In this chapter I propose to take up the questions related to Taslima Nasreen’s art. For any artist the modes of projection are as important as the content of his/her works. What is to be said is important but equally important is how it is said. In this chapter an endeavour will be made to study the various aesthetic strategies adopted by Taslima Nasreen to put forth her ideas and themes. Taslima Nasreen is a writer with a commitment; she is committed to humanism which means she respects the inalienable human rights. She respects each human being—man or woman, high or low—and believes in his/her dignity and freedom. What is unique about her is that she is able to bring about a fine fusion of her themes and art and thus succeeds in harmonizing her aesthetics with her commitment for dignified human existence. Thus, in Taslima Nasreen, the ethical and the beautiful carry equal weight.

Aesthetics and ethics are inter-related. Ethics means moral principles that control or influence a person’s behaviour, individually and socially. The matter, the content and the message constitute ethics, and the manner, the form, the beauty and the suitability of expression and the exposition of them through characters and situations constitute aesthetics. Ethics is associated with beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. It is an individual’s sense of what is desirable and useful for society. The balanced relationship between the two is of paramount importance as there can be no content without form. In a true piece of art ethics and aesthetics are finely blended. Taslima Nasreen presents her ethical views aesthetically through the medium of her fiction.

In this respect, it is pertinent to have a peep into Taslima Nasreen’s formative years because they provide an insight into the working of her mind. Since her childhood Taslima Nasreen has evinced keen interest in art. She started reading and writing poems when she was at school. She also seemed to have a fascination for nature in all its aspects and keenly observed its various hues and moods. However, her love for nature has nothing to do with the revelation of God in it as we find in Wordsworth’s poetry. She does not believe in any holy plan of God, and thus nature for her has its own entity. With her brother, she used to track the mountains nearby and was thrilled by their spectacle, but at the same time she felt disturbed at the divisive presence of the border between Bangladesh and India. She came to realize that natural borders like mountains and hills create no discrimination between the creatures of both sides, while borders created by man are most cruel in this respect. Taslima Nasreen led a sort of charmed life, playing
on the roof of her house, and climbing on the trees growing in the yard of the spacious house. At the same time, she frequently received beatings from her father for not properly attending to her studies. Thus, she grew up observing and absorbing the various dichotomies and contradictions in the life around her. Feeling dissatisfied, she would feel uncomfortable in an indefinable manner but could do nothing to change the scenario. However, there is no doubt about her forming some definite view of the life around her. There seems to be some connection between her aesthetic and ethical development. She tries to synthesise art and the business of living, living in harmony with people regardless of their religion, nationality and gender. Her mental growth and aesthetic development took place side by side.

Taslima Nasreen does not write merely for art’s sake. For her thought is of the greatest consequence and art is a vehicle of her thought, and so subjected to it. Art is a means for her to approach her readers and tell them how the anomalies of life could, perhaps, be resolved. It is a medium of conveying what an artist considers truth. Fidelity to truth is Taslima Nasreen’s forte. Telling the truth is important for her and she puts it without any fear. In her interview with Karan Thapar, she said, “I know what I am doing and I am telling the truth. I want to change the society, I want to make women conscious about their rights and freedom” (Nasreen, “Devil’s Advocate”). We may have heard these words before but when they are repeated by a woman like Taslima Nasreen, they acquire an added significance and beauty, particularly when they are viewed in the context of Bangladesh and its pre-dominantly orthodox society.

In the traditional sense, Taslima Nasreen is not religious but she is highly moral and ethical. Morality is only one of the four principal aspects of religion, the other three being mythological, philosophical and ritual. Religions may concur in some of their moral teachings but the other three aspects become the cause of conflict and clash between them. Taslima Nasreen’s moral sense transcends the morality of religion and asserts itself in her concerted efforts at improving society by establishing harmonious relationships among its members, in fighting against the ills that beset human beings and in being true to one’s self. The moral sense is an index of the integrity of the self. The ethical concerns of Taslima Nasreen’s protagonists demand from them the determination to act upon their faith in their values. The essence of the moral sense lies in uncompromisingly upholding the values one thinks worthwhile. Matthew Arnold leans on the side of ethics when he underlines the moral function of literature. He is certainly right when he says that ‘How to live?’ is a moral question. He combines ethics with
aesthetics—‘What to live for?’ with ‘How to live?’ Taslima Nasreen, too, raises these moral questions in a style that is quite unique and distinctly her own.

