuality to subvert the system of inheritance. In Western feminism, reproductive rights can be considered in terms of equality of choice and rights to one's body; her enunciation of the womb is aimed at disrupting the order of patrilineal descent in Bangladeshi society.

One possible approach to the issue of the reappropriated womb in these stories is to read conception as metaphoric. Nasreen might be suggesting that we, through our desires, should conceive of new alternatives, that our liberated desire should define our goals. The yet-to-be born baby in *Aparpokkho* may be metaphoric of embryonic ideas represented for further expansion, elaboration and espousal.

Her strong social and professional identity validates her embryonic ideas. Her fictions gain power from her public position as a professional
in the field of medical science. Specifically, if her fictional writings are read against the backdrop of her newspaper columns, one is likely to hear the resonance of the powerful observer/doctor writing about the female patients and their devaluation by social gendering based on misconception and unscientificity. For example, in one of her newspaper articles, she reveals that many childless couples come to her for medical help to cure barrenness. Categorically, it is the wife who is targeted for treatment by the husband and the in-law family. In defiance of the norms of modesty and courtesy to men, she then announces that she diagnosed many of these men to be impotent and found them responsible for the childlessness in their families (Selected Columns, 95).

Such a bold exposure of a fact certainly emboldens other women to come forward to deflate the balloon of power held by men who promote silence and ignorance in the area of reproduction but exercise power to ensure the patrilineal identity of children. By bringing the most personal and mystified realm of life such as reproduction to such a scrutiny, Nasreen deals a good blow to the unequal foundation of gendering. She shows how no social taboo should befall "barren" women. The narrator of her novels bears the authorizing mark of that columnist/doctor endowing her stories with a seal of extra-fictional validity.
If the major pillars of an exploitative system are called into question, it may help dethrone the middle class man; the middle class man is robbed of his good name by these stories. The husbands of *Shodh* and *Aparpokkho* live in cities and they are neither *mollahs* nor uneducated village men.

Nasreen has challenged the unassailability of Bangladeshi patriarchy by institutionalizing fear in the system, and by introducing terminologies of revenge and oppositionality in the realm of domestic relationships. She has shown that the patriarchal institutions and customs of Bangladeshi society constitute the armour for the contending male rendering the female helpless. By unveiling the patriarchal agenda of subordinating women, and by introducing overt and covert strategies to subvert this agenda, she has pioneered the feminist discourse in Bangladeshi society. Simultaneously, her novels open up areas for new exploration and debate in postcolonial feminist studies.

**Notes**

1. Riaz has used the term "strangeness" in reference to Taslima's writings. Riaz has also been observant of the first person style of Taslima's writings and the critical importance of female sexuality in her work (75).
2. Alam has adequately pointed out, "Nasrin does not view the body as a biological entity; rather, she attempts to unwrap the socio-cultural meaning of the female body, especially the historical configurations of male-female power relations to which the female body in Bangladesh is subjected" (453).
Works Cited


