Next to her relentless fight against fundamentalism, Taslima Nasreen’s over-riding concerns in her major novels that have been taken up for the present study, deal with feminist issues as both (that is, fundamentalism and feminism) are related to the general theme of the oppression of the weaker sections of society—minority communities and women. Nasreen is both a creative writer and a woman and as such she understands the concepts and structures of exploitation and suppression in a better manner. Born in a Muslim family, she has had a firsthand experience of religious fundamentalism as well as being at the receiving end as a woman. She is hailed and assailed for what she has said and done. Hailed by some and assailed by others, Taslima Nasreen occupies a distinct place in the galaxy of South Asian feminists. As Ranajit Das suggests, “Taslima Nasreen has been largely successful in identifying the problems of gender discrimination in Bangladeshi society” (qtd. in Khatun, par. 27). Her commitment to the cause of woman is the basic principle underlying all her writings, fictional or non-fictional. She asserts, “I am simply talking about women, the tired, dispirited, undernourished, ignorant, speechless, blind women of the Third World. My subject is woman” (Selected Columns 123-24). Her determined struggle to secure justice, equality and dignity for women places her among the foremost feminist writers not only of Bangladesh but also of the world at large. Her voice is heard with respect and attention everywhere. A study of her novels clearly proves that Taslima Nasreen is a feminist in her aims and outlook. Out of her four novels under scrutiny—Shodh, Lajja, Phera and French Lover, three have female protagonists occupying the central stage. Even a superficial study of Lajja may reveal the novel as a male discourse with men commanding and controlling the events; but it may be re-read from the feminist point of view also. Lajja is the story of Suranjan and his family. Suranjan and his father may be regarded as the pride of their country, Bangladesh. But the religious extremists of Bangladesh who not only try to shatter the secular fabric of the society but also indulge in such dastardly acts as abducting a young girl, which are enough to put humanity to shame. So Lajja is predominantly a male discourse though feminist readings are possible in case of Maya and the Muslim whore who are overpowered by man’s savage physical strength and suffer violation of their honour. In contrast to Lajja, French Lover and Phera are completely feminist texts. Kalyani faces the threat and Nila becomes the victim of sexual assault in the beginning but later on they assert themselves and take initiative in all matters concerning them without letting men interfere. Nila’s lover Benoir is cast aside and
Anirban, Kalyani’s husband, is of little consequence as regards his contribution to the sequence of events that follow. *Shodh* is Jhumur’s delineation first as an oppressed and later on, consequent upon retaliation, an individual with an independent mind. Haroon, Jhumur’s husband, is demanding and commanding in the first half of the novel but in the second half, Jhumur takes the matters in her own hands, decides things independently and ultimately emerges as an architect of her own fate and the mistress of her own life, though in the process she is inconsiderate towards the feelings and fate of Afzal, the sensitive artist, whom she uses just as a tool.

Before speaking about remedies and reforms, the factors determining woman’s position in society need to be discussed at some length. Ages ago, some sets of rules were framed for all communities in the name of religion by the authorities. These rules though outdated, as suggested by Taslima Nasreen in her interview to *The Statesman* dated 9 May 2004, are still the highest authority in deciding the roles of a woman at different stages of her life. Thus, the factors responsible for woman’s plight are religion which has founded a patriarchal society, and the society which is not ready to accept reforms in the condition of women. Literally, patriarchy means the rule of a patriarch, the male-head of a family or a tribe. In feminist theories patriarchy means a social system which is male-centred and male-controlled, and is organized in such a way as to subordinate women in all walks of life—sexual, familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. Patriarchal system is a system resting on the subordination and exploitation of women by men, a system that is age-old, world-wide and is only beginning to be challenged.

Women are never given any rights of liberty and equality. They are treated as inferiors and as items of daily use or show-pieces in the house. It is the supremacy of the male all the way. In fact, with most Bangladeshi women, the belief in male supremacy and female subservience is so deeply ingrained and so much a habit of mind that it never occurs to them that it can be questioned. Prof. Khaled Abou El Fadl in his ‘Foreword’ to *Inside the Gender Jehad* writes: “Too many Muslims and non-Muslims are not sufficiently sensitized to the fact that Patriarchy is despotism and that it is a morally offensive condition” (xi-xii). Iqbal Mullick, a supporter of patriarchy, writes in *Women in Islam* (2008): “The husband assumes the role of ruler, superior, controller, oppressor and master while the wife, on the other hand, is reduced to a slave, a captive, a low inferior and submissive creature” (155). The wife and mother roles are seen as
woman's primary roles. Society, by and large, tramples upon their right to life, liberty, health, education, employment and choice of a career or a partner in marriage. Thus, patriarchy legalizes women's oppression and is a way of maintaining control over them. Sara Jeannette Duncan, the Canadian journalist and writer, pays a great deal of attention to the position and activities of women and comes to believe "that most of the ills that women suffer from are due to the superior attitudes of males" (qtd. in Dhawan 73). John Stuart Mill too says that every man is a tyrant in his own household. Feminism is an effort to create the balance that was dislodged by patriarchy.

Initially, woman did not lack in her capacity to hold decision-making power in familial matters but with man dominating masculine jobs, woman was relegated to the four walls of her house and confined to do the petty jobs that kept her engaged but did not generate confidence in her physical or mental powers and hence the conditioning of the female mind for a subservient role. Simone de Beauvoir writes:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (267)

There are innumerable rites and rituals, customs, ceremonies and myths created by man which make woman as well as the whole society believe that she is 'impure' and make her psychologically inferior, passive and inactive. During menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause, she is made to suffer for no fault of hers, but simply because religion, tradition and history, art and literature have projected a derogatory and negative image of woman. Taslima Nasreen acquaints her readers with many superstitions prevalent in Bangladesh regarding women. For example, if a girl climbs a tree it will dry up. Taslima Nasreen, a strong critic of ignorance and superstitions, does not want to let go any chance to whip these evils. In *Phera*, seeing the girls climb on trees, Rukshana's mother scolds them, "The tree will rot if women get on top of it" (91).

Here it needs to be specified that superstitions regarding women are prevalent all over the world and there are numerous ways of torturing them in the name of sacred taboos. Women are secluded and degraded during puberty. They have to suffer pain and humiliation. They are held responsible for their barrenness. J. G. Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough* (1922), that the people of Darfur, in Central Africa believe that women possess no souls (497). Quoting another
example, Frazer says, "In New Ireland girls are confined for four or five years in small cages, being kept in the dark and not allowed to set foot on the ground" (596). Frazer also gives an account of the superstitions prevalent in olden times, which forced women into prostitution. Ancient myths glorify woman's physical and mental subjugation to her husband. Beauvoir says:

Surely most of the myths had roots in the spontaneous attitude of men toward his own existence and toward the world around him. But going beyond experience toward the transcendent idea was deliberately used by the patriarchal society for purposes of self justification; through the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals in a picturesque, effective manner; it is under a mythical form the group-imperative is indoctrinated into each consciousness. (260)

As literature is said to be a mirror to society, the position of women can be gauged from an incident in the Mahabharat. In the second chapter of the section Anushasan of Mahabharat it is described how Brahman Sudarshan offered his wife Aughwati to fulfil his guest's sexual desires. As a reward he was elevated to dwell in Indralok. Dushasana’s efforts to strip Pandvas’ wife Draupadi in the royal court and her husbands’ impotent silence stink of a rigid patriarchy where a husband can lose his wife in gambling and the elders of the family remain mute witnesses to a woman’s insult. In Thomas Hardy’s novel, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), Henchard, the hero, sells his wife in a village fair as one sells horses and mares and nobody objects to it. The woman is taken away by the highest bidder.

In fact, woman was not ‘officially’ considered a human being until the end of the last century. The picture regarding woman’s underprivileged status becomes crystal clear when we take into consideration the fact that the United Nations that approved the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, only recently passed a declaration regarding the condemnation of slavery, torture and killing of women. In her essay “Feminism against Fundamentalism” Lidia Falcon states:

The United Nations Conference on population growth convened in Cairo in Sep. 1994 resolved for the first time in history of these conferences that women should be taken into account when formulating the politics of population.

The Cairo conference approved another resolution no less important than the first: the category of human rights “also” applies to women. One might infer from this action that until now, women were not considered human. We must
define them as such and insist upon this in the face of countries whose legislation scarcely recognizes women as the subject of social or political rights, and where women are treated worse than animals. Countries where women can inherit only half of the goods stipulated to their male counterparts, where they cannot request a divorce, where they are never granted child custody, and where, to the ultimate horror, the male members of the family can kill them for any reason without ever being brought to justice. ("Feminism," *New Politics*)

Women forming 50% of the human population are most abused and discriminated against. They survive under extreme conditions. This, in a nutshell, is the status of women. They are considered second class citizens. The idea of status also connotes the idea of equality with men. Women should have the same rights and opportunities as men, and this, in a broad sense, is called feminism.

Before we proceed to discuss the term ‘feminism’ in respect of Taslima Nasreen’s works, let us first have a clear conception regarding feminism and related terms. The term ‘feminism’ has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term ‘feminism’ to refer to a historically specific political movement in the U.S. and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that women are oppressed and disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate and unjustified, and the goal of feminism is the ending of the oppression of women. In the middle of eighteenth century, the term ‘feminism’ was used to refer to “the qualities of females”, and it was not until after the first International Women’s Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term ‘feminism’, following the French term ‘feministe’ was used regularly in English for a belief in, and an advocacy of, equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes, though agitation for women’s liberation started much earlier. In France women’s fight for liberty came into prominence during French Revolution though it did not bring about any appreciable change in the lot of women. In America women’s liberation movement was interlinked with the anti-slavery movement as women were quick to make the analogy between the slaves’ bondage and their own lack of rights.

The feminist movement started in the West with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Wollstonecraft is concerned with the education of women and by education she does not mean merely attending classes and taking examination
but the broader notion of social conditioning. In all things she relies heavily on reason and stresses the need for an equal status for both men and women. Another great feminist writer Margaret Fuller contributed to the movement with her treatise, *Women in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845. John Stuart Mill’s book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) endeavours to understand women’s true place in society and studies the abuses of power. In the twentieth century, the feminist movement turned its attention to the world of imaginative literature to see how far it has misrepresented woman. In England, Virginia Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) pointed out that the lack of financial and social independence put a brake on woman’s ambition in literature. Moreover, she suggested that a woman fears the opinion of others, even of her family circle and can write only in snatches since she has no room of her own, that is, she has neither economic independence nor privacy. Her movements are restricted by patriarchy and the area of her influence covers only her personal relationship.

In France, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), a friend of the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, wrote *Le deuxie Sex* (1949), translated into English by H. M. Parshley as *The Second Sex* (1960), and through her book investigated the origin of female subservience to man. Beauvoir also accepts the fact that a woman’s role is influenced by biological constraints. In her famous treatise, she traces the causes and effects of woman’s otherisation. “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (xxii). Women have gained only what men have condescended to grant. Women have taken nothing; they have only received. Consequently, women’s movement has always subsisted on the charity of men.

During the 1960’s, a tendency to politicize the movement was quite evident. It can be seen in Mary Ellman’s *Thinking about Women* published in 1968, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* published in 1969 and Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* published in 1977, and in the writings of other prominent feminist critics like Helene Cixous, Julia Kresteva and Toril Moi. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* voices the aspirations and principles of radical feminism. Elaine Showalter, an American feminist (b.1941), shifted the focus of attention from woman as reader to woman as writer in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). She moves from feminist critique (the woman as a reader) to gynocritics, a term coined by Showalter herself for feminist criticism focusing on literary works written by women. So for Showalter, feminism is an attempt
to read literature from the woman's point of view. Helene Cixous (b. 1937) in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) speaks of woman locked in struggle against conventional man. Elizabeth Meese (b. 1943) challenges the methods and techniques of the inherited critical tradition. In the novels of the Post-war novelists such as Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Beryl Bainbridge we find authentically female literature representing woman's experience and her view of life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1941), India-born American critic finds that the Western feminists have focused on the problems of the Western women only and ignored the Blacks and the women of the Third World, called the subaltern. Gayatri takes up the case of the subaltern.

On the basis of differences and varieties of thoughts propounded by these feminists, different shades of feminism are mainly categorised as analytical feminism, Amazon feminism, radical feminism and cultural feminism. Analytical feminism applies analytic concepts and methods to feminist issues and applies feminist concepts and insights to the issues that traditionally have been of interest to analytic philosophers. Amazon feminism is concerned about physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumptions that women are supposed to look or behave as if they are passive, weak and physically helpless. Radical feminism is a movement that aims at an overall social change and has revolutionary spirit imbedded in it. Radical feminism questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on theirs. As radical feminism died out as a movement, cultural feminism got rolling aiming at transformation of society. Other important branches of feminism are Erotic feminism, Eco-feminism, Marxist and Socialist feminism, Moderate feminism, Lesbianism and Separatism. All these schools have different critical approaches but they are all one in fighting against patriarchy, a social, religious economic and political system controlled by men.

Vidyut Bhagwat in his book *Feminist Social Thought: An Introduction to Six Key Thinkers* (2004), gives Jaggar’s classification of feminist thought. Alison Jaggar has presented four views of women’s liberation. Her argument is that the feminist divisions are not basically about differences in strategies or tactics. They arise due to the fundamentally different ideologies governing the women’s movement.

1. The Conservative View: The conservatives believe that men and women are inherently unequal in abilities and this implies a different social function for each sex. Therefore, social
differentiation between the sexes is not unjust and these differences should be enforced by law.

2. Liberal feminism: Liberal feminists argue that a woman should be able to determine her social role with as much freedom as men. She should have equal opportunity with men to seek whatever social position she wishes. She should have right to control her reproductive capacity when children are born, caring them must be the responsibility of men as well as women.

3. Classical Marxist feminism: Marxists consider the oppression of women, historically and currently, a direct result of the institution of private property. This oppression can be ended by the abolition of the institution. The Marxists maintain that the oppression of women is rooted in capitalism whose continuation requires perpetuation of women’s degradation. Capitalism and male supremacy reinforce each other because cheap female labour can be secured only through the degradation of women. Besides, capitalism does not have to pay for domestic labour. Engels says that monogamous marriage is founded on open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife.

4. Radical feminism: Radical feminists demand total abolition of discrimination based on biological laws. They support artificial reproduction and end of biological family. Lesbianism, too, is an extreme off-shoot of radical feminism.

   Feminists’ first great success in England was the Divorce Act of 1857. Then the suffragist movement made deep impact on the social and cultural life in England towards the end of nineteenth century. In the United States of America the biggest success was women’s right to vote that they achieved with the amendment in US constitution in 1920. In 1964, the US Congress added the word ‘sex’ in the civil rights bill which prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, colour, religion, natural origin or sex.

   Thus, feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. In brief, feminism may be regarded as a modern, social and literary orientation of thinking on women’s rights as individuals. From the very beginning till today the ultimate goal of all the feminist movements is the end of gender discrimination from physiological, emotional, intellectual and psychological angle. In a nutshell, the concern of the modern feminists can be categorized as below:

   (a) Woman’s role in production
(b) Her role in reproduction
(c) The role of socialization in a male-dominated social culture
(d) Sexuality

In simpler terms, the demands of modern feminists are right to have or not to have sex, optional maternity, right to abortion, better child-care and health facilities, equal access to all educational and professional avenues, ban on sex discrimination in employment, maternity leave rights and childcare centres.

This is, in essence, what feminism means: amelioration of the condition of women by giving them equal rights with men but it also means much more. In fact, no rigorous definition of feminism can be possible. Most of the feminists do not define what feminism is; rather they say what feminism demands. This view is supported by Alice Jardine who defines feminism as “a movement from the point of view of, by and for the woman” (20). Chaman Nahal in his *Feminism in Indian English Fiction: Indian Women Novelists* (1991) defines feminism in terms of her defiance to her subjugation to man. He says:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes. (30)

According to Michele Barrett, feminism seeks to change not simply men or women or both as they exist at present but seek to change the relation between them. A woman does not have her independent identity; her identity is defined by her relationship with others. First, she is a daughter to her parents; second, she is a wife to her husband and daughter-in-law to his parents; and third, she is a mother to her sons and daughters.

Thus, feminism is women’s struggle against patriarchy in order to attain her just rights. So far as the feminist perspective on Bangladeshi women is concerned, it is precisely presented by Dr. Abdul Hakim Sarkar in these words:

Women in Bangladesh are traditionally placed in lower status, deprived of much of opportunities in education, employment and access to essential services. They are denied of human rights, most often. A woman normally lives behind shadow of her father during her childhood, and of her husband after marriage. Household
remains male dominated all through, women have no or little role in decision making. But they are largely engaged in non-earning domestic work, which has traditionally no recognition, no power, no honour. Moreover, observance of purdah (seclusion) stands as bottlenecks to women’s freedom of movement. (“Women,” acpf.org)

The history of feminism in Bangladesh is linked with the history of feminism in India since Bangladesh was a part of India nearly half a dozen decades ago. During the British rule in India, the white women who associated with the locals were mainly missionaries. The uplift of the exploited Indian women was a concern among them. With the emergence of the educated ‘Bhadra-Mahilas’ the scales were tilted in favour of the Indian women. Society began to become less rigid and some measure of equality was introduced to defuse the hierarchy among women. At the same time, the political presence of women activists like Sarojini Naidu tended to break the stereotype of the submissive Indian woman. The silence of the subaltern was broken.

In Bengal, the torch of struggle was lit about a century ago by Rokeya Begam. Rokeya Shekhawat Hussain (1880-1932) a forerunner of the women’s rights movement for Muslim women raised her voice against those orthodox religious leaders who had assigned a retrogressive role for women. After the war of liberation, the women’s movement in Bangladesh did not initially make much headway as it was chiefly an urban, middle class phenomenon. But when rural women joined it, it gathered strength and acquired a wider support base and the movement achieved some success in influencing the state policies. There were legal reforms in the rape and dowry laws. But the military regimes of Zia and Ershad relied on religious sanction for their legitimacy, so, Islam was given the status of state religion through a constitutional amendment in 1978. The rising power of Jamaat-i-Islami party in the country’s politics caused another major set-back to the feminist movement. Their leader Gholam Azam had to face a massive protest because he was accused of war crimes against Bangladeshis during the period of their fight for freedom. His supporters used Taslima Nasreen as a ploy to distract attention from the real issue, accused her of subverting the cultural and religious values of the state and depicted her as a traitor. They quoted her works out of context to prove that she insulted Islam. They put a price on her head as a fatwa. Taslima Nasreen’s own challenging attitude and unorthodox views further contributed to alienate her from the considerable section of Bengali society. Some women
even accused her of derailing the feminist movement. Notwithstanding all these accusations, Taslima Nasreen has not flinched an inch from her chosen path of espousing women’s cause.

Taslima Nasreen’s campaign for breaking the age-old bondage imposed by religion, inter alia, has its contemporary counterparts in Islamic countries. For example, in Iran, Sohaila Sharifi and Marriam Namazie vigorously fought for women’s rights. Mina Ahadi opposed Khomeini’s fatwa for compulsory Islamic veiling and had to leave her native land for the reasons similar to those for which Taslima Nasreen had to flee her country. Sufia Kamal, a poet and powerful representative of secularism in Bangladesh and Lindsey Collen, the Mauritian author of The Rape of Sita (1993)—a book about sexual violence against women, also face opposition from fundamentalists in a similar manner as Taslima does.

Taslima Nasreen works as a bridge between activism and academics. She does not follow any fixed ideology of a certain movement. If studied from the Western standards, Taslima Nasreen cannot be attached to any particular ‘ism’, movement or school of thought. Neither does she belong to any government or non-government organization, nor is she directly influenced by the works and ideas of feminist activists (not, at least, until she wrote her famous Columns, a small treatise on women’s plight in third world countries). Still she is a feminist activist in her own right as she draws on heavily from her practical, real life experiences, activities and discusses women’s problems she also refers to some great feminists in her writings. She also pays a rich tribute to Simone de Beauvoir in French Lover for advocating the legalization of abortion. Then there are repeated references to Marx and Lenin in her works. In her book, Aurat Ke Haq Mein (An Apology for Woman) (1994) which she calls a novel, but which is, in fact, a long treatise on feminism, Taslima Nasreen devotes one full chapter to Lenin and calls his voice the strongest voice raised in favour of woman.

The Bangladeshi brand of feminism spearheaded by Taslima Nasreen has its own peculiar aspects affected by Islamic laws. In this context, it is relevant to quote Mark Sedgwick who has categorized feminists on the basis of Islam. He writes:

Two varieties of feminism are found in the Muslim world, one very similar to Western feminism, and one more Islamic. Western style feminism generally has limited impact, with its exponents sometimes being better known in the West than in their own countries. Western style feminists are seen by most other Muslims as irreligious representatives of an alien culture….Islamic feminists, in contrast,
ground their arguments in Islam and the Sharia rather than in abstract conceptions derived from the West. (114)

The first category seems to define Taslima’s brand of feminism in more clear terms than any other. Some feminists believe that it was the ‘misinterpretation of Islam’ that was to blame for the oppression of women in some countries, not the religion itself. Taslima Nasreen disagrees, “There are some laws based on religion that don’t give women any rights.” She says, “My view is that Islam and fundamentalism oppress women. The rules say that a woman who commits adultery should be stoned to death, and the fundamentalists do it. Moderates are against this, that means they aren’t following the religion” (“Developing,” Indian Express)

In fact, Taslima Nasreen has comprehensive concept of what she wants to achieve for woman. Her ideas of liberation and emancipation of women have been translated into reality in her own life that she has lived so far. In her works Taslima Nasreen has underlined the trials, tribulations and agony which women undergo in Bangladesh. She feels that women have been robbed of their rights for too long. Her call to women in Selected Columns is: “If you are human, loosen your chains. Tear them off with your hands—these hands are yours”(112). Here she echoes the views of Amina Wadud, who, speaking on women’s behalf in her Introduction to Inside the Gender Jihad, says, “Life is a gift that we must live with honour—not by random standards imposed on us by an exploitative environment” (9).

Taslima Nasreen, who is not an armchair feminist writing a beautiful thesis deriving her ideas from well known writers and various other sources, emerges as a rebel in her writings, a rebel who opposes and rejects all rotten conventions, traditions and accepted norms of society. While most Western feminists focus on critical theories to define how women are presented in literature, Taslima Nasreen describes how women are treated in the family and the society. She herself has suffered for being a girl, a woman, and has seen other girls and women suffering: her mother, her aunts and her neighbours and acquaintances. Such cases can certainly be bracketed under domestic violence. Domestic violence is not merely physical or sexual; it can be psychological, verbal and economic. Physical violence includes beating, pushing, shoving and inflicting pain. In Shodh, she describes how young girls have to face eve-teasing. Even male members of the family deny her small pleasures that men can enjoy in their youth. In Phera, Kalyani’s brother curbs her movements at the college. Taslima Nasreen subtly observes the position of a married woman and the demands made on her by society. Most of her writings in
general, and _Shodh_ in particular espouse the cause of married women, expressing how the very first step after marriage is marked by extreme sacrifice of starting a new life at a new place with new people and under entirely new conditions. It is nothing less than a new birth. Certainly, a woman’s role as a wife is in most of the cases, abjectly subaltern. She is forced to believe that her own wishes and interests are subordinate to those of her husband and his family. In _Shodh_, Haroon, the husband makes Jhumur wipe out the state of her own life: “Your life has changed Jhumur,” he says smilingly. “Your new life must not bear traces of the old” (9). He clarifies:

Why can’t you make out the difference? You no longer carry your old name. You are now Mrs. Haroon-ur-Rashid. You are Hasan, Habib and Dolon’s Bhabi. Your address is Dhanmundi, not Wari. You can’t gad about the whole day! You are bou of the house. (9)

Jhumur too realizes the new role’s requirement: “I had known what it was to be a daughter-in-law, a self-effacing shrinking creature” (7) and that “marriage had altered my life” (10).

Women need protection within marriage and out of marriage as they are unsafe at home as well as outside it. Women, euphuistically called the fair sex, are, in fact, the weaker sex, physically and economically, and they suffer silently. It is the silence of such cases that Taslima Nasreen has endeavoured to break. In _Phera_, Kalyani’s friend Sharifa who used to be a tomboy in childhood, climb trees and roam about in the whole town, is reined in by her husband. On returning to Bangladesh from Kolkata, Kalyani says to Sharifa, “Let’s go out and roam. I want to have a look at the town.” Sitting on the bed Sharifa replies, “Can’t go. I can’t go anywhere without taking permission of the father of my children”(74). Sharifa cannot do anything without her husband’s permission. Her movements are completely controlled. She has no independence, no zest for life. She tells Kalyani that she could have her meal, Sharifa can eat only after her husband, children and guests have had their meals.

Kalyani implored Sharifa to join them but Sharifa shook her head. It wasn’t something she was used to.

‘But you must this once,’ Kalyani insisted, ‘Couldn’t you change your habit for one day?’

‘I’ve had to change so many of my habits, if I try to alter them again, adopt a new way then…’
‘What will happen then?’
‘Doesn’t matter, I don’t wish to say anything.’ (114)

The whole dialogue implies that she is no longer what she used to be—a happy-go-lucky girl. Her overall transformation has been brought about by the compulsions of her married life, more particularly by the domineering behaviour of her husband. Her free will is curbed, her independence broken and her very life squeezed out. This is what generally happens to a woman after marriage.

In *French Lover*, the kind of life expected of Nila, as she herself says, is: “I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master, you are the boss, without you my life is pointless and I am a mere servant who will clean your house, cook, serve and provide sexual gratification at night” (20).

It is not only the male members of the house but the females too who take advantage of their superior status in the family hierarchy and leave no chance of exploiting weaker women of the household and add to their misery. Jhumur muses over the position of mothers-in-law: “The mothers-in-law of the society were totally beholden to their sons. They went to great lengths to keep them in good humour while they unleashed a reign of terror over their daughters-in-law” (187). A wife’s mission of life is supposed to keep the husband and his family happy. Jhumur’s mother-in-law gives her lengthy lessons to make her a good wife:

Here she was advising me about keeping Haroon happy: I must not do anything to annoy him, must please him, a woman’s place is at her husband’s feet. I would rot in hell, be forced to swallow puss and gore, get stung by scorpions or go up in flames if I could not look after my husband. (64)

Most of the women are victims of economic dependence which includes denial of money, food, clothes and medicines. Nobody takes interest in what they eat or what they wear and how they live. They are generally undernourished and not taken care of when they fall sick. They are not expected to fall sick, in the first place. Jhumur analyses: “The other members of the household were allowed to be indisposed; the wife had to remain forever healthy so as to be able to shoulder all responsibilities, tend to the sick etc. Everybody was irritated if she was on the sick list” (11).

There is an Islamic saying—Paradise lies at the feet of the mother. But what about Molina—Nila’s mother in *French Lover*? Nila reflects on how and why she fell ill. It was
because, like most women, she was expected to look after the family but not herself. The doctor explains: “The illness isn’t sudden; it was festering for a long time. It was just a boil in her intestine at first and that was haemorrhaging. It could have been operated quite easily. But because it was allowed to grow, it turned into cancer” (143). It was not that Molina’s husband, a doctor himself, did not know that Nila’s mother was suffering from piles (just like Taslima Nasreen’s own mother), but he does not regret his negligence. He arranges for the best oncologist in the city but that is to make a false show of his position in the society.

A woman, even if educated, shares her lot with the maids of the house doing all the household chores like them and sometimes the latter have more freedom to move about. Jhumur is frustrated at not coming up to her father’s expectations who wanted to see her as a bar-at-law: “Yet now I wonder whether there was all that difference between her, an uneducated female, and us, degree holders. Whether we were not yoked to the drudgery of running a home” (43).

Women get no opportunities for participating in extra domestic activities. Their work is confined to the household. They are expected to be only wives and mothers and it is their bounden duty to produce and bring up children, cook, clean and serve the family. In My Girlhood, Taslima Nasreen describes her mother in similar terms, “Ma was no more than a servant in the house. That was how she felt. Baba did not seem to care at all about her” (80). Nila too sarcastically remarks at her husband, Kishanlal, “So you wanted to keep an Indian servant” (81). Kishanlal is a typical Indian husband who demands his wife to be a complete yes-person. He is orthodox to the core and would stick to what his father told him:

> Apparently he had been taught from the age of six that it wasn’t right to indulge [in] such pointless pleas and whims of womenfolk. Kishan was laughing when he said that once his mother had craved for some ripe mangoes. His father went to pluck them from the tree, slipped and fell and broke his leg. That day his father had called his sons and warned them never to give in to these whims and fancies.” (38)

Thus, a woman in the house, that is, wife, is no better than a domestic slave. She has to be at the beck and call of her husband. She loses her real identity and is reduced to a lifeless automation. Everywhere it is her husband’s dominance (Kishanlal’s in French Lover and Haroon’s in Shodh) that prevails. Many Indian feminists have also put the women’s ordeal in black and white. Shashi Deshpande, in her novel, That Long Silence (1989), sufficiently brings to
light the plight of women. The Protagonist Mohan’s mother is severely beaten by his father simply because a bit of chutney has not been prepared. Kusum, a cousin of Mohan’s wife Jaya, is ill-treated by her in-laws and she commits suicide. In Taslima Nasreen’s novels also, a woman’s position vis-a-vis her husband is telescoped and the woman is shown as eclipsed in the shadow of her husband. Not only is she at the receiving end, but also a mere nonentity. This unequal relation is at the root of Taslima Nasreen’s main criticism of the man-woman relationship. Virginia Woolf also observes that woman is the slave of any boy whose parents force a ring upon her finger. Sometimes attempts at betterment land them in a worse situation and their search for a better life frequently leads them to fall prey to unscrupulous men who traffic in women on the international scene. Engels even equates unequal relationship between man and woman with mere prostitution, for, wife is paid in the form of bread and bed in lieu of her services. Here is an account of oppression of female sex given by Engels, “The man seized the reins in the house also. The woman was degraded, enthralled as a slave of man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children” (485). He calls the relation between man and woman, based on unequal material foundation with woman producing legitimate heirs for transmission of property in return for board and lodging, as a form of prostitution. As is evident, women, in marriage, are crushed by neglect and brutality, as found in the case of Taslima Nasreen’s mother, who lapsed into silence after having been cruelly beaten and driven out of house.

Domestic violence doesn’t necessarily imply violence inflicted by the male on the female; the house-wives of the well-to-do families beat their maid-servants most sadistically. Taslima Nasreen gives an account of her own household in My Girlhood when her sister-in-law Geeta pulls the maid servant by her hair and kicks her viciously. There is another heart-rending account when the maid-servant Phulbahari is thrashed mercilessly, suspected of having stolen Aunt Jhunu’s ear-rings while in reality, it was done by uncle Sharaf: “Uncle Tutu brought out a half-burnt log from the kitchen and began beating her severely. She rolled all over the yard, shouting, “Phulbahari does not steal” (89). All the females of the household watch the scene nonchalantly as if maid-servants are non-humans. All this is the result of gender biases born out of patriarchal mind-set. Even the women’s minds are conditioned in a manner wherein they behave most indifferently and callously towards their own sex. Falling into the trap of patriarchal power structures they behave worse than males.
Being in practice for long, socio-cultural conventions and institutions force women into silence. They suffer from a sense of dislocation, alienation and loss of identity. They suffer on yet another account—that of their gender. After marriage, a woman becomes a prisoner of her husband’s desires, is not able to move about, go to her parents, take a job or have her say in family-decisions. Any attempt to cross the Laxman Rekha results in the accusation of being a fallen woman or a woman of loose morals. Subjected to baseless suspicion, she is terribly shaken and sometimes too shocked to have faith in her own chastity. When Jhumur has Haroon’s baby in her womb, he suspects it to be somebody else’s baby. He interrogates Jhumur: “How could I know…how can I tell whose baby you had in your womb when you stepped into our house. You were in such a hurry to get married; gave me no time to think. Now everything has become clear” (Shodh 74). Haroon was convinced that one could not become pregnant in six weeks’ time. He was dead sure that Jhumur rushed him into marriage to legitimize the pregnancy that occurred because of Jhumur’s illegitimate relationship with one of her friends. The fact, on the other hand, was that Jhumur had married Haroon out of love and because she was persuaded by her father not to delay and be jilted like her elder sister. Haroon constantly suspects Jhumur’s character and tortures her with sarcastisms: “How could I know…how could I tell whose baby you had in your womb when you stepped into our house. You were in such a hurry to get married, gave me no time to think. Now everything has become clear” (74).

It is always considered shameful for a woman to have relations with men who are not their husbands. Jhumur is suspected because she used to move freely with her friends Subhash and Arju. Subhash was just like a brother to her and her mother considered him more than a blood relation. However, man can have as many intimate relations as he likes. Haroon was in love with a girl before Jhumur became his wife. He even enjoyed sex with her and then rejected her saying, “She wasn’t nice…”

Thus sleeping with a boyfriend makes a woman ineligible for marriage but not so with man. Kishanlal, in French Lover, takes pride in patronising a fallen woman and wishes her to be grateful to him for this benevolence. Kishanlal had married a French woman to get French citizenship and concealed the fact from Nila. When Nila shows her annoyance, he taunts her for having slept with her lover Sushanta.

Another social evil, long in practice even after many prohibitive laws in the South Asian countries is dowry system. The never-ending greed of the in-laws results in persistent
humiliation of the bride. The system of dowry encompassing all classes devalues all women. Haroon’s mother is bitter and tells Jhumur that she could get a rich dowry, had her son not gone after Jhumur for his love-marriage. She complains, “Haroon had had such a rich proposal. The girl would have come with furniture, a Frigidaire and even a television—and such a lot of gold they had promised—12 tolas of it” (103). Commonly, the derogatory word ‘dowry’ is not used in its actual sense; a bride’s status in the in-law’s family is directly related to the ‘gifts’ she brings from her natal family in terms of money and goods. Despite the dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, dowry has been a great cause of domestic violence. Not bringing dowry degrades a woman’s position but it must not be assumed that a handsome dowry can enhance her position. Far from it. The reality is that in-laws take all this just for granted. Nila’s father married her mother for dowry and he studied medicine out of that money. Still all this did not make any difference to the mother’s lot. Anirban has no compunctions about not attending to his wife’s condition because that is actually how women are often treated in their husbands’ house.

Women are subjected to extreme brutalities, and rape is one of heinous crimes. No place is safe, not the home, the campus, the workplace or the street. No age is safe, little girls, young women and even old women can be the victims of rape. Taslima Nasreen in her autobiography tells us how in her girlhood she was sexually assaulted by her uncles. Maya of Lajja, portrayed in her own image, is also abducted at a young age. When Kalyani is living with her uncle’s family in Kolkata, her own cousin Saumitra tries to molest her at night. Ironically, the next day she receives a letter from her mother Saralabala that they are at peace because she is safe. They have sent her to Kolkata for her safety. But Kalyani is troubled by the irony of situation. The word ‘safety’ makes her feel ill at ease as she has been sent away from her home to an Indian city to escape being raped by the Muslim youth. But at the same time she has to face the threat of being abused by a relative. If women are ugly they are unacceptable and kill themselves as Mithu in French Lover does. If they are beautiful they fall prey to the lust of brutes in the shape of men. Sadat Hasan Manto’s stories Khol Do and Thanda Gosht are the glaring examples of the savage treatment meted out to women during riots. The stories demonstrate how women become commodities during war time and carried away as trophies of victory. Suranjan of Lajja is bitter and frustrated and perceives his sister’s abduction thus: “Women after all were like commodities, and therefore stolen just like gold and silver” (162). Manto’s short story Khol Do, which means ‘open’ or ‘untie’ has a clear feminist undertone. Here the fact that Manto highlights is that it is
not the war between two communities during riots that makes women the victims, it is savage forces versus vulnerable timid helpless creatures that makes the lot of women a sad reality. Such ugly practices followed in the name of religion cannot escape the mature vision of the intellectuals like Vibhuti Narayan Rai who in his Shahar Mein Curfew (1986) remarks regarding the rape of a girl that it does not matter which religion the victim belonged to and which the oppressors. Lajja, a bold expression of Taslima Nasreen’s fight against discrimination based on race, religion and gender, raises the issue of rape as an act of war. When in the name of religion, some scoundrels invade the Duttas’ house, they take Maya with them. Helpless with rage, Suranjan retaliates by raping a Muslim prostitute. Women on both sides suffer, in and out of their community.

Thus, rape has become a means of terrorizing, torturing and humiliating the people of minority community. A victim of rape is not considered marriageable and that is the worst punishment for her in Bangladeshi or in any other society. Innocent girls are trapped and abused as clandestine prostitutes. Many of them suffer from venereal diseases and die a premature death. Violence against females, universally under-reported and until recently under-researched, influences female morbidity and mortality. Women are almost always vulnerable to domestic violence and rape. Taslima herself was raped in her girlhood by her uncles. In French Lover, Sunil, a friend of Nila’s brother assaults her sexually. Dishonouring of the women of a community is a blow at the men of the group community. The enormity of the offence can be gauged from the Amnesty International report which was released on the eve of 8th March 1991 and submitted to the United Nations Commission on Women’s Status which said that “rape continues to be a phenomenon prevailing in every region of the world and under every system of government. The victims have included babies, teenagers, pregnant women and even older women above sixty” (Sathe 144).

Denouncing the heinous crime, the report says: “All of us should be aware of the fact that rape is the most extreme form of sexual abuse against women. Rape is a political crime against women. The root of the crime is unequal power balance between men and women” (150).

There is such a rise in the crime rate against women because a lot of importance is attached to virginity and chastity; virginity before marriage and chastity after marriage. Saiyeda Khatun analyses:
In Bangladesh, a family’s honour or ijat is dependent on the conduct of its women and their success in marriage. Virginity and chastity are the defined qualities of a good woman and she can preserve her honour only under the guardship of a man; the father is in charge of protecting her virginity, the husband her chastity. (par. 15)

Such concepts have been instrumental in raising the crime graph against women. Women are abducted and raped as an act of revenge in personal as well social matters. Once a woman loses her honour, there is no respectable place for her in the society. Her own faltering in terms of morals is a severe blow to the honour of her family. Nirmala Sathe also agrees, “In society women are seen as the property of men and represent the honour of the male, the family and the community” (150). In fact, it is the male perception of women which makes him take woman as an object of lust. Women also are conditioned that their chastity is synonymous with their honour and losing it by rape or accident makes them self-conscious. It is so because males make chastity a yard-stick of a woman being good or bad.

It is not always that a married woman suffers, an unmarried woman also suffers for not being married. To pack off a young girl to another home is a holy duty for many parents. Hence, girls of marriageable age are a big concern for the parents. Mithu in French Lover commits suicide because no suitable boy can be found for her. It is not the non-fulfilment of her sexual desire but the shame of her own dark complexion, coarse looks and a worried expression on her parents’ faces that drives her to kill herself. Earlier she had pleaded with Nila to find a husband for her:

‘Find me a man, anyone. You know I am four years older than you. Baba was a clerk and the job has gone. Now he is a watchman in the same office. Dada is jobless. Whoever comes to see me for a match, rejects me because of my dark skin. Baba doesn’t have any money to offer me a fat dowry. Nila, you are married and you wouldn’t know what a crime it is in this society to stay unmarried. I have passed my B.A. long ago and I am sitting at home. I am nothing but a burden on my parents. I am an eye sore….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. If you find someone, old, mad…” (136-37)
Later on, Nikhil informs Nila that Mithu hanged herself. She sacrificed herself at the altar of family’s honour. Obviously, a girl’s life has less worth than family’s honour. Once a girl is married off, nobody in her parental home is ready to take her in again. A proverb is often repeated to the Indian girls, “Dear daughter, go to your husband’s home in palanquin, but come out only on a hearse.” Parents also discourage their daughter to complain about her in-laws or her husband. Nila’s father never asks his daughter whether she is comfortable or happy but is always full of sympathy for Kishanlal. He complains that he has lost sleep over Nila’s marital issues and is eager to send her back. He is not ready to let her stay at their place: “After marriage your husband’s house is your home. There lie all your rights. Girls come to their father’s house for a short while, not to stay” (154). He further warns her, “Either go back to Paris, or kill yourself like Mithu and let us off” (155).

Rukshana was a friend of Kalyani, the heroine of Phera, in their girlhood days. When she was a class eight student she was married off to an old man she knew nothing about. Her brother Swapan told Kalyani that Rukshana’s marriage had broken up. Her husband divorced her and she was married again. But her new marriage was nothing better, as her husband often beat her up. Kalyani is shocked to hear all this:

‘What are you saying? He beats Rukshana up? Why doesn’t she come away?’
‘Where will she go with so many children? Her parents are no longer alive. She has to seek refuge in her brother’s place. I wouldn’t mind if she came and stayed with us, but I doubt my brothers would like it.’ (97)

Instinctively, Kalyani thought of Rukshana of old who was so boisterous that she couldn’t be reined in easily. Now the same girl was a prisoner in her own home.

A woman is passed on from parents to a husband and from the husband to nothingness. Jhumur of Shodh remembers the plight of Parul, a girl forsaken by her husband and tortured by her near and dear ones for no crime of hers. Even the mother keeps on reminding her of her plight. Nila reflects, “Parul had gone through three kinds of existence in one lifetime as a daughter, as a wife and as a divorcee. The same person had undergone divergent and vastly different modes of living in this society and had been at the receiving end in all of them” (135).

Then, in Taslima Nasreen’s literature there is reference to emotional violence that spans insults, jibes for not having a male child, preventing a woman from getting a job and forcing marriage against a woman’s will. Kalyani of Phera, brought up in an atmosphere where there
was no discrimination between a male and female child, wonders how giving birth to a son changes one’s position in a family. “Her importance in the family had increased after the birth of a son. She was loved more, given gifts of jewellery. Her life as a woman seemed at last vindicated, or so the people said” (24). Earlier the same Kalyani had to bear sarcastic remarks for not being able to give birth to a male child from her in-laws as well as her husband. “She realized that a woman without a son had no place in society. ... Anirban kept running to Tarapith to pray for a son. His parents expressed sympathy. ‘Who knows? Bou may have some serious malfunctioning’” (22-23).

In her autobiography, Taslima Nasreen gives an account of her own childhood memories that when Chandana, her classmate and friend, was born, her father rushed to kill her because he did not like girls. Thanks to the intervention of family members Chandana’s life was saved. Chandana had never been able to forgive her father.

If a woman gives birth to a daughter, she is humiliated and cursed and even faces the threat of divorce. In fact, for a married couple, the most unwanted thing is a female baby. And if it happens repeatedly, either the wife gets a divorce for her crime of having given birth to a girl child or she must spend her life in disgrace. Jhumur comes to know about a patient of Dr. Sebati. Ayasha, the patient had given birth to a girl child, her first baby and her husband had left the hospital in a huff. A broken hearted Ayasha had cried the whole night holding the baby in her arms. Jhumur realizes, “I recognized how the wives were discarded if the husbands came to know they were barren or could give birth to only female children” (134).

Taslima Nasreen herself, when she worked as a gynaecologist, had witnessed worry and fear writ large on the faces of the women who gave birth to girl-children. She relates her experiences of the obstetrics department’s delivery room where there used to be a continuous stream of mothers of different ages. Outside the room, when she informed the waiting relatives of the arrival of a girl, their faces were transformed with gloom.

How undesirable was the arrival of a girl child was something I witnessed almost every day. ... To stop the wails of a twenty-one year old woman who had given birth to a girl child, I had said, “Being a woman yourself, you don’t desire a girl-child, chichi, what a shame!” The woman told me in a low tone, “I will be given ‘talaq’, if that happens, where will I go?” If you go into a labour room in any
hospital, you can hear the cry of women giving birth to a female child. They cry because their husbands will divorce them.” ("World," BBC News)

In the Indian sub-continent, though the statistics give a fascinating picture of progress and modernization, the facts are uglier than one can imagine. The desire for a male child becomes more pronounced with the advent of the technology of ultra-sonography.

The cases of domestic violence are in no case infrequent. Not to speak of common illiterate women, even educated women cannot always hope for a decent life. Wife-beating and rape have become common even among communities which traditionally respected women. Taslima Nasreen’s mother was brutally beaten by her father. Towards the end of the novel, French Lover, Benoir, who is furious when Nila refuses to deign to his desires, kicks Nila with hard boots and thinks of murdering her. Like Taslima Nasreen, Arundhati Roy, too, has presented women-beating as an aspect of domestic violence in her debut novel, The God of Small Things (1997), in which the central character Ammu’s mother is habitually beaten by her father till her brother Chacko, finding one day his mother being beaten, clasps his father’s arm and twists it round his back and says, “I never want this to happen again” (28). In the feminist novel Voices in the City (1963) by Anita Desai, the heroine Monisha, finding no way to mitigate her sufferings caused by a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family, and feeling helpless, ultimately commits suicide as she has no alternative left to protest against the inhuman treatment meted out to her by her husband. She views the meaninglessness of life from female point of view. Thus, the problem of domestic violence acquires mammoth proportions in the South-Asian context. Husbands beat their wives in drunken state to get rid of their frustration. Muslims say that the beating of woman is sanctioned by the holy Koran. But others too, do not lag behind: “Erstwhile Japanese Prime Minister Sato often boasted to journalists that he soundly beat his wife. He received the Nobel Prize for Peace” (Chatterjee, "Unsafe"). Even the great Indian saint-poet Tulsi Das has approved of the beating of women. He is said to have remarked that a drum, a rustic a low-born and a woman deserve to be beaten. He does not explain why. In his essay, “Ideas that have Harmed Mankind”, Bertrand Russell also exposes how man’s brutality to woman is justified in literature with nearly a similar idea,

A dog, a wife and a walnut tree,

The more you beat them the better they be. (162)
This clearly suggests that since times immemorial the patriarchal norms have dictated males’ responses to women and even women have resignedly accepted their position. The roots of violence against women are deeply embedded within the patriarchal society system itself.

The condition of women in poorer sections of society is the worst. They are exploited in multiple ways and subject to violence. They are beaten, pushed off the roof, attacked with sharp weapons, poisoned and set on fire. Women have no protection against domestic violence, including dowry deaths. These are not popularly regarded as criminal offences coming under the jurisdiction of state laws. On the contrary, these are considered family quarrels to be settled under customary law adjudicated in family courts which treat women unequally as they often favour men. Thus, the question of the subordination of women involves the attitude not only of men but also of the court and the state. The policies of Bangladesh in this respect are blatantly anti-woman. For not looking for deterrent measures against the violence and injustice to women, the state is indirectly responsible for perpetrating them. Taslima Nasreen writes in Selected Columns, “Everyday we read about women being murdered, raped, disfigured by acid. No one is caught for these crimes because laws have loopholes” (124).

Taslima Nasreen takes to task not only the uncivilized men of lower stratum of society for thrashing and beating their wives; but also the urban, educated, sophisticated elites who torture women in a very subtle and refined way. She exposes their shrewd manoeuvres to keep woman subdued. Haroon of Shodh would not let anybody in the house know how mean he was in suspecting that his wife was carrying another man’s child in her womb, and getting it killed. He would not tell his wife to cut off her links with her friends; he would simply have his telephone number changed and tap the phones. Outwardly, he is a very hospitable and goody-goody man in presence of her friends and makes them feel that they were ignored by Jhumur herself. He says that he would accept Jhumur’s gift (of a boy or girl) gratefully while in her heart Jhumur knows how he longs for a baby-boy. In the last scene of the novel too, he is not clearly debarring Jhumur from going on a job and makes excuses like the taking care of the baby. Kishanlal of French Lover too would give everything that Nila demands but she cannot have anything on her own. Taslima Nasreen reveals hypocrisy of such men as would like to keep their women in gilded cages.

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be said that Taslima Nasreen depicts the plight and predicament of the Bangladeshi woman. But hers (Bangladeshi woman’s) is not an
exceptional case. She represents all the suffering women in general and women in Muslim societies in particular all over the world. She admits:

The life of woman beckoned me. Women made me think constantly. I perpetually experienced the sorrows and pains of women. The pain that I had suffered in my life was the pain of a woman. Was the pain mine alone? I know, it had to be the pain of thousands of other women. *(Wild Wind 507)*

Woman is exploited at all places at all times and in all manners. Thus, in depicting woman’s miserable life the author indictsthe entire society which causes exploitation and allows it. As reported in the Introduction to *Violence Against Women: Women Against Violence* (1998), violence against women is not confined to Bangladesh or Asia, it is a global phenomenon. Here are the two comparative facts: “Maria Crawford quotes figures to show that around three quarters of the women killed annually in Canada are killed by the men they are living with….Figures quoted by Varsha Bhagat show that six women are burnt every day on an average in Gujarat” (2).

All this has become a way of life all over the world and more so in South Asian countries like Bangladesh which forms the social milieu of the most of Taslima Nasreen’s writings because the families are patriarchal, the system is sanctioned by religion, hence Taslima Nasreen’s denunciation of all religions: “I criticize Islam and also I criticize Christianity, Judaism, I criticize Hinduism because women are oppressed by all religions. All religions are anti-women. Religions were made by men and men made religions for their own fun, for their own interest” (“Devil’s Advocate,” CNN-IBN). Here Taslima Nasreen, the recipient of Simone de Beauvoir Award for the year 2008 seems to have been influenced by Beauvoir herself. In her Introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes, “Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect their wish for domination” (xxviii). This view is substantiated in the novel of Jane Austen (1775-1817), *Persuasion* (1818), the heroine, Anne Elliot having argument with captain Harville challenges patriarchy in these words:

Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much
higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything. (221)

Man is the master of the world. He can make and unmake laws as he wishes but woman is forever tied to drudgery because she is not given economic independence in any religion and her subjugation is justified by law-books. Taslima Nasreen seems to tell us that women like the slaves in Roman Empire are completely beaten down and crushed by the curse of social customs even in our enlightened age and, what is more, the situation goes from bad to worse as time goes by. Man is, by and large, indifferent to woman’s sufferings, and there is no dearth of such men as derive sadistic pleasure by aggravating her miseries. Taslima Nasreen believes that Islam is responsible, to a large extent, for the deplorable condition of women and thus she rejects Islam. It is not only Islam but every religion which undermines woman that she criticizes. “If any religion keeps people in ignorance, if any religion allows people to persecute other people of different faith and if any religion keeps women in slavery then I cannot accept that religion” (“Devil’s Advocate”).

Taslima Nasreen openly declares that religion suppresses woman. In her views she appears to take her views from Begam Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain who asserts:

We have been unable to raise our heads from slavery for one reason: whenever a sister had tried to stand up straight, immediately the weighty weapons of religion or the sayings of the shastras have fallen to break her head open…These religious texts are taken as God’s commandments and used by men to keep us in eternal darkness. (qtd. in Sengupta, Translator’s Note vii)

Taslima Nasreen has been accepted by the West as a symbol of the Islamic woman who has stood up against the unfair treatment to women. In recent years the feminist movement has become more energized and organized as a response to the perceived threat of Islamization, inter alia. Obviously, there are people who want to suppress women’s freedom by using religion as an excuse. They use religion in such a way as to ensure male dominance; they argue that female emancipation is not part of God’s plan. Iqbal Mullick in Women in Islam tries to justify that Islam holds the essential human dignity and fundamental equality of the two sexes. He says: “Before the advent of Islam the history of woman was no doubt the history of subjugation and oppression” (50). He further claims that the social status of women in Islam is much higher than that accorded by any other religion. But he bases his concepts on half-baked theories. Such
arguments are discarded with disgust by critics like Fatna A. Sabbath who goes into the depth of religious texts to expose how they try to prove woman as a lesser human being with lesser aptitude. They are not considered even humans; rather, they are ranked with material objects. On the other hand, the supporters of Islam try to convince people that Islam has given women more rights than any other religion. Sabbath quotes many verses from the Koran in which women are associated with the material riches created for the gratification of their husbands.

As an answer to such bigotry, Taslima Nasreen has been working in the direction of liberating women from the clutches of religion, which, according to her, gives men the license to enslave women. Taslima points out that there is no equality between man and woman, in marriage, divorce, child-custody and inheritance under Islam. A woman in Islam is a miserable specimen of humanity. She suffers from the cradle to the grave because she is bound by religion. It has been mentioned in the holy Quran: “Your women are a tilth for you so go to your tilth as ye will. (2:223)” (qtd. in Mullick 191) The Koran allows infliction of physical punishment on women, “As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart; and beat them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way from them. (4:34)” (qtd. in Mullick 2). The Koran also says that if a woman fails to comply with the above order of her husband, she is a sinner and deserves punishment from the divine authorities: “If a husband calls his wife to his bed and she refuses to come, the angels hurl curses on her till morning. (Bukhari)” (qtd. in Mullick 19).

Regarding divorce laws too, woman is at a disadvantage. A husband can divorce his wife by mutual consent or against his wife’s will. But,

A wife, however, has difficulty in divorcing her husband against his will. She has to show good reason and get an outside authority to intervene. Typically, a wife has to prove insanity, neglect, abandonment or very serious abuse. The Sharia does not consider adultery as a ground for divorce, since an adulterer is (at least in theory) liable to execution. (Sedgwick 109)

Hence, in Islam, a woman is at a disadvantage because of unjust divorce laws. A man can divorce his wife whenever he likes unilaterally and without cause by uttering the word ‘talaq’ thrice but a woman even if she is victim of domestic violence or infidelity of her husband cannot demand divorce from her husband. It is near impossible for a wife to prove her husband’s infidelity, so the question of above-said punishment for him hardly arises. Even if she dares to do
so, she has to face harassment at the court and looked down as a low woman. Even if she is successful in getting the divorce, her torture by society does not relent. She is not given a respectable place even in their parents’ home. An example is set before other women so that they might not follow suit. There is no provision even for alimony. In her study of Taslima Nasreen’s work in context of the social paradigms of Bangladesh Saiyeda Khatun writes regarding divorced women:

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 entitlement. Moreover, going to court for a divorce is extremely dishonourable 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. (par. 15)

Another reason of the miserable condition of women is purdah system. Taslima Nasreen refers to the evil of veiling in almost all her writings though the issue gets more coverage in articles and autobiographical writings. In Shodh, Jhumur grumbles that the servant of the house enjoys more freedom as “She could lift her veil whenever she pleased. I had to keep my head covered whether I liked it or not” (12).

Seclusion of women which restricts them from participating in social and political affairs, finds approval in the Holy Scriptures too. Iqbal Mullick writes regarding woman’s subjugation: “Holy Prophet Muhammad has said, “Woman is to be kept in privacy, therefore, keep her confined in the house” (111). Not only Islamic but Hindu religious teachers too feared and shunned woman for being an embodiment of sexuality possessing no intellectual or spiritual dimensions. In fact, woman is perceived in all religious discourses as exclusively sexual object who must be avoided to prevent men from going astray. John Bowker gives the Muslim opinion on veiling:

The idea of ‘the barrier’ is one of the most fundamental in the Islamic ethics of daily life, and one which, as we will see, is of great importance in Muslim education. Many of the detailed rules of behaviour or of deportment are to prevent sin or temptation even coming over the threshold. In the case of clothing and the Hijab, it is to prevent arousal by sexual temptation. (121)
Thus, there is double irony in the image presented by religious discourses. On the one hand, woman is presented as an erotic object without her own independent identity, created merely for the sexual gratification of man, on the other hand, she is an embodiment of sin and corruption, hence, to be controlled, separated and kept under cover. The highly formal Islamic marriage is largely an agreement between two families rather than two individuals with equal rights and obligations. Marriage gives the husband the right of access to his wife’s body, while the wife must remain silent and passive regarding her desires. Nasreen quotes the Holy Koran to expose this hypocrisy and prove how biased religion is against woman:

Islam considers a woman slave or sexual object, nothing more…Islam treats woman intellectually, morally and physically inferior. In marriage Islam protects the rights of men only. Once the marriage is consummated, women have no right whatsoever to this field. The Koran gave total freedom to men saying, “Your women are your field, go unto them as you will. (“Speech”)”

But Taslima Nasreen defines this aspect of women in relation to man’s weakness and demoralizing aspect. She suggests that the custom of veiling humiliates not only women but men also who cannot control themselves and falter in their morals even at the sight of women. It also brings forth their own complexes regarding their sexual powers and their jealousy of other men.

This unjust and illogical restraint put upon women has made them a historic case of economic dependence that has persisted till date. Woman’s disadvantaged position is aptly described by a report published under the aegis of the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, which gives a crystal clear picture of women’s status conditioned by the conservatives and Islamists:

Although women have right to own and dispose of property, they inherit less property than men. Women have the right to only half the amount of inheritance that their men receive. Male members of the kin-group have extensive control over key decisions affecting their women’s rights. Women are required to obtain permission of father, husband, or other guardians to marry, seek employment, start a business, or travel. (Offenhauer, Women in Islamic Societies 35)

There has been a persistent demand by the feminists for amendments in Shariat laws and hence improve women’s position. Taslima Nasreen landed herself in difficulty when she said in her interview to The Statesman that Shariat laws should be changed. So many of women’s problems
in Islamic nations are because of rigidity in these laws while they are only man-made, and not prescribed by the Holy Prophet, Muhammad. As reported by Sheeba Aslam Fahmi, there have been innumerable reforms in Shari'at laws in the countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt Tunisia, Spain and Bangladesh. So, let’s hope with Taslima for better Islamic societies. Taslima Nasreen, too, has asked for changes in the family laws that go against women, changes in aspects of the Islamic religious code that are against women, human rights for women so that they need not be the slaves of men, have freedom to say what they believe in as a secularist, abolition of practices such as divorcing women just by saying ‘talaq’ thrice and the liberation of women from man-made prohibitions.

Going a step further, Taslima Nasreen not only raises her voice against Islamic laws which allow beating, thrashing, abusing and heaping atrocities on women; but she also takes up subtle issues like how a woman wants to live her life. The West has been in the habit of presenting the women of the Third World as victims of extreme torture while all evil customs are also prevalent in the West too, though their snobbery does not permit them to expose those evils. In *French Lover*, Taslima Nasreen satirises this kind of pseudo-feminism. A false impression is created in our minds that today the women of the West are economically stronger, therefore, less vulnerable. So many revolutions that took place in the West put them in a better and safer position. However, exploitation of women continues unabated everywhere. Michelle of *French Lover* says, “Times have changed, you must admit. Just think of the condition of women in Europe—the church used to burn them alive, didn’t it?” (92). Nicole, another character, countering her view, raises her hands and silences everyone. Then she utters each word slowly and clearly, “Things have changed only on the surface; beneath it all everything is just the same always: man still exploits woman and the frameworks of exploitation haven’t changed at all” (92-93).

All of Taslima Nasreen’s writings are synonymous with feminist writings. In every novel she shows how every society and its male members crush a woman’s desire for freedom. A woman demanding equality, freedom and justice and showing self-assertion is not tolerated. She cannot claim love on an equal footing. Taslima turns the matters topsy-turvy. In *Shodh*, Jhumur’s husband Haroon is moved with gratitude when Jhumur says that she does not need any *mehar*. He says, “I want you for myself...only for myself”(201). But Jhumur is quite mature in her stance, “I had corrected him adding that we were two different people—each with an
independent mind. Neither of us is the property of the other" (201). A communist in her ideologies, Taslima Nasreen reflects the influence of Marx and Engels in her writings. Like Engels, Taslima Nasreen believes that man-woman relationship should be based on love, equality and complete reciprocity.

The story of Jhumur’s marriage goes beyond the study of marriage or the fate of a person and raises uncomfortable questions such as: Is love possible without self-respect? What is the relationship among love, desire and marriage? Why must a woman remain silent regarding her own desires? Why does she not have any right to take decision in matters as to have a baby or not to have it and when and by whom? Taslima Nasreen’s heroines articulate their identity and assert their rights to their own body, their womb, money, education, and social life, and shock the readers out of their complacency. They are bold and rebellious, like their creator, even in suffering. They upset the established norms and cardinal values and ridicule the idea of a good woman held by a majority of people.

Taslima Nasreen turns social conceptions and conventions upside down. A good woman suffers silently all the humiliations heaped on her in her married life. To serve her husband is the primary duty of a good wife. He is the master; she is his servant. He is God; she is his worshipper. These notions, in Taslima Nasreen’s view, are impressed on women in order to keep them in slavery permanently. In her interview to Karan Thapar, Taslima Nasreen says that she herself is a bad woman. In this hypocritical society there is no other way than to be a fallen woman in order to liberate oneself. The word ‘fallen’ applies to a woman who is adulterous and without any ‘character’ in the socially accepted sense. The word is hardly ever applied to a man—although there may be more adulterous men in this world than women. If ‘fallen’ men are not destroyed fallen women will continue to exist for the pleasing of these men. The concept was challenged more than a century back by Thomas Hardy when he called Tess, a woman defiled in the sense of virginity, ‘a pure woman’. In his introduction to Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891), C. Day Lewis writes:

Hardy’s sub-title, ‘A Pure Woman’, was an afterthought; but several times in the novel he stresses the essential purity of his heroine—though Tess has ‘fallen’, she should be judged not by this, but by her intentions, her life and nature seen as a whole. Hardy perceived it to be nowhere more true than in the relationship between man and woman that ‘the letter killeth.’ (11)
Among various rights that Taslima Nasreen demands for women, an important one is the right to her own body. She openly expresses her sexual desires in order to fulfil them. Nila, who does not fit in with her tradition-bound husband, Kishanlal, goes with her French lover, Benoir. Here she reminds the reader of Jasmine, the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1990) who asserts her femininity beyond conventions after she has undergone many adventures and misadventures at home and abroad. Regarding the concept of sexuality, Taslima Nasreen gives a terrible shock to male chauvinistic belief that woman is a passive object of pleasure and she herself need not have any role in it. Taslima brings to the fore hitherto repressed knowledge about female desire. In *Shodh*, Jhumur confesses to herself that she protested against Haroon’s advances before marriage not because it was a taboo for her, rather it was because she had other important things to do. She remembers,

I had secretly wanted Haroon to touch me all over and if I hadn’t been so hard pressed to get home early I would have accepted his ‘invitation of love’. And why shouldn’t I have had? What was wrong in two youthful bodies coming together in passion? The rites of spring! (79)

After fulfilling all her duties towards her in-laws, sacrificing all her personal contacts, she asserts her right to claim something back. This is a process of evolution for her. This something is her self-identity and this she achieves by paying her husband in the same coin. Haroon gets her foetus aborted because he was suspicious of its parentage. Jhumur conceives somebody else’s child without letting Haroon have the slightest suspicion and she exults in her strategy. She analyses her own morality, and without any sense of guilt, she concludes, “I wasn’t a loose woman. I wasn’t deceiving him, I was merely paying him back…” (147) and that “Haroon had violated the very truth of my being by his unwarranted suspicions. My anger, my infidelity, was the expression of my utter loyalty to my own integrity” (166).

This is a totally new image of womanhood and motherhood. Until now man had taken pleasure in glorifying the self-sacrificing and ever-patient image of motherhood. Taslima Nasreen gives paramount importance to this right of woman in almost all her writings, be they her newspaper columns, her poetry or her novels. In her novel *Opporopokho* (1992), her character Jamuna strongly affirms that the illegitimate child is her child only and of nobody else. This point is stressed by Saiyeda Khatun who states, “Taslima invests the sign with a politics of
subversion and protest. Unsanctioned pregnancies are endorsed in Taslima’s stories with an agenda of empowering women” (par. 3).

Sexual relationship outside marriage bond, as we find in Shodh, is an assertion of female sexuality. Just as Virginia Woolf talked of “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), Taslima Nasreen talks of ‘a womb of one’s own’. She does not forget to pay homage to the woman who initiated this battle for womb. Nila of French Lover wants to get an abortion done as the foetus has not taken shape out of love but lust. She remembers:

> It was in Paris that Simone de Beauvoir had fought for abortion in the fifties. She had rented a small house in the sixth arrondissement and helped women abort legally. Her battle resulted in the legalization of abortion. Nila felt happy that she was going to enjoy the fruits of that revolution in the same city. (292)

Virginia Woolf, in her essay, previously delivered as a lecture to some college students, observes that to write a woman needs financial independence and a room of her own, and in these two matters, that is, economic security and privacy, women have been traditionally disadvantaged as compared to men. ‘A room of one’s own’ forms a prominent concern for Taslima Nasreen’s heroines also. They want space for themselves. Jhumur and Ranu of Shodh and Nila of French Lover are obsessed with the idea of having their own space where they can have freedom and live their lives on their own terms.

Taslima Nasreen also pleads against taking the husband’s surname after marriage and naming a child after its father’s name. Thus, as she considers a child to be more of a woman than a man, Taslima brings to light the hidden side of female desire. Conceiving a child out of marriage is a way of revolt against patriarchy adopted by Taslima Nasreen’s heroine. Taslima Nasreen has certainly sided with her heroine but the act that it strikes at the very foundation of a family and society cannot be brushed aside. If perceived from the traditional norms, undeniably, Jhumur’s approach is unethical. It is a sin from the religious point of view and a crime from the legal point of view. But in her action Jhumur reclaims and establishes the power over her body and soul. She dares to defy the ethical cover-up of the patriarchal practices to subordinate women. Jhumur takes this extreme step and there are very cogent and psychological reasons to spur this step. Here, Nasreen’s heroines present a sharp contrast to Gayatri Spivak’s subalternised image of woman. Whereas in Spivak the subaltern women experience physical horror and even annihilation of their bodies, Taslima’s women represent a different oppositional
mode by enunciating and confirming the ecstatic pleasure of the body and by utilizing the womb to disrupt the self-complacent male order.

Apart from Spivak, it is often tempting to compare Taslima Nasreen with Kamala Das. Both are confessional writers and have revealed their personal experiences of love and lust which are generally taboo and shocking in context of the prevailing moral standards prescribed by the male members of society. Both have craved for true love but have received only lust from men—their husbands and other men too. Both have acted as rebels against the society that is male-centric. Both are great poets and feminists in their own right. But there are two important points of dissimilarity between them. First, Kamala Das is preoccupied with the problem of love; for Taslima Nasreen fundamentalism and the status of women are the issues that concern her most. The reformer in her often overshadows the artist in her. Second, Taslima Nasreen condemns religion as it is instrumental in keeping women in slavery. Kamala Das, in her later life, converted to Islam and became Suraiya whereas Taslima Nasreen has given up Islam and does not find any religion worth-adopting; she is free from religious tentacles.

Society does not endorse such women as dare to assert themselves in terms of body and womb. It either wants them to end their own lives like Daria of *Janani* (1961) by Shaukat Osman or kill them for the sake of honour. But Taslima Nasreen’s heroines desperately want to live. Kishanlal always wants Nila to be passive and inert. He cannot tolerate her arguing and reasoning with him and roars that no Indian wife speaks like that. He wants to be the lord of her life. He can buy everything for her but won’t allow her to buy anything. She can leave home only in case there is fire. Fed up with this imprisonment, Nila is desperate to assert her identity beyond her husband. One day, she crosses the threshold, and is carried away by the art and beauty of the French world where she wants to dissolve her borrowed identity—“just one identity—that she was Mrs. Kishanlal” (67). Her demands from life are far more than the fulfilment of basic necessities. She tells the gaping Kishanlal, “You’re talking of bread, but that isn’t all. One needs the lily as well” (71). Haroon shatters Jhumur’s personality to shreds, delinks her from her own world—her family and her friends, till she is left with nothing to call her own. She even learns never to demand from Allah to grant her any personal favours (105). Still, phoenix-like, she emerges from the ashes and creates her own identity.

Even in the face of trying situations, Taslima Nasreen’s heroines do not give in. They are all great survivors. Jhumur recalls how Kakima struggled after her husband left her alone and
shelterless. “Kakima was a great survivor. I had seen her pull through all kinds of situations, especially when the country broke apart” (79). Maya, Suranjan’s sister in Lajja, wants to go to some safe place when there are riots. She does not depend on the family’s patriarchal head to take decisions and leaves for Parul’s house. She manages economic independence by giving tuitions and knows how to make compromises in order to survive. She falls prey to hooligans because she has to return to attend to her ailing father, Sudhamoy, who laments her return, “The girl had so very much wanted to live. She had fled to Parul’s house on her own, and it was only his illness that had brought her back to be carried away by those heartless monsters” (157). Their creator, that is, Taslima Nasreen, advises every woman and herself too in Selected Columns, “Woman, rise and live again. Take a deep breath…If you are a woman too, defeat death and live again” (161).

One important aspect of feminism is hatred for men. In French Lover, Danielle, the lesbian, hates men and has never allowed any man to come close to her. Having been raped by her father in her adolescence, she suggests an analogy with Taslima Nasreen too, who was raped by her uncles at around the same age. Danielle warns Nila against men, “You’ve seen how life is with a man…Hasn’t it taught you a lesson?” (118). She concludes, “All men are the same. They all exploit women” (118).

Here, the point needs to be further illustrated as Ketaki Kushari Dyson has accused Taslima of being a man-hater. Ms. Dyson has also said that Taslima Nasreen has been over-rated at the cost of other Bangladeshi writers including herself. But there are evidences in her novels which contradict Dyson’s charge. Mojammel and his co-workers in French Lover are sympathetic to the heroine Nila and so is she to them. In Phera, an old man (name not mentioned), and a boy Swapan, the brother of Kalyani’s girlhood friend welcome her warmly. In Shodh, Jhumur finds intimate friends in Arju and Subhash. In Lajja, too, there is no trace of man hating instances. Most of her female characters have very emotional bondage with their fathers.

None of her heroines is ashamed of her womanhood. They are brought up in an atmosphere where there is no discrimination on the basis of religion and gender. They know how to live: holding their heads high (as Tagore dreamed). They are sustained by big dreams like becoming a magistrate. Taslima Nasreen’s heroines know that money cannot buy happiness and are free from the notions of religious bigotry and superstition. They are bold and beautiful and cannot tolerate any bully. Jhumur of Shodh remembers:
Once when I was thirteen years old I had come home crying because some boys had pulled at my dress. Baba had taken me aside and said, "Don't think just because you're a girl you are a lesser human being. Always walk with your head high, keep your backbone firm and straight. Don't hesitate to slap anyone who dares bother you on the streets." (198-99)

In her writings, Taslima Nasreen suggests that emancipation from the bondage of man is not possible without economic independence because her dependence on man is largely responsible for woman's low status in society. Women are more like the puppets which move jerkily on the stage when one pulls the strings than individuals with minds of their own. Nila sits down to write to Molina, her mother in Kolkata:

If I had money, Ma, I'd have lived happily. My own money, Ma. Without your own money you have to obey the person who has money for all your life. If you are a pauper, your wishes don't count. You can't live on someone else's money and also have your freedom. (68)

Woman cannot expect emancipation from the bonded and unpaid-for domestic drudgery unless she stands economically on equal footing with man. Without economic independence she will always remain a beggar for love and respect and as beggars cannot be choosers, she will not be able to earn a respectable position of freedom and choice. Love without equality is exhausted by lust. Engels stated that emancipation of women and their equality with men would be impossible so long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework. Only equal economic status can give woman right to reason and assert herself. As long as she is deprived of this fortification, she will continue to be trampled underfoot. Savitri, the heroine of R.K. Narayan's novel, *The Dark Room* (1972), in a bid to end her slavery leaves her house and attempts to commit suicide but cannot. Then she lives in a temple and toils hard to earn her bread. At first she is thrilled at her independence, "This is my own rice, my very own; and I am not obliged to anyone for this. This is nobody's charity to me" (120). But soon she realizes that a woman cannot live without any support. If she has to slave, it is better to do so in her husband's house rather than in the temples. She returns home and resigns to her fate in utter helplessness and despair as she has no independent source of income, and gives vent to her frustration, "What despicable creatures of god are we that we can't exist without a support. I am like a bamboo pole
which cannot stand without a wall to support it…” (123). She has to come back to the square one.

Economic independence or right to have one’s own money has always been an important feminist issue. Woman cannot enjoy her just rights provided by the constitution until she is economically independent. Simone de Beauvoir writes:

According to French law, obedience is no longer included among the duties of a wife, and each woman citizen has a right to vote; but these civil liberties remain theoretical as long as they are unaccompanied by economic freedom. ...It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separates her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator. (679)

In fact, economic self-reliance is the key solution to the problems of women as independence and equality are indispensable to an individual to lead a life of dignity. Irshad Manji assures Muslim Womanhood of an unshackled life: “By liberating Muslim women’s entrepreneurial talents, we in the twentieth-century can help transform honor into dignity and thereby reform how Islam is practiced” (178). All the heroines of Taslima Nasreen’s four novels under study have their own source of income by the time the novels reach their end. Nila asks Mojammel to find a job for her and finally she gets a job of packing computers in boxes. Jhumur’s emancipation comes through her getting a job and becoming economically independent. She stands on her own feet at last. She becomes a teacher, an earning hand. She knows what it is to have her own money and tells Haroon that she cannot claim his money as hers. Maya gives tuitions and earns money to support herself and her family also, to some extent.

Independence regarding money matters can only be achieved through education. Uneducated women, even if they inherit money, cannot claim it and cannot prevent others from usurping it. Had Nila of French Lover not known her rights, no man, even no woman of the family would let her take the money Molina gave her. As a matter of fact, a woman can come out of the four walls of her house only if she is educated. Uneducated women, even if coming of rich families, still suffer from various socio-cultural, personal and familial constraints, which come in the way of the improvement of their life and living. Taslima Nasreen feels very small and
humbly confesses she cannot render any practical help to the suffering women of Bangladesh who are uneducated. This bitter realization descended upon her when she came in contact with a friend (whose name she keeps secret and whom she calls “Chh”) during the days when she had gone into hiding escaping the fundamentalists. “Chh” told her, “80% of the population of the country is illiterate and you claim that you write for women. How many of them can read what you write? Only the educated women have the chance to become independent” (Wei Andhere Din 198).

Taslima Nasreen delves deep into the roots of the disadvantaged conditions of women’s life. An important factor is the Muslim community’s attitude to devalue continuing education for girls. It is quite common in many families to hold the view that it is the boy who needs to be educated and not the girl. Girls may be sent to school but they are denied higher education. Taliban rule in Afghanistan and then in Pakistan’s Swat valley put a total ban on girls’ education by closing or destroying girls’ schools. Even when a rule is not imposed, a common belief is that woman’s place is the hearth and home and men are needed for other jobs. The belief is so much ingrained in their minds that it is difficult to get it over. Many educated girls do not take up career, as it will hinder their smooth and peaceful family life. Jhumur of Shodh feels depressed to think that her education was rotting like a stagnant pool,

Baba had brought me up to become an independent woman. He had sent me to school, encouraged me to become educated. And here I was, a parasite, with all the learning stashed inside my head. I had become putty in others’ hands, had no life of my own. Parasites don’t have any. (197)

However, the gainful employment which has been thought to be a panacea for all women’s ills is not an unadulterated blessing. The paid employment outside the home has to be carried on along with the unpaid employment within home. A working woman has to prove herself as a perfect house-keeper and also show herself as not lacking in the qualities that help her succeed as a professional woman. This has caused a double burden for her. But the trouble is worth taking if she is to secure empowerment and independence.

Taslima Nasreen feels that education and employment if given to women will go a long way in improving their status and bring their miseries to an end. Education, of course secular education, is important for women to get the knowledge of their rights. In many cases women are not educated, they are indoctrinated. Most of the women of the East have neither any education
nor any economic independence. Some Westerners argue that some traditions and superstitions of the Oriental countries are good in their ways but Taslima Nasreen argues that if modern secular education is good for Western women, then the Eastern women should not be deprived of it. She pleads in favour of secular education:

Why should Muhammad’s wife Khalida be a character from whom girls of the country should learn to build their character? What good would you find in Khalida’s character? What in the hell can school children learn from the biography of the thirteen or fourteen wives of Muhammad? And I want to know what kind of ideology they are getting? Why don’t they get opportunity to study or learn the biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, John of Arc, Begum Rokaya, Sarojini Naidu, Leela Nag or Ila Mitra’s revolutionary life. (“The Past”)

To conclude the argument, Taslima Nasreen emerges as an independent liberal author who does not take the traditional view regarding the status of women for granted. She believes that each woman in the world has a right to live her life with honour and dignity. She has been bogged down for centuries by patriarchal discourses and structures which have been tailor made in favour of males. Society and religion, according to Taslima Nasreen, have joined hands to conspire in order to restrict woman only to a subaltern role. Without the right to education they have remained gullible to male-centric mechanisms for they cannot understand the rules of the game. Lack of education, Taslima Nasreen feels, makes them economically dependent and thus life affords no opportunity of taking initiative and leading a life of independence in the widest sense of the term. Taslima Nasreen debunks all patriarchal structures through her novels and makes her heroines debunk them; it does not matter whether it is religion or tradition or socio-cultural restraints. She chisels them in a way where they can evolve into their independent stature by acquiring education and economic freedom. These characters whether they are Jhumur or Maya—all shape independent destiny for themselves by asserting their rights on their body and their circumstances. Thus, Taslima Nasreen vociferously asserts her stance regarding a woman’s right not only to exist but to live in a dignified manner where she can be her own mistress—the mistress of her body and her soul.
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