Taslima Nasreen arrived on the literary scene of Bangladesh with a bang. The feminist movement in Bangladesh had been limping all along till Taslima Nasreen gave it a thrust with her forceful voice against all kinds of subalternity. She deliberately expressed her anger and anguish at the male authority and the female submissiveness. The down-to-earth and candid style that she employed suited her purpose to make her voice heard. She created controversies by raking the issues which had been swept under the carpet by the stage managers of the society, and caused tremors and ripples in the placid pool of orthodoxy with her unvarnished, provocative and aggressive use of language. In employing such a style, Taslima Nasreen totally broke away from the ingratiating method of most other Bengali writers. Thus, she emerges fearless and forceful with her pen as she is with spoken word. Several writers have discussed the historical subjugation of women under Islamic law. But according to some critics, it was Taslima’s aggressive, almost propagandist’s style that angered the authorities and the orthodox religious leaders. Obviously, she herself is quite aware of this fact and she admits:

My way of saying things made many people angry but I could not change the way I write. I wanted to wake up women to fight the inequalities and injustices heaped on them and to get the freedom they deserve. I did not whisper, I shouted because I thought that was needed. (Nasreen, “Of an Ongoing Battle”)

Thus, Taslima Nasreen justifies her aggressive style for she believes that harsh and unpleasant realities have to be expressed in harsh words and not in polite terms. In Selected Columns, Taslima Nasreen writes, “I am simply a writer. I write for the oppressed, exploited, trampled women of our society. I write harsh words because plain speaking is necessary to change things” (140). Thus, Taslima Nasreen opts for a style which suits her themes. Since it is a fight against all kinds of exploitation, human debasement and degradation, it is but natural for her to adopt a style which is brash and loud, sometimes like rubbing a sand paper on the open wounds of society.

To bring home to her readers what she wants to convey in unambiguous terms, it is natural for her to adopt a style that is straight-forward and direct. Hence, her emphasis is on clarity. This point is supported by Shohini Ghosh who in her review of Taslima Nasreen’s My Girlhood has this to observe: “Future generations will not dispute that Taslima Nasrin has been
one of the most important Bengali writers of contemporary times. Moving away from ornate and
euphemistic rhetoric, Taslima Nasrin deploys language that is direct, even ruthless” (“Rebel”).
Her language is energetic as it is rich with the force of thoughts which she wants to share with
her readers. When something moves her deeply, she cannot help writing and takes up the pen,
rather the pen takes her up, and she identifies herself with the subject. She herself has revealed
her way of writing in these words:

I cannot write unless there is strong urge in me to express. Just as in the spring
season a bud blossoms, bursts into a flower, in the same way, words come out of
me in a natural way. I cannot frame sentences under any compulsion. Whatever I
have written, I have written because I could not help it. When I write something
about a woman in distress, I feel that I am that woman and I start weeping. While
writing Phera, I was Kalyani….While writing Shodh, I became Jhumur myself to
take revenge on Haroon and when I finished the story, I smiled with satisfaction.

(Dwikhandit 452)

As the reader sifts through her novels he realizes that Taslima Nasreen usually adopts two
narrative techniques, that is, the first person narrative technique and the third person narrative
technique. The first person narrative technique suits her temperament better and being a creative
writer, Taslima Nasreen, finds the first person narrative technique more suitable as a vehicle of
her thoughts. As Taslima Nasreen does not mince words, engage in double talk or hide in
ambiguity, this technique lends authenticity to her unorthodox ideas. In Shodh, Taslima Nasreen
makes use of the first person narrative technique. In this novel, Jhumur the female protagonist
narrates her own story of how she, a free-willed, highly educated young woman turns into a
victim at the hands of her chauvinistic husband. With a remarkable candour and transparency,
Taslima Nasreen takes the reader through the labyrinth of Jhumur’s experiences, real or
imagined, subjective or objective, and enables him to gain a unique insight into the challenges
that confront half of humanity in Bangladesh in particular and the whole world in general.
Jhumur of Shodh does not compromise with her fate, and seeks ultimate solution to the insult
that is inflicted upon her by her egocentric and jealous husband. As her autobiography reveals,
Taslima Nasreen herself was a victim of domestic violence and was forced to abort her child by
her husband Naiem, Jhumur becomes the spokesperson of the author in the first person narrative
of Shodh. Her complete defiance of patriarchal constrains against illegitimate pregnancies
derives its power from the author whose passion for change against the system of patrilineality is well-known.

In the description of details and desires of female body, she is straight-forward, frank, free and fearless. Like many other women writers such as Kamala Das, Shobha De or Amrita Pritam, she successfully asserts the new paradigms of female sexuality, and first person narrative makes the treatment of the subject more reliable and authentic. Through the first person narrative, Taslima Nasreen presents before the reader's eye Jhumur's constricted sex life with her husband wherein we find the husband forcing himself upon her unwilling body. The situation has occurred because of the turn-about attitude of the husband who as a lover was very liberal and accommodating. However, after marriage there is a complete change in his attitude and he turns out to be a jealous, possessive husband for whom a wife is nothing more than a piece of property. In these circumstances, it is natural on the part of Jhumur to feel disgusted and thus her natural lust for sex becomes frozen. In her husband’s company, Jhumur reflects:

There was no rainbow in my sky now. I had become a two-legged creature meant to keep Haroon physically satisfied. I was nothing more. I tried to conceal my pain, didn’t want anyone to have a part in it, not even Haroon. Now-a-days, whenever, undoing my sari, Haroon exclaimed, ‘We want a baby, don’t we?’ I would say to myself, ‘Yes, we do now, we didn’t then.’ (Phera 96)

As an educated woman, Jhumur feels the pinch of humiliation when her husband suspiciously points out that she was probably impregnated before marriage and that a woman cannot conceive within six weeks of marriage. This turn-off of Jhumur in relation to her husband is well contrasted with her escape by her lover, Afzal. She relishes every moment of her ecstatic adventure with Afzal and is free from any sense of guilt regarding her infidelity to her husband. In her essay “A Site of Subaltern Articulation: The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi Novels of Taslima Nasreen” Saiyeda Khatun writes:

Taslima’s narrative technique institutes a rupture in the Bangladeshi epistemic tradition, it is important to look at her use of the first person narrator…The public assertion of her heroines on sexual self-determination of women and illegitimate pregnancies is narrated in the first person to shock the reader into rethinking the issue of women’s self-determination and rights to her body…Taslima’s women represent a different oppositional model by enunciating and confirming the
ecstatic pleasure of the body and by utilizing the womb to disrupt the male order.
(par. 9)

Taslima Nasreen as a woman, and that too, a Muslim woman, has borne the pain of being used merely as a body, a mere object of sex. Being a member of ultra-orthodox society in which religion plays a significantly prohibitive role, a woman’s role even in sexual activity is restricted. Fatna A. Sabbah also writes in *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1984) that in the orthodox discourse “woman is an object of pleasure intended for the gratification of man” (44). She further writes:

In the patriarchal universe the sexual act is not an act uniting two persons equally endowed with will; it is an act in which a sole human being masturbates with an object, woman, who is often compared to inanimate objects and categorized as a piece of property. (44)

To give expression to this pain, experienced first-hand, Taslima Nasreen employs the first person narrative technique to her advantage up to the hilt, as it compels the reader to think about the narrator’s point of view afresh and without prejudice. In *Shodh*, by talking about herself and other women’s experiences of harassment and humiliation, she connects the personal with the social, that is, what is described is not an individual’s case, it happens to countless other women in Bangladesh. The narrator acts as a representative of the whole womenfolk and hence Taslima Nasreen’s insistence on using the first person technique. The narrator becomes the spokesperson of the author, Taslima Nasreen. Further, the fact that a young doctor and a writer is not afraid of disclosing secrets may encourage other women to come out of their shell and share their experiences of shame and suffering. Commenting on her style of first person narrative, Saiyeda Khatun writes, “Stylistically, Taslima’s deliberate and bold use of the first person narrative against the embarrassing micropractices of Bangladeshi patriarchy sets her apart as a writer. In Bangladesh, a social critique is usually launched in the third person objective style” (par. 55)

Thus the use of the first person narrative style sets Taslima Nasreen apart from the traditional Bangladeshi writer whose intentions it may be to distance himself from the untraditional narratives. In the process of distancing a writer may objectify the reality. Not so in the case of Nasreen, who, instead, insists on subjectifying the reality. In this sense, she charts a different artistic strategy for herself. Thus, the ‘I’ of her narratives is often the writer herself. Ali Riaz also affirms the same point when he says:
Nasreen feels comfortable in writing in the first person…. Most of the times she deals with the issues pertaining to oppression, harassment, and the like. To say that ‘I’ has been subjected to harassment is to expose the self. In Bangladeshi society, the common wisdom is to distance oneself from unpleasant events…by reconstructing and rearticulating her own and other women’s experiences of humiliation, abuse and discrimination…Nasreen connects her personal identity to the larger context of social relations. (82)

However, it may be noted that sometimes the sections which are in the first person do not necessarily refer to the author. On the other hand, some of the third person accounts may also reflect personal experiences even when the person is given a name. In Shodh, sometimes Nasreen represents herself as Sebati, a doctor, witness to patients who are coerced by their husbands into abortion, at other times, she is Jhumur, a housewife, treated as a domestic servant and sex-object and sometimes she is a prisoner of religious orthodoxy. It proves that Taslima Nasreen does not hesitate to use first person even to narrate a woman’s unhealthy or sordid encounters whereas unpleasant experiences of such persons are generally related by writers in the third person narrative technique. Taslima Nasreen uses the first person technique to focus on the gender issues more emphatically and draw the attention of the reader to the exploitative tactics of man against woman.

In this context Taslima Nasreen herself points out that she writes in the autobiographical mode because she finds in the misery and pain of every woman her own pain. Empathizing with the ordinary marginalized woman in Bangladