In addition to the three main themes, that is, fundamentalism, feminist concerns and home and homelessness with which Taslima Nasreen is intensely occupied in the novels under scrutiny, there are a large number of subsidiary themes which are clearly perceptible. A novel, unless and until it is a fantasy, cannot exist without a social milieu. The chief characters do not move in vacuum; a novelist has to create a suitable social background in which the characters move and operate. This social milieu creates a richness and depth in the fictional world of an author. While the author is engaged in delineating characters and situations which directly deal with the pre-dominant themes he has taken up for treatment, certain subsidiary themes creep in the fabric of the novel. They may not be significant in the context of the novel but their worth cannot be underestimated as it is they which make the novel wholesome and rounded.

While in the novels under consideration Taslima Nasreen is engrossed with the themes like fundamentalism, gender issues, her novels also encompass the multi-faceted human and social relationships and sub-themes which not only add colour to them but also create a composite picture of the background against which the mighty drama of human passions and pettiness is enacted. While the novels concentrate on the doings of the main protagonists, the secondary or minor characters also contribute in the movement of the action of the novels as also they shed light on human behaviour, characters, and attitudes.

Interpersonal relationships in Taslima Nasreen’s novels include man-woman relationship within and beyond sex-relations, viz. brother-sister relationship, mother-son relationship, father-daughter relationship and relationships among various female characters. Man-woman relations have, to some extent, been covered under the theme of feminism but there are other areas, too, in which these relations operate. In French Lover, Nila’s relation with her parents, her lover and others; in Phera, Kalyani’s inter-personal relationships with her friends; in Lajja, Suranjan’s relations with his comrades, his parents and his sister; in Shodh, Jhumur’s relations within and beyond social definitions are covered under this topic.

**Love and Marriage**

The theme of love and marriage is a favourite theme with writers. The general formula is that love culminates into marriage and the spouses are supposed to live happily ever after. In some novels, love is thwarted by various social forces and the lovers are a dejected lot. Of course, it is the most common theme taken up by almost all novelists ranging from Samuel Richardson to D. H. Lawrence and other modern novelists of that ilk. Emphasising the
importance of such a relationship Lawrence points out, “The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman. The relation between man and man, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary” (Twentieth Century Literary Criticism 130). No wonder, Taslima Nasreen, too, explores the complexities of man-woman relationship culminating in love and marriage relationships. In her novels, love is seldom fulfilled and marriage is a social compulsion, not a satisfying affair. Most often man-woman relationship is also highlighted in the incompatibility of marriages and inharmonious relationship between man and his wife. Jhumur and Haroon in Shodh are not made for each other. Marital fissures begin to appear soon after their marriage. Haroon is an orthodox husband. Jhumur keeps up the institution of marriage though it is already on the rocks within a few weeks’ time. They have strained relations but somehow they pull together. Nonetheless, when Jhumur is unjustly accused of being an unfaithful wife, she is well-nigh on the brink of a mental collapse; the reader cannot help sensing marital disharmony and tension between the man and the wife. Nila and Kishanlal in French Lover are mismatched from the beginning. She is sensitive, intellectual and freedom-loving being bitten by the bug of liberty abounding in the French atmosphere. Under the unbearable pressure of alienation, boredom and lack of freedom, she might have disintegrated had she not run away from Kishanlal’s prison house. Nila’s mother Molina and her father Anirban are yoked together in the bond of slave and master relationship. It is far from being a warm relationship. Anirban is not only insensitive to his wife but also callous and cruel. There is no love lost between them, but they are joined together by matrimonial bonds. Kalyani and her husband Anirban in Phera have near normal relations. The husband-wife relationship between Suranjan’s mother and father is traditional and ideal, of a devoted wife and a considerate husband. Their sexual life comes to an early end owing to the amputation of Sudhamoy’s sexual organ by his Muslim torturers but she comforts him by saying that sexual life is not the be-all and end-all of her life and she continues to love him as before.

Taslima Nasreen was brought up in the conservative Muslim society of a small town of Bangladesh wherein she was a victim of sexual abuse at an early age by her own relatives. Later, when she was doing her M.B.B.S. and staying with her family, she fell in love with a poet through correspondence and then accomplished a registered marriage. The fact is that Taslima Nasreen has neither believed in nor preached the concept of traditional arranged marriages and her own life with three consecutive husbands and one live-in relationship has been a symbol
rebellion and attack at the structure of strait-jacketed society. Thus, it would be futile to look for the stereo-typical regarding man-woman relationship in her novels. There are passionate love-relationships in all her books which project unpretentious mockery of traditional marriages. In Lajja, Suranjan had a love affair with his friend Haider’s sister Parveen and both of them used to meet without any fear and constrains of religion or community. Haider never objected to their meetings but when it came to deciding on the marriage, Suranjan was asked to embrace Islam he refused without any hesitation as he did not believe in any religion. Suranjan-Parveen relationship has its parallel in Chaman Nahal’s Azadi, too, where Arun-Nur relationship is also sacrificed at the altar of religious biases. Later on, Parveen was married off to a Muslim boy. However, she returned home in just two years. When Haider tells Suranjan all this, he reflects:

Divorce within two years? Suranjan had wanted to say, but he didn’t. He had eluded Parveen from his mind, but the news of her possible divorce gladdened him and revived memories of her….She had married a Muslim, someone her family approved. And everyone had expected everything to take off smoothly from there, almost as if it was guaranteed that if marriages were matched in terms of religion and caste they would last. So why was it necessary to come back?

(102-03)

Here Taslima Nasreen censures the institution of marriages arranged strictly within castes and communities where the girl is never asked to voice her consent. In Lajja, there are love affairs, all unsuccessful. Like Suranjan and Parveen, Maya—Jahangir relationship ends in a fiasco as Jahangir does not reciprocate Maya’s love and leaves for abroad even without saying a word of love to her. After Parveen, Suranjan is attracted towards Ratna, a girl quite mature in her outlook, but before Suranjan decides to speak up his love for her, she too marries a Muslim, Humanyun.

In Phera, there is innocent adolescent love relationship between Kalyani and Badal and it remains unfulfilled as Kalyani has to go to India. But the feeling does not die even after three decades of her married life that Kalyani lives with Anirban who also married Kalyani for love. When Kalyani visits Bangladesh she enquires about Badal and leaves some money with Swapan for him. Love between Kalyani and Anirban dies soon as the lukewarm relationship is a type of compromise for Kalyani who seeks escape from her uncle’s house through this marriage:

In her heart of heart she knew she had deceived no one but herself….Out in a rickshaw or on a boat, or sitting upon the grass chatting with Badal her face would
grow red in happiness and embarrassment. Anirban didn’t evoke those feelings in her in spite of their being really close now. (18-19)

In *Shodh*, the bitterness in Jhumur-Haroon relationship is conspicuous from the very first pages of the book though Jhumur has some sweet-bitter memories of their affair. Before their marriage, Haroon would appreciate Jhumur’s singing and go outdoors with her. Within the first few months of their marriage, Haroon reveals his real self by suspecting her of carrying another man’s baby in her womb. Once he succeeds in getting rid of the baby, Haroon becomes his passionate normal self but Jhumur is filled with cold contempt for him and craves for revenge which she succeeds in taking by entering into a sexual relationship with a young artist. At first it is the physical attraction but later on, it is suggested that Jhumur does not have any amorous feelings for the boy. He is only an easily available means of taking revenge on her husband. The painter, on the other hand, is filled with deep anguish which he reveals in his last painting which shows a woman in sari climbing stairs. He vows never to paint a woman again. Another love relationship that has no connection to the plot of the novel but runs parallel to Jhumur-Haroon relationship is the passionate Shipra-Dipu relationship. In fact, Jhumur is enamoured of Afzal because she painfully infers that Haroon could never love her like Dipu; when lifted by Afzal in his arms, she imagines herself to be Shipra and for the first time she feels fulfilled.

With an Islamic background, Taslima Nasreen’s treatment of the theme of love and sex in her writings is conditioned by the Bangladeshi patriarchy and has become a controversial theme. Since the birth of Islam, woman has been relegated to a degrading position in Islamic society, as, in religious texts, she has been described merely as a bodily phenomenon, just to satiate carnal desires of her male partner. Her physicality overshadows the other dimensions of her personality. Though in these texts, she is considered merely an erotic object, she has no say in the matters of her own desires and if she is explicit about these matters, she is taken to be a shameless slut, a threat to the society and hence, an agent of moral corruption. In the conservative cultural milieu of South Asia, a woman is not supposed to express her sexual desires openly as such an expression is a sign of shamelessness in her. Man desires her most for her two attributes, silence and immobility—she is expected never to take initiative and always to remain a passive partner in regard to the matters of sex. But, in her exploration of the theme of love and sex, Taslima Nasreen is unabashedly unorthodox. She does not believe in any religion—theocratic or social. She herself had enjoyed intimate relationship with her first husband Rudra though they had not
made a public announcement of their registered marriage. She challenges the accepted social norms and the institution of marriage. More than sex within a married relationship, she recognizes the existence of wild and unrestrained passion outside marriage, and she describes such scenes without caring for the reactions of old fogeys. In *Shodh*, the heroine has a consensual sex to pay back her husband for having a suspicious eye on her. Here Taslima Nasreen describes the nudes painted by Afzal and Jhumur’s naked body in detail. In *Lajja*, the disgusting details of Suranjan raping the Muslim whore leave a bad taste in the mouth, but in *French Lover*, the love scenes between Nila and Benoir are merrily described. Nila jumps into the Frenchman’s arms at the first instance without any qualms of conscience. Here Taslima Nasreen breaks that long silence and describes the various aspects of a woman’s sexuality. Nila, in this context, asserts her sexuality. She had been a passive immobile creature underneath her husband, Kishanlal, for it did not matter to him whether during the sexual act Nila was asleep or awake. But Benoir arouses her body in a manner that she had never experienced before. Thus Taslima Nasreen has broken through new grounds, hitherto restricted to male writers—a woman is much more than a mere body; at the same time she can have desires and passion like men.

Conservative clerics of Bangladesh accuse Taslima Nasreen of purposely including these details as they feel, it helps in boosting up the sale of the books. The writers of our sub-continent, too, have started aping the Western writers and give a frank and free description of sex because it pays them in terms of money though the exposure of sex is considered shocking and unwarranted because most of the people observe prudery in their public postures. Angry eye-brows are raised and accusing fingers are pointed at the writers who dare to violate established norms of society. No doubt, such writers are thought to be naughty and notorious. But then, there is a very thin line dividing notoriety and fame. Changing times and attitudes of people are the deciding factors in marking the difference between them. For instance, D. H. Lawrence was dubbed as a vulgar novelist but today he is rated as one of the greatest artists. Hence, it would be too much to expect Taslima Nasreen to deviate from the general trend and refrain from showing sexual encounters in her fiction. The strongest plea to include sex in fiction is that if art is to mirror life, sex cannot be excluded from it as it is an integral part of life. Nilanjana Roy, a critic on her *Dwikhandit*, comes forward in her defense: “Nasrin is not a subtle writer, but she is honest, and never vulgar. It’s absolute rubbish to get her book banned on the grounds of obscenity” and says, “people in the sub-continent are not used to plain speaking about sex, especially by women” (qtd. in Rehman,
“Calcutta”). Taslima Nasreen breaks taboos in order to jolt society out of its prudery. She wants to play a social role. However, Anwar-Sebati relationship is devoid of sexual relationship, still very intact, as they have compassion for each other despite Anwar’s impotence. Thus, it may be concluded that Taslima Nasreen is basically a thinker and reformer she keeps her writings out of the region of pure entertainment and hopes to make them an instrument of social change.

**Lesbianism**

Though lesbianism and homosexuality have been as old as human civilization, they have always been taken as aberrational behaviour—unnatural to human society. In her critical evaluation of the plays of Mahesh Dattani, who writes authoritatively on the issue of homosexuality, Sangeeta Das rightly comments: “Every second person may be a homosexual but fear of ostracism restrains him from exposing himself” (“The Sensational Issues” 113) In spite of their wide prevalence, lesbianism and homosexuality were not allowed to become a part of civilized society and its parlance. However, with the advent of modern psychology and its focus on the darker zones of human sexuality there is a renewed interest in these aspects of human sexuality. Taslima Nasreen, who does not hesitate in entering tabooed zones, takes up such a theme as lesbianism which is taken to be a strict “no, no” in an orthodox society. In *French Lover*, there are lengthy details of a lesbian relationship between Nila and Danielle though at times Taslima Nasreen seems to discuss this theme in ambiguous terms. Nila comes in Danielle’s contact at her work place and she proves to be a good friend when Nila requires a place to stay at. Danielle provides her emotional support in a foreign land when Nila needs it after her break-up with Kishanlal. But it is an utter shock to Nila when Danielle drags her in a lesbian relationship. Stunned at Danielle’s advances, Nila jumps off the bed:

‘Danielle, what are you up to?’

‘Why? Don’t you want it too?’ Danielle was surprised.

‘Want what?’

‘Sex.’

‘What?’

‘I thought you wanted it too.’

‘How did you think that?’

Danielle said, ‘You held my hand in the street.’ (99)
Holding a woman’s hand is no sign of homosexuality in Indian culture and Nila, too, does so casually. With Danielle in the bed, Nila is just a passive partner. Here, Nila’s attitude towards this complex human behaviour seems to reflect Taslima Nasreen’s own lukewarm attitude towards the relationship. Brought up in an atmosphere of culturally imposed restraints, where open discussions on homosexuality are strongly inhibited, she seems to be a naïve in the world of people with different sexual and emotional needs. At the same time, she ushers in the theme as if only to shock and shake the orthodox reader off his tabooed and limited perception of sexuality. Hence, Nila, though aroused by Danielle’s advances, seems to be uncertain about her physical desires and bodily demands: “Nila wasn’t a swimmer. She clung to Danielle, the expert swimmer, and crossed the ocean. Danielle swam ashore and whispered to Nila, ‘Wake my magic bee.’ Nila didn’t. She feared that bee, she hated it!” (104). In fact, Nila is unable to break the taboos of the restricted conservative society in which she has been brought up and hence “she was afraid that if anyone heard Danielle they’d know that she was homosexual and her companion must, naturally, be one too” (116).

Danielle has been a lesbian since she was twelve years old. At school, she fell in love with a female teacher. After that she had many lesbian relationships, the last being the one with Nicole—another character in the novel. When Nila goes into the history of her relationships, Danielle reveals that her love for the female body was a part of her man-hatred that started at an early age—at the age of six—when her father raped her. She claims, “I don’t need a man” (118) and considers homosexuality as a death blow to patriarchy, “and for sex, the day women say they don’t need men, will be the day men finally lose” (118). Nila, though submits to Danielle’s advances, craves for a touch of man, to be loved by man.

When Nila comes home to Calcutta to see her ailing mother, Danielle, too, unable to resist her urges, comes to India and is playing with Nila’s body, caressing and kissing it while her mother is dying: “When Nila was drowning in orgasmic tremor, when the first rays of the sun were kissing her long black tresses, Nila heard Chitra’s scream and turned into stone” (147). Here, in orthodox terms, the act seems to violate the sanctity of the house at the time of death. Here, Taslima Nasreen seems to treat the themes of lesbianism so as to defy everything that constrains human urges in the name of organized restraint and cultural behaviour. However, she lacks insight in this complex human behaviour which is sympathetically and intensely explored by modern writers. Susan Chacko writes in her review of French Lover:
A fair amount of prose is devoted to Nila’s sexual discoveries, though for some reason the lesbian sex is fuzzily described in a couple of paragraphs of soft-pom analogies while the Benoîr-Nila liaison has exhaustive detail and goes on for pages. Implicit parallels are drawn between the openness of French society and her own new sexual life. (“From Hooghly”)

However, in the South Asian context, where a voluminous body of literature has been produced in English as well as about twenty other indigenous languages, there are only a few names associated with the theme of lesbianism such as Ismat Chughatai, Kamala Das and Shobha De, Taslima Nasreen’s contribution by initiating tabooed issues to the South Asian literature can hardly be denied. When Ishmat Cughatai’s story “Lihaaf” (1942) came out, she had to face litigation with charges of obscenity. She, however, came out a winner. Later on, Kamala Das, too, was censured for alluding to her teenage crush with a girl in her autobiography My Story (1976). With evolving literary culture, there have been signs of growing tolerance towards lesbian and homo-sexual relationships as they have been socially as well as lawfully getting acceptance. Though some literary establishments dismissed Shobha De’s Strange Obsession (1992) as a mere purveyor of filth, it became a national bestseller. The commercial success of her writings is indicative of common man’s acceptance of non-traditional sexualities; however, the interest, to some extent, may simply be prurient curiosity. The novel is based on an uneven passionate lesbian relationship between two characters Amrita, a super model and Minx, a woman with a sexual obsession. Minx finds fulfilment in the relationship and expresses her satisfaction thus: “After many years, my darling, I felt a strange peace coming over me. I felt close to the Almighty. I walked out of here and looked at the stars. I thought I saw a heavenly sign in the skies. Without thinking I went straight to the Kali Mata Mandir. I wanted to be in the presence of the Devi and thank her for giving you to me” (106). She further expresses how her love culminates in Amrita, “I worship you…you are my goddess…my Devi…I live for you” (107). Amrita though fails to resist the pleasure that she draws from Minx’s advances, tries hard to step out of the relationship and hence her character bears an analogy with Nila of French Lover who, too, finds her lesbian relationship with Danielle abnormal and is more relaxed in her heterosexual relationship. At the same time Minx, too, resembles Danielle when she reveals her hatred for her father who made her victim of his lust at an early age. Her lesbian characters take pride in having a better understanding of female sexuality than rough and rash males. Linda of
Starry Nights tells her partner Asha Rani, “This is love, understand? This is love-making, not what those bastards do to our bodies” (80). Asha Rani too agrees, “Yes, she thought, this was what it should be, tender, beautiful and erotic. In a way it could never be with a man” (80). So far as Taslima’s own inclination towards the issue is concerned she seems to prefer heterosexual relationships over the homosexual ones. Moreover, she also seems to lack psychological depth in the delineation of her characters’ complex sexual needs and behaviour. Still, her sympathetic though ambiguous treatment of the theme is suggestive of her acceptance of this relationship.

**Inter-personal Relationships**

An in-depth study of Taslima Nasreen’s literature reveals that some of the best quoted texts belong to the theme of interpersonal relationships beyond physical contacts. In Shodh, Jhumur’s manipulated entanglement with Afzal sensationalises the story and draws the readers’ attention at once but what goes deep down the heart is Jhumur-Subhash asexual relationship which remains abiding till the very last despite Haroon’s suspicions. Their friendship crosses the frontiers of religion, community and class and sex and their attachment does not stink of mere sympathizing of an affluent supporting a deprived and impaired; rather, it affirms a deeper understanding from both sides. The following extract reveals the touching sentiments that Jhumur has for Subhash: “Don’t go anywhere Subhash…Don’t leave this country, our country, which is full of memories of Nitun Kaka, your father; the water of Buriganga is sullied with Sujit’s blood. How can you escape from these?” (221).

Similar patterns of man-woman relationships without any label can be traced in Phera too. Kalyani receives cold contempt from her dearest friend Sharifa’s husband but finds unforeseen love and compassion in an acquaintance beyond expectation. Swapan, the younger brother of her childhood friend Rukshana calls her ‘didi’, and is hospitable to her. They both discuss matters of state and religion with a humanitarian concern and Swapan’s feeling of shame over the rowdies’ scurrilous remarks on Kalyani for being a Hindu appears quite touching. Another character which needs to be referred to in this context is the man who is moved by Kalyani’s sorrow and his own neighbours’ insensitivity towards her. On seeing the debris of her house Kalyani is weeping copiously while the local people all around her pass caustic remarks. The old man consoles Kalyani thus:

‘What’s your name Ma? What is your father’s name? Where have you come from? Stay in some place and eat something. All this is happening here now.'
These people are not human beings. They are an inhuman lot. You may not have a house here any more but the country has a few good people still. Come, get up, and dry your tears. Why should you weep? Do those who speak like this know what they are saying? They blabber out whatever comes to their minds. You must not take offence.’ (94)

In fact, it is important to note that there are certain relationships which transcend the barriers of sex, geography, ethnicity, language and culture. These relationships between a man and a man are beyond all selfishness, all narrow considerations, all politics. They are pristine in nature because they are based on human sympathy, empathy, love and consideration of one man for another.

Nila of *French Lover* also exhibits similar kind of feelings for Modibu, the black boy and other immigrants like Bachhu, the cook’s brother, and Jewel’s brother Rubet, who meets with a tragic accident while trying to enter illegally into Germany. The discussion of this theme becomes significant all the more, for, time and again critics, who have probably done only a superficial study of Taslima Nasreen’s works, have accused her of promoting negativity regarding male characters. Nila’s having sympathies with these men clearly disproves the charge against Taslima Nasreen of being a man-hater, for Nila is a replica of Taslima Nasreen in a number of ways.

**Father-daughter relationship**

Another interpersonal relationship that deserves discussion is father-daughter relationship, most often a complex relationship as it is inspired by and sometimes tends to be a subjective one. Taslima herself had a love-hate relationship with her own father who was a doctor and aroused both awe and respect in her; at the same time, he was most callous towards his wife and children in his disposition and generated fear and hatred in their hearts. Whatever the emotion, Taslima Nasreen always wanted to be like her father and hence reflects his image in her writings. In *Lajja*, Suranjan’s father is a physician and imparts to his children a secular education which holds moral values much higher than any other knowledge, making them independent-minded. Maya, his daughter at once abandons the idea of her own safety and comes to him as soon as she hears of her father Sudhamoy’s sudden illness. In *Shodh*, the father of Jhumur and Nipur also educates his daughters ignoring the rigid notions of Islamic fundamentalism and patriarchy. He makes them dauntless, and does not force them to wear
burqa and never objects to their forming friendships outside caste and community, gender and religion. He wants his children to be intellectually broad in outlook and keeps them away from drowning in the mire of materialism. The father, thus, presents the ideal image, and this father-daughter relationship is near perfect. The daughter, too, holds him in high esteem and respects his wish of marrying Haroon at a short notice though they had planned otherwise. She is sad over her failure to come up to her father’s expectations. Jhumur is a father’s daughter, his shadow, more attached to him than to her mother. Thus Jhumur’s father is an idealized version of Taslima Nasreen’s own father sans all his negative qualities. In a way, this father emerges as is sanitized version, who without the negative qualities of Taslima Nasreen’s father is loving and understanding. He understands the psychological needs of his children and grooms them in such a way that they develop the qualities of self-reliance and intellectual analysis. In fact, these are the very qualities which help Jhumur in understanding her dilemmas and tackling them with confidence and clarity of purpose.

In Phera, Kalyani’s father too provides secular environment at his home. He too wants Kalyani to be highly educated and become a bar-at-law or a judge, and scolds Kalyani’s Sarlabala when she tries to train Kalyani into becoming a typical housewife.

Kalyani recalled how at Kalibaree, her mother Sarlabala, would pull her to the kitchen and say to her, ‘You are born as a woman--how can you not learn housework?’ and push her to chop vegetables. ‘Don’t teach her to become a maidservant; my girl is going to spend time studying.’ (6)

Kalyani, though not able to become a judge, becomes a nursery teacher. The attachment between the father and the daughter remains intact even after his death and during her short stay at Bangladesh, Kalyani visits the cremation ground where her parents had been cremated. Indeed, father-daughter relationship is one of the most sensitive or tender human relationships. It is a psychological fact that while daughters keep their mothers as their friends, it is their fathers who are their role models and on many occasions women have been seen being unconsciously attracted towards men who resemble their fathers in one way or the other. Taslima Nasreen, in her novels, seems to confirm this fact when many of the fathers she has delineated resemble her own father. Of course, she does not take only positive qualities that her father possessed—in some of the fathers she has delineated she has also incorporated the qualities that she detested in
her father. Take, for example, her father’s despotic behaviour, his insensitivity to her mother, his sadistic tendency to torment and torture her docile mother and his flings with other women.

One of the most complex relationships among father-daughter relationships is the relation between Nila and Anirban of French Lover. Here Taslima Nasreen draws upon her own father much more than what is required. Like Taslima’s father, Anirban is a doctor, rigid in his outlook towards society in general and women in particular. He treats his wife most inhumanly and does not take care for her when she needs his attention as a doctor, leave aside his responsibilities as a husband, who is having extra-marital relationship with Swati Sen. But when Molina, Nila’s mother dies, he performs all rites and rituals very strictly as if the death of his wife is a big loss to him. All this degrades him in the eyes of Nila. She questions him why he had treated her mother so shabbily. Anirban treats Nila in the same manner as he did Molina and asks her either to return to her husband Kishanlal or commit suicide as Mithu, another ill-fated female character in the novel does. Nila also pays him in the same coin by refusing to return the two million rupees that Molina has left for her. Paradoxically enough, the same father has a soft corner for Kishanlal, Nila’s husband and finds him quite a simple man. Through Aniraban Taslima Nasreen presents the fact that he is a symbol of patriarchal power structures and that is why instead of sympathizing with his victimized daughter he sides with her indifferent husband. There is a commonality between Nila’s father and her husband, that both of them take women to be doormats or at the most objects of lust, who are to follow their commands like slaves. Thus, Taslima Nasreen looks at both the aspects of father-daughter relationship—the positive as well as the negative.

In comparison to the father-daughter relationship, Taslima Nasreen pays less attention to mother-daughter relationship. As quoted earlier, Taslima Nasreen had more affinity for her father than her mother despite her empathizing with her mother for being a victim at the hands of her authoritarian father. She herself confesses in her articles that she wanted to attain her father’s qualities and hated her mother’s timid and servile outlook. In her earlier novels, Shodh, Laija and Phera, she seems to ignore this subtle and sensitive relationship and introduces the relationship only casually. In Shodh, Jhumur’s relationship with her mother, in Laija, Maya’s attachment with Kironmoyee and in Phera, Kalyani’s relationship with Sarlabala are eclipsed by all these heroines’ relationships with their fathers. It is, however, in French Lover, published after her mother’s death, that Taslima Nasreen feels for the poor woman—ignored all her life by her
husband as well as her children. Here, the mother-daughter relationship finds full coverage in Nila-Molina relationship. Nila’s sentiments for her mother are aroused after she comes to know about her illness which proves to be fatal. As a married woman, Nila understands her mother’s ordeal at the hands of an insensitive husband. She blames her father for neglecting her health as well as her emotional needs. Against her family’s wishes, she wants to take her mother on visit to the places she had always wanted to see. The mother, too, loves her daughter more than anybody else and leaves a large amount of money for Nila. After her death, Nila lives a life of emotional vacuum that she desires to fill with the passionate love of her French lover Benoir Dupont and tries to live life on her own terms—something which her mother was never able to do. Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in her latest novel seems to make up for the neglect in her earlier novels. At the same time, her fascination for her father’s qualities like his domineering nature and his autocratic behaviour seem to lose hold. On the whole, an impression is created that Taslima Nasreen has an imbalanced treatment of the relationships like her own tilted relationship with her own mother and father.

**Mother-son relationship**

In contrast to father-daughter relationship, mother-son relationship lacks warmth and reciprocity on the part of the sons. Jyotiparakash of *Phera* does not even want to attend his mother’s funeral. Quite shamelessly, he says, “I don’t like funeral ghats,” and adds, “and it’s such a hassle being the elder son of the family; can’t even have a sip of water before the pyre is lit”(20).

Suranjana is hardly able to share his mother’s sorrow over the loss of normalcy in her house, when she is kneeling down in prayer to the idol of goddess Durga because Sudhamoy has suffered a paralytic stroke:

She was saying fervent prayers and every now and then would bend low and wail mournfully, ‘Bhagwan…O Bhagwan…” Suranjana was so surprised by this unexpected tableau that for a moment, he did not know what to do. Should he pick up the clay idol and throw it out? Or should he, with his own hands, pull up Kironmoyee’s stooping head? It made him sick to see a head bent in such humility. (83)

Kironmoyee even sells her gold bangles but refuses to accept money from Suranjana. The worst among mother-son relationships is the relationship between Molina and her son Nikhil in
French Lover, who considers performing his mother’s last rites merely a bit of fun. Haroon of Shodh, however, does not remain constant in relationship with his mother. He gives the reign of his household to his mother who has the supreme position in the family hierarchy. She seems to represent the patriarchal authority that Haroon has delegated to her. In the early years of his married life, he does not allow his wife to have any say in domestic affairs, leave alone the social ones. But once, she gives him a son, another successor of patriarchy, he transfers the power from his mother to his wife. In the relationship between Benoir and his mother, we find an entirely different set of values where mother-son relationship is utterly formal and neither of them tries to disturb or interfere in the peace and harmony of the married life of the other.

Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s fiction presents a varied picture of the relationship between mother and son. She also shows her insight into the delicate relationship as it undergoes radical changes after the son’s marriage.

Brother-sister relationship

We may shift our gaze from father-daughter relationship to brother-sister relationship in Taslima Nasreen’s novels for a brief discussion. Taslima Nasreen herself did not have very healthy relationship with her brothers and the sentiment colours the treatment of this relationship in her works too. As has been pointed out earlier also, Taslima Nasreen’s body of fiction draws heavily from her own life. Taslima Nasreen’s brothers were too caring about her and, in fact, took offence at her libertine ways. Their prudery, orthodoxy and male-chauvinism deeply offended her. This naturally does not go well with the author and she obviously reacts to it by portraying this love-hate relationship between brother and sister in her fictional world.

Brothers are generally far more caring about their sisters’ moral behaviour than their happiness. Suranjan of Lajja does not like his sister moving out of the house during communal tension. He feels that she has moved to a Muslim house less for her safety and more to get a chance to be with Jahangir, her lover. Suranjan knew that ‘Maya was in love with a young man called Jahangir and was sure she would go with him if she had the opportunity’ (13). It does not occur to him that earlier she had pleaded with him many times to shift to a safer place. However, Maya’s abduction is the biggest shock to him and he is hardly able to sustain it. Here Maya-Suranjan relationship reminds us of Madhu-Arun relationship in Chaman Nahal’s Azadi. Arun misses her badly after she is killed in riots. His life is never the same again without her. Like
Arun, earlier it was Maya that belonged to him but now it is Suranjan who belongs to her and feels remorseful at his negligence and keeps on mulling over their relationship.

In *Phera*, Kalyani’s brothers Parimal and Jyotiprakash are highly concerned about the probability of her being involved with some boy in the college. Parimal, her younger brother warns Kalyani, “Fall in love with a genuine village idiot; you’ll see the tantrum Dada throws” (2-3).

But when it comes to taking care of Kalyani’s happiness in Kolkata, the brothers hardly seem bothered. Rather, Jyotiprakash would come to Kalyani to get some money and Kalyani could not refuse: “Can you dish out a couple of rupees?” (7). In a foreign land, Jyotiprakash, shedding off his responsibilities towards his younger siblings, takes to gambling, refuses to give shelter to his brother and suggests going to Kalyani’s place. Haroon of *Shodh* presents a sharp contrast to Jyotiprakash as he is always intent upon bringing joy in the lives of his siblings. He gives a large amount of money to Anis, his sister’s husband. He is also striving hard to see his brother Hasan settled abroad. The relationship, however, receives a set back after Haroon’s priorities change. Now his son, or more appropriately, Jhumur’s son is the pivot of his life. In *French Lover*, Nila and Nikhil do not seem to have a very affectionate relationship. Money matters also affect the relationship as Molina, Nila’s mother makes her an heir of a large sum of money.

Hence, Taslima Nasreen creates a panorama of human relationships in the form of brother-sister relationship which has a high place in the culture and tradition of Indian sub-continent. She presents a practical view of the human ties and does not deviate in pseudo-idealism.

**Zest for life**

Throughout her life and literary career, Taslima Nasreen has demonstrated an untameable will to live life on her own terms. It has been her endeavour to suck the marrow of life in its literal sense. It is this never-say-die spirit which has made Taslima Nasreen a true fighter and a survivor against heavy odds. This indomitable spirit surfaces in the body of her fictional works where her characters struggle against heavy odds and retaining their zest for life emerge victorious even if in a limited manner. It is this fighting spirit which makes Taslima Nasreen a true champion of the underdog and the marginalized.
Zest for life, the rejuvenating force that supports human existence, driving back the fears and sorrows is witnessed in all of Taslima Nasreen’s works. In *Lajja*, Maya is the first to shake Suranjan off apathy and do something to shift them to some safer place. It is her desire to live that urges her to leave that unsafe home and shift to her Muslim friend, Parul’s house. She has the knack of survival and can compromise to adjust herself to the circumstances whatever they are. When she is abducted, her father reflects, “The girl had so very much wanted to live” (157).

Nila, the heroine of *French Lover* also sees life from the perspective of an artist. Kishanlal fails to understand till the last what Nila needed when he was meeting all her needs. Nila answers, “Yes, you’re alive, but I don’t just want to live. I need more” (71). She clings on to something or the other, despite her losses—loss of her first lover Sushanta, her mother Molina, and her severance of all connections with family and friends: “Nila had lost everything, and in that loss she had lost the pain of losing, Nila desperately wanted to live. In this grotesque world Nila would walk hand in hand with beauty and head for her dreams” (202). Even Benoîr acknowledges her love for life and praises her: “I have seen many women, but none as lively as you. You know how to enjoy life. No one is more spontaneous; you are exceptional” (212).

Life and death continuously occupy Taslima Nasreen’s mind and she makes her characters philosophise about life for her. In spite of heavy odds against them, Taslima Nasreen’s protagonists have a strong desire to live. They never say die. Nila’s French acquaintance Monique discusses the issue of life and death when she sees Nila feel depressed after her mother’s death:

You have become so depressed because you saw someone die in front of your eyes, that you’ve forgotten man is one species among many others. In this universe, man lives on a planet in one solar system among many in one galaxy among many others. You are like a dot, even smaller. Can you feel your existence anywhere in this vast system?...We come and go; thus we float away.

Man’s life is over in a blink of an eye. (152)

In spite of all this philosophising, there is a spark in Nila; she has a will to live which makes Monique remarks about her liveliness: “You make me feel as if you are eternal, you will never die!” (152). Nila too discusses with Benoîr how to make life worthwhile. She quotes Sartre, “Sartre said life is pointless but it has to be made worthwhile” and muses, “What is life if not a series of pain?” (264). She relates the topic to Molina, her mother, who did not have the
capacity to make her life meaningful. She sometimes feels life is pointless. She wonders, "What would this country give her? Security? Of what—happiness or life? Sometimes Nila felt there was no point in living! There was no point in happiness" (266).

Taslima Nasreen does not believe in religion and hence there arises no question of believing in life after death. Benoir is astounded that Nila does not believe in life after death:

Benoir said, ‘But why? You have heaven and hell in your religion too.’

Nila laughed and said, ‘Long ago a Bengali author said, “Where is heaven and where is hell—who says they are far away? In the midst of man reside heaven and hell both.”’ (264-65)

How to live life is a question that always puzzles writers and Taslima Nasreen, through her mouthpiece, Kalyani of Phera asks, “What is the duration of any religion and are we going to live our lives burdened with religion? (101).

In Phera Kalyani considers the meaninglessness of exaggerated vows of love. She recalls how Badal, whom she loved when she was in Bangladesh, used to say that he would not live without Kalyani. But these things are not always meaningful. Kalyani feels, “Life doesn’t come to a standstill because another person is not there. It moves onwards and because you know it’s on the roll. It comes to an end and amidst calculations of gains and losses” (78).

Maintaining an optimistic view, Taslima Nasreen stresses the fact that life must go on; the show must go on. Afzal, Jhumur’s lover in Shodh, does not know what he really expects from life but wishes to live it with enthusiasm: “One has to live like a king although death awaits everyone, the king and the pauper alike. When death is certain why bother about worldly possessions and waste one’s time striving for them?” (114).

**Composite Bengali Culture**

Taslima Nasreen, a Bengali herself, is deeply immersed in Bengali culture, which acts as a social backdrop to all her novels. Her characters, mostly Bengali, represent the various dimensions of the Bengali culture. Their traditions, social norms, their language, dresss, mind-set all are Bengali. The positive and the negative aspects of Bengali social milieu—Hindus and Muslims—have been authentically chronicled in the corpus of her novels. The Partition of India took place on the basis of religion, though linguistic differences were wider, and the divisions of the states in India were made on linguistic basis. The Eastern wing of Pakistan severed itself from the Western and dominating part and proved beyond doubt that religion was not such a
uniting force as it was thought to be. Before that, in 1952, there was a language movement in East Bengal, and Bangla became the national language of East Pakistan. Hence, Taslima Nasreen believes in the unifying force of language and hopes for the re-unification of the two parts of Bengal like the two Germanys. Regarding the differences, Kalyani of Phera says:

‘But do you or the people you know ever wonder why we are separate.’
‘What do you mean by ‘separate’?
‘What I mean is this, that, although we both speak the same language—Bangla, we stay in separate countries; we’ve created two nation states.’ (100)

Though, a lover of Bengali, yet, like a good linguist, Taslima Nasreen does not believe in discrimination in the name of region and language. Kalyani does not like offensive attitude towards her language ‘Bangla’ by the people who consider themselves superior in terms of language. Influenced by Kolkata culture, Dipan calls Bengali ‘Bangalbhasha’ (used as slang in west Bengal). He says, “You mean to say they are speaking Bangal bhasha?” (39). Kalyani is disturbed to find that her own son has joined the set of people who mock at her language. She tries to teach her son the difference that is bound to occur with increasing distances between areas. To her, no language is superior or inferior. She tells her son:

‘Why do you say Bangal when it is Bangla – the language of the Bengalees?
Here’s bound to be some difference when it is spoken by people living in different regions. Isn’t there some difference, no matter how slight, in the way Bangla is spoken in the Twenty Four Parganas, Murshidabad and Kolkata? Do all English speaking people speak the same way? Language is diverse, enunciation distinct. What about American English? Isn’t it a world apart from what we know as British English? Does that mean we can’t call it English but find another name for it—such as Anglach!’ (40)

Sometimes, language is also associated with religious identity. Generally, Urdu is considered the language of the Muslims. In Lajja, Suranjan is surprised to notice that his friend Kajal who always speaks ‘jal’ at home calls ‘paani’ at the shop for the fear of being discriminated as a Hindu and getting maltreated. In European countries, their narrow nationalism prevents them from learning and speaking the language of neighbouring counties. In French Lover, Kishanlal tells Nila, “The French don’t know English and they don’t want to know it” (37). The Indians living in France are affected by this snobbery too, and teach their children
French instead of their own language. Chaitali of *French Lover* ingrains in her child the habit of speaking French even at home rather than Bengali, their mother tongue. Sunil and Chaitali do not see any need of teaching Bengali as it is useless in France. On the other hand, Nila is disturbed:

Nila had seen this in Calcutta too: Bengali children were sent to English medium schools and spoke English at home, as if Bengali was a low-class language. The same logic applied there too: English helped in getting jobs, while knowing Bengali added no value. In spite of this factor, Nila studied Bengali literature. Anirban had said this degree had no value. But she had argued that twenty one crore people spoke this language and so it couldn’t be that worthless. It was the sixth most spoken language in the world and the written literature of this language alone went back to a thousand years. (44-45)

This language bias is also conspicuous in her comparison of the ‘Bangladeshi’ and Indian Bengalis too, who felt ashamed of their own language and held it back in the public, though used in private. Nila observes:

‘The Bengalis from West Bengal were more Indian than they were Bengali. They’d embrace a Punjabi, Maharashtrian or Gujrati as their brothers and speak in broken French, Hindi or English. But they’d keep the Bengali in them suppressed like holding back nature’s call. Bengali was for the bedroom—secret and surreptitious. (45)

In *Phera*, we find Taslima Nasreen raising questions related to various dialects of Bangla. Kalyani, who has come to stay in Kolkata, is a source of amusement for her cousins who constantly make fun of her Bangladeshi accent and vocabulary. Whenever she opened her mouth to say something, she became a laughing stock. ‘‘The duck says—Quack, quack…’’ they echoed, never ceasing to correct her mode of speaking. Soon Kalyani was too ashamed to utter a word” (11). In this respect, a reference may be made to an essay “In search of an Authentic Discourse” by Abhijit Karkum:

Let us now divert our focus to the Indian subcontinent where West Bengal and Bangladesh both use Bangla as their official language but which one has more legitimate right to be really Bengali than the other? Though a convincing answer to this is a complex one, the authors on both the sides are constantly trying to
bring a regional character in their writings which will bring a dimension of specificity to their aesthetic creations. (115)

Apart from the concept of Bangla language, Taslima Nasreen seems to be in love with the whole of Bengali culture. In *Lajja*, Suranjjan regards himself more a Bengali than a Hindu. He remembers, “When he was old enough to make up his mind on the matter he declared that he was above all, first, a human being and then a Bengali by race. No religion had created this race and he wanted his people to know no communal barriers, and live together in perfect harmony” (25). In *French Lover*, Nila is not prepared to abandon her Bengali food and culture. She craves for a little of Bangla music, that is, Rabindrasangeet, every now and then. She is more enthralled to see a memorial of Michael Madhusudan Dutta than any other poet. Bengali language, food, games, in fact, the whole of the language form the mind and soul of Taslima Nasreen. However, it is to be kept in mind that language, dress, social traditions and religious beliefs of different hues etc. are a part of a huge social structure. Not one component can claim to be the whole. It is the playing the various tones on various instruments that constitutes an orchestra.

Thus, in Taslima Nasreen, who prefers to write in Bangla, though she is a writer of international fame, we find an artist who has risen above the narrow concepts of regionalism and languages. Her love for Bangla as well as Bengali culture is everlasting. She follows the tradition of her literary forefathers like Tagore and has enriched the literature as well as the sensibilities of the two Bengals.

**Love for Art and Literature**

Apart from putting her convictions in the garb of art, Taslima Nasreen also exhibits her love for art. For instance, in *French Lover*, the heroine, Nila visits various art galleries and takes interest in great artists, novelists and poets and listens to Rabindrasangeet. Like her mother tongue, Bengali, her interest in art and literature also figures in Taslima Nasreen’s writings again and again. She shows a deep knowledge of a vast literature across the seas, though her first priority remains Rabindranath Tagore and Rabindrasangeet. Nila of *French Lover* expresses her passion for Rabindranath and his music. While visiting Paris with Moronnis, Nila is excited to find a road named after Tagore:

> See, this road is called Rue Tagore, the man whose song I sang.’ There was a garden named after the Spanish artist Miro at one end of the street and on the other end was a road named after the Russian painter Marc Chagall.
Moronnis asked, “Was Tagore an artist like Miro and Chagall?”
Nila said, “His name isn’t Tagore, the correct pronunciation is Thakur,
Rabindranath Thakur. Since the British couldn’t pronounce it, they made it
Tagore. (196)
She further says: “Rabindra also sketched, but his songs, poetry and prose were of greater
renown. To the Bengali he is almost like a god. Even today Rabindrasangeet is played in almost
every Bengali home. It’s eternal. No musician can do what he has done. His songs will be
everlasting” (196).

In Lajja Taslima Nasreen’s love for Rabindranath is evinced in Kironmoyee’s urge to
learn Rabindrasangeet. Once in a while, she would sing a Tagore song for her husband but
suppressed her public singing as the Muslims criticized her as a shameless Hindu singing for
everyone. In Phera, too, there is a passing reference to ‘Jorasanko Thakur Baree, the house of
Tagores’ (82). In Shodh, both Jhumur and Haroon are fond of Rabindrasangeet. When they used
to meet before their marriage, Jhumur would sing songs of Rabindrasangeet for Haroon. Haroon
would also take her to Shafique, a friend, who was also fond of Rabindrasangeet. In fact, Taslima
leaves no chance of bringing in Rabindranath in her works. Here is an example: ‘Haroon had put
on some record of Tagore’s songs. Music was blasting the place. Kanika Mukhopadhyya’s ‘My
heart’s desire has been fulfilled…’ was being played over and over again” (175).

In French Lover, Nila regrets the lack of Rabindrasangeet in Kishanlal’s collection. For
her, among the great litterateurs of Bengal, Tagore tops the list. At Sunil’s house she can find the
picture as well as the music of Tagore. Sunil also nods for Nila’s demand of two cassettes of
Rabindrasangeet by Kanika. In her occasional happy moments with Kishanlal she listens to
Rabindrasangeet.

Taslima Nasreen does not confine herself to regionalism in art and literature; she shows
her erudition by giving reference of Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, James Joyce etc. Nila
has read literature by Balzac, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Maupassant, Albert Camus, Jean
Paul Sartre, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine and Paul Eluard.

Taslima Nasreen also flaunts her learning by giving scholastic references of places as to
who planned or built them or in whose name the places were named. Sometimes she seems
extravagant as the list is quite long with Baudelaire, Ezra Pound, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest
Hemingway, George Orwell, Samuel Beckett and Picasso as well. Besides literary giants, artists
too crowd in with painters like Daubigny, Camille, Pissaro, Paul Cezanne and Van Gogh. Sometimes, it appears that Taslima Nasreen can’t resist the temptation of exhibiting her learning. In *Shodh*, the names of famous painters appear repeatedly. Here is an example: “Afzal admired Rembrandt and Van Gogh, the two Dutch artists, but he confessed to being profoundly influenced by Claude Monet although he preferred to paint women instead of flowers and tendrils” (119). Another instance from many of *French Lover’s* unrelated details into history of towns is sufficient to prove the above-said point:

Sunil lived on Rue de Rivoli, which was named after the village in Italy where Napoleon defeated the Austrians in 1797. There was a station, a street and a bridge in the city, which were named after Austerlitz in Czechoslovakia because there too Napoleon had defeated the Russian and Austrian armies in 1805. There was also a street named Friedland because that was the Russian town where Napoleon had defeated the Russians in 1807. “The war fields where Napoleon was victorious were the only ones that were honoured on Paris. Nila had not found anything named after Waterloo when she’d searched the map of Paris” (42-43).

**Women’s Education**

Women’s education has been unanimously accepted as a weapon to fight their bonded status. In India it was clearly recognized and stated by the freedom fighters and national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. Nehru says, “Truly, no argument is required in defence of women’s education. For my part, I have always been strongly of the opinion that while it may be possible to neglect men’s education it is not possible or desirable to neglect women’s education” (398). Taslima Nasreen lays great stress on imparting education to girls as it is the only liberating force for them in countries like Bangladesh where every effort is made to curb their freedom of movement and independence of thought. Taslima Nasreen’s main characters are educated like herself. Maya of *Lajja* has completed her education and is giving tuitions to support herself as well as contribute to the general expenditure of the family. Kalyani of *Phera* is a teacher and so is Jhumur of *Shodh*. Nila of *French Lover* has studied Bangla literature and has regular discussions on literary topics with Benoir, her French lover.

Taslima Nasreen never forgets to emphasise that parents, especially, fathers have played a big role in their daughters’ formal and informal education and this education is always secular, humanistic education, not just rote learning or bookish knowledge. In *Lajja*, we find that Maya is
turned out of her Islamiat class for being a Hindu. Sudhamoy, a sensible father, wishes peace of mind for his daughter whom he has tried to make a human being and not a Hindu, and goes to the religious instructor so that she may be allowed to attend the class in order that she does not feel she is different. But when Maya starts chanting Koranic verses at home too, the parents are alarmed. Sudhamoy, the father writes to the school Headmaster in this regard:

...religion was something very personal and that it must not be a compulsory part of school curriculum. Besides, if as a parent, he was not willing to allow his children to acquire knowledge about any religion at all, how then could the school authorities compel them to follow the dictates of any one religion? He had suggested that instead of having religion as a subject of study it would be far more profitable to include the teachings of great men as a study of their lives. (72-73)

In Shodh, Jhumur’s father teaches her to develop independent ideas and not to be a slave to dead habits and materialism. About a rich neighbour, whom people consider big, he comments, “He is not big, he’s just full of cash” (198). He further convinces his daughters, who wish for material goods:

Who said expensive clothes made one look nice...your distinctiveness lies within yourself, in your wisdom and learning—it is revealed in your attitude and behaviour and not in your outside appearance. People who are empty inside cling to their exterior image. (198)

Thus, Taslima Nasreen considers education a liberalizing factor and attaches great importance to it. As far as female education is concerned, she thinks it indispensable to make woman realize their potentialities and to make them financially independent, not just a means to get a good match in marriage. Regarding the purposefulness of education, Jhumur of Shodh keeps on evaluating whether better education makes her worthy or not. On getting pregnant, she does not receive love and happiness from Haroon in the way Shipra does from Dipu, and wonders, “Was Shipra better looking than me, more educated, accomplished in love?” (4). She compares herself with Rosuni, the maid, her mother-in-law, and Ranu, her sister-in-law:

There was another daughter-in-law Ranu, who hadn’t qualified as a matriculate. Was there any difference between our relative positions? I had wondered sometimes whether it was not my superior academic qualifications that had made
me so eminently fit for domestic tasks. *Wives and daughters! Pay heed! Academic skills don’t count with the in-laws.* (44)

Jhumur had obtained her master’s degree in Physics and she had worked very hard on that. Now that she wants to take some job, her husband tells her that her real happiness lies in making his family happy. Flabbergasted, she asks her husband, “Have I collected university degrees to stay at home and twiddle my thumbs? I worked so hard, stayed up whole nights, to pass those exams—difficult ones, to say the least. Was all that for the benefit of running a home?” (51). To her, to stay idle and waste her education is like some serious offence. She questions Haroon, “I had studied so that I could work. Is it right for an educated person to sit idle at home?” (52). She wriggles with helpless fury when her brother-in-law, Anis shows his anxiety asking why she was wasting her university degree. She gulps down her anger silently:

I had no clue where our conversation was taking us, or what Anis wanted to hear from me. If one cooked one didn’t read? Was he reminding me that Haroon had chosen me for my accomplishments? Rosuni was an excellent cook, but would Haroon have married her? Girls with degrees had this advantage over someone like Rosuni, no doubt…” (95).

Educated girls are praised in public but in-laws cherish a secret desire that the girl is homely enough to take care of all their comforts from morning till night.

Jhumur had sought to live a life upto the ideals of her father but getting mired in the ugly show off of materialism, though unwilling, fills her with guilt, “I wondered if Baba still hung on to those beliefs especially since the girl he had brought up to become as strong as man was merely an educated housewife—a clinging vine” (109).

Thus, Taslima Nasreen seems to underline the fact that education equips a woman to evaluate her situation in objective terms and wrestle with the existential issues related to a woman’s life. Education, in fact, becomes the chief tool with which they can fight the insensible, illogical patriarchal structures. It gives them confidence to fight their battles and make a search for their identity and self.

**Sense of insecurity**

While dealing with the major theme of fundamentalism, feminism and home and homelessness, one sub-theme that emerges in Taslima Nasreen’s novels is the theme of insecurity with which most of the characters seem to be occupied. In a sense the major themes
contribute to this theme because whether it is fundamentalism, or patriarchy or a fear of losing the security of home, all point to the same fact of life— insecurity in the mortals. For many characters in the novels, fear or insecurity becomes a driving force for them. This is true in case of Maya of Lajja who is haunted by a sense of insecurity for many days after her abduction in her childhood days. During riots also she is full of anxiety and finds shelter in a Muslim friend’s house. Later on, Suranjan and his parents are driven out of their home and homeland by the same overpowering sense of insecurity. Kalyani of Phera is sent to her uncle’s house in Calcutta because her parents think that her honour is not safe in Bangladesh. But there, in Calcutta too, Kalyani suffers from a sense of insecurity when her cousin attempts to rape her. It is out of this sense of insecurity that she marries Anirban in a hurry. In Shodh, Jhumur’s father fears that his second daughter might be ditched like his first one, Nupur. A father anxious to secure security for his daughter rushes her in a hasty marriage, though he is hardly aware of the consequences. Haroon, too, feels insecure towards Jhumur’s moral behaviour and hence imposes compulsions on her. Nila of French Lover also feels insecure in her relationship with Benoir. She does not want to live a loveless life like her mother, Molina and holds on to an impractical relationship with a man already married and having a daughter.

The feeling of insecurity sometimes leads to withdrawal in human beings and instead of living life to the fullest or fighting it out against the adverse circumstances or antagonism, they prefer to withdraw into the cocoon of their isolated selves. This withdrawal from the hubbub of life makes all life-forces seep away from them, thus making them victims of insecurity, aloofness and loneliness. Nila of French Lover withdraws and immures herself in her room when her mother, Molina, dies. In her parental household, she was attached most to her mother but instead of wailing or showing up herself before mother’s body, she remains aloof. At the end of the story too, she withdraws from everyone and everything. Suranjan of Lajja is so disgusted with the behaviour of the people around him, especially his former close comrades that he withdraws from all and sundry, even his family members and simply sulks. He does not attend on his ailing father and neglects family responsibilities. In Shodh, after Haroon nurses the illusion that Jhumur carries some other person’s baby in her womb, he too, sulks and behaves in the most unpleasant manner: “Haroon simply refused all the attention. He didn’t need any drink, didn’t want anyone to soothe his pains. It would be better if people didn’t fuss over him. He wanted to be left alone” (68) His mother holds Jhumur responsible for her sons foul mood and scolds her, “It must
be you who have caused the upset, he’s not talking to you” (69). Sharifa of *Phera* too withdraws herself from the pleasures of life. Her life becomes mechanic run by her husband’s control and she has no hold over her own joys and sorrows. She is not able to utter even a few words of love and compassion to the departing Kalyani.

Thus, in the novels of Taslima Nasreen, the state of withdrawal is sometime a state of negation while at other times, it is sheer helplessness on the part of the characters that wrings life-force out of them.

**Revenge**

In *Shodh*, Jhumur says, “And I realized that I was neither gifted to forgive nor to forget” (111). The expression quoted above summarises the whole theme of the novel—revenge. The title itself is clearly indicative of the theme of revenge. Revenge has been a subject of interest for creative writers. The Latin and Greek epics and some English blood and thunder plays in the Elizabethan age were written on this theme. In fact, ancient literature is full of such instances when a righteous person is wronged and he/she finds tranquility only after justice is met after complete revenge. Women have been said to be fiercer and more calculating in their revenge than men. Even the most submissive of the ancient epic characters cannot be excluded from the kind. Sarojini Naidu, in a public address raised her voice for the women, “for those women whose proudest memory is that Sita would not stand the challenge to her honour but call upon Mother Earth to avenge her” (131). But Taslima Nasreen does not treat the matter in a traditional way. She furnishes the novel with a practical ending though the scheme of revenge is most fantastic. Her heroine Jhumur is tortured and she does not have calm and peace of mind till she gets even with her husband who suspected her of bearing a child of someone other than himself, and forces her to abort the child. Jhumur’s cold and calculating revenge chills the spine of an orthodox reader when she sleeps with another man to get impregnated by him just to have fun at her husband’s expense who would mirthfully dance with joy, basking in the pride of carrying forward the family name with his seed. She does not allow Haroon to touch her when she conspires against him. She soliloquises, “Take care Haroon. Don’t dare touch me. My body carries the signature of another man. Don’t try to blot it out. Your bride is an adulterous now; she has become what you had taken her to be and what you don’t think her as…” (146). Jhumur does not indulge in silly display of her achievement and spoil her married life. Her revenge is not for a moment, it is a life-time experience for her to see and relish the conceited Haroon shower his
love over somebody else's son. Jhumur cooks a snook at the patriarchal set-up and upsets the apple cart. Generally speaking, revenge involves violence, bloodshed and tragedy but Jhumur's revenge is a revenge with a difference as the victim, that is, Haroon, is unaware that she has avenged herself on him. Here, Jhumur can be contrasted with Sundari of Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964). In order to have a view of the beach, Sundari casually places a telescope on the window sill but to her surprise, she finds her husband Gopal in Malini's arms. When Sundari comes to know about her husband's infidelity, she takes revenge on him and plans it in such a way that the husband knows every bit of it. Greatly hurt, she creates a similar situation and once again sets the telescope in a similar position so as to make Gopal see her in somebody else's arms, in Gian's arms. Gopal feels slighted at this sense of being avenged:

He felt defeated, curiously humbled; it was somehow far worse than if she had created a scene that day. Instead, she had waited for this kind of revenge, calculated and openly retaliatory, staging a scene for his benefit which shrieked of artifice, and yet made it clear to him that she would have no hesitation in giving herself wantonly to a stranger just in order to get her own back on him. (325)

Jhumur's mental equilibrium is restored after her thirst for revenge is satiated, but Suranjan's revenge remains incomplete as it is not directed against the assailant himself but against the whole community. In exchange for her sister, who is abducted by Muslim marauders, he brings home a Muslim whore and rapes her savagely. He, however, does not get a sense of fulfilment and remains morose and miserable. Nila of *French Lover* also takes revenge on her lover who is in love with none else but himself by forsaking him and his unborn child rather than have him forsake her.

Thus, in Taslima Nasreen's works a transformation in self-sacrificing image of womanhood is noticeable. Her protagonists do not swallow their shame and insult lying down; rather they look back in anger and retaliate.

**The problem of Diaspora and Cultural Dichotomy**

Though Taslima Nasreen got her fame and notoriety for writing against men and religion, she takes up the issue of cultural differences too, in her works. *French Lover* opens up a new world to Nilanjana from Calcutta. In the very first page we get the disparity between the White and the Black. On reaching Paris Nila finds herself completely alien to a brave new world of the civilized people, though at home she considers herself the member of an intellectually superior
race of Bengalis in comparison to Punjabis (Kishanlal). The difference of the two cultures, namely, Bengali and Punjabi, too, emerges at every point. Nila basks in her superiority for her good singing and literary taste while Kishanlal taunts the whole Bengali race for killing time idly in their famous addas. Nila likes tea; Kishanlal does not. One is non-vegetarian while the other is pure vegetarian and cannot strand even the smell of meat in his house. The former is interested in art and music while the latter is completely indifferent to such subtle fineries of culture and finds joy in raw pleasures of food and sex. In a sense, the difference is that of the cultured and the uncultured.

However this cultural snob from Bengal is totally ignorant of the manners and etiquettes of the French Culture. On her first day in Paris, she observes from the window Kishanlal’s house the life outside and contrasts it with that in Calcutta:

Nila sat at the window impassively and observed the flow of people and cars down below; the urbane, smooth, busy lives of people amidst silent loneliness. At this time of the day Calcutta would be split wide open by terrible sounds—siren, a truck’s tyre bursting, push-carts, hawkers, beggars, dogs bickering, women quibbling at the common tubewell, and so many other sounds that make life unbearable. Nila felt she had landed somewhere outside the planet where there was no dirt, no hassles, nothing that piqued the eye, nothing uncontrolled, uncouth or ugly. (25-26)

The shameful practice of immigrants marrying local women just to get the citizenship is also exposed in Taslima Nasreen’s writings. Difference in moral values is also given from the point of view of conservative middle class male represented by Kishanlal. Kishanlal had married a French woman to serve his above-said purpose but hates them for the life of liberty they live:

‘Yes. Over here they believe in enjoying life, in whatever way.’ Kishan twisted his lips and crinkled his nose. ‘Bullshit! Do you know when these girls lose their virginity? At age five or six when they play doctors and nurses. Even before they’re twenty they must have bedded a hundred boys. There are no principles, really. If they love someone today, tomorrow they leave him—there are no enduring ties. They don’t know how to settle down, when and with whom. They don’t know it and they can’t do it.’ (47)
In contrast to Kishanlal, Nila feels impressed by the freedom enjoyed by the young couples in Paris and grieves how she had to keep her affair with Sushanta away from public eyes and seek private places away from the city. She thanks Danielle for setting her free but once she steps out of Kishanlal’s house, she is exposed to a different world to which she does not belong at all. When Nila is invited with Danielle at Nicole’s house, she exhibits such a poor display of her lack of etiquettes that she becomes a laughing stock of the whole group. At first she ignores the dress code of the party, and then she reclines on a sofa, ignoring the decorum of the group which is standing. Soon she realizes her mistake. The cultural snobbery of the French stops them from using English still they use English for the sake of Maria and Nila. In order to show-off her knowledge of French, Nila utters something which is mispronounced and leaves everyone rolling with laughter. At the dining table, too, she fails miserably. When back home, she confesses before Danielle, “I don’t really fit in. Perhaps I was better suited to be Kishanlal’s bride, the archetypical housewife who’ll cook, clean and sometimes talk to an Indian or two. Actually I am not cut out for this society” (96).

But Taslima Nasreen’s purpose in bringing in the differences of the two cultures is not to show the French superiority; instead, it is just the opposite. Nila discovers that under the cover of elitism, these so-called cultured people are sometimes very dirty at the hygienic level (Danielle does not have a brush of her own and uses Nila’s when she stays with her, and Benoir smells of rats perhaps for the same reason. At first Danielle and then her French lover Benoir Dupont try to convince Nila of their love for ‘the beautiful dark skin’ but the contempt for the uncivilized savages soon comes to the surface. Both of them have her for their own pleasure, though they do so in such a sophisticated manner that Nila is totally bewildered when Danielle hurls upon her heaps of indignities. Benoir crosses all limits of beastliness when he thinks of murdering Nila. The race that belongs to ‘the land of equality’ sinks in depression if their animals do not piss or shit, but these people can be cruel to humans beyond limit. Third world population is forever hungry, ill mannered, outlawed and distrustful to them. Mannequin suspects that her servants will eat the dog food. Danielle wants Nila, a third world victim of domestic abuse, to prove that Kishanlal inflicted brutalities on her, and Benoir takes third world people for criminals. The followers of Joan of Arc hold protest against the immigrants. Danielle even hints that Nila could have got murdered when she joined the procession.
The matter of fact is that Taslima Nasreen writes for content and not for the sake of form. All her novels start with a particular theme that she has devised and the whole story proceeds supporting the same idea. Harassed badly for her criticism of Islam, she works in French Lover on a foreign culture and reveals the anguish of the diaspora. People selling their all and spending their hard-earned money on visa and passports are a victim of illegal trafficking and pay for it in the lands where they reach. Nila learns from Mojammel, a worker in Kishanlal’s restaurant, that he had acquired a master’s degree in Chemistry. His father bought him the passport for five lakh rupees. But he lived a hard life in France. He started by selling roses, and doing odd jobs like box-packing. Then he got passport with a Hindu name pretending that he was a victim of communal violence in Bangladesh and sought political asylum in France. Bachhu, a cook, is a doctor, but cannot practice here as he cannot read and write French. Moreover, he will have to first pass exams. He meets a tragic end on his dreamland:

Mojammel told her about Bachhu, the cook. He didn’t get his papers in France and so he was off to Italy. He had to pay the agent a hefty amount to get his papers for Italy. The agent told him what to do, when to run and when to jump. Just before entering Italy, Bachhu had jumped off the train in the dark—as was the rule. Once the train was gone, he was supposed to run on the tracks and hide in the bushes if another train came along. He did all this and went some way but he was accidentally hit from behind by another train and that was the end of him.

(276)

Another illegal immigrant Jewel’s brother also lost his life in a similar kind of accident when he was only twenty years old. Modibu is a new arrival from Timbuktu. Many people live under the same roof but nobody returns to his homeland, for, they do not want to go with nothing and keep on sending some money there to cover up.

Non-conformity

An important theme in Taslima Nasreen’s novels is of non-conformity which has been rendered through the behaviour and statements of the protagonists. In fact, all protagonists in Taslima Nasreen’s novels are non-conformists. They are fairly well-to-do educated persons who are not in harmony with the social patterns of life, whereas the other characters are comfortably conformists. Jhumur’s act of getting impregnated by a man other than her husband is the height of non-conformity. For Nila the social institution of marriage bears no sanctity. For Kalyani the
barriers of religion and countries do not exist whereas others are bound by them. The same is the case with Suranjan. But both these protagonists, Kalyani and Suranjan receive a rude jolt when they find themselves in an insignificant minority.

To sum up, Taslima Nasreen’s novels throw up a variety of sub-themes which evolve side by side the major themes. While her war on fundamentalism and patriarchal value system goes on, and while she pays her attention on the theme of home and homelessness, she creates a social milieu which presents a criss-cross of so many lights and shades. The social norms and value systems evolved through cultural and traditional beliefs and biases help in creating human beings’ compliances as well as dilemmas. Whether it is the relationships beyond marriage and sex that is father-son, mother-son, brother-sister relationships, or relations nurtured on faith, love and good will, they all create a background against which Taslima Nasreen’s characters move. It is the rich variety of these themes that provides solidity and depth to Taslima Nasreen’s novels; they do not seem to exist in vacuum. In a way, because of these themes, Taslima Nasreen’s novels become true chronicles of the contemporary Bangladesh and its struggle against itself. However, it may also be pointed out that Taslima Nasreen’s novels seem to go beyond the present and acquire a universal hue because she takes up in them not only whatever is contemporary or temporal but universal as well.
Works Cited

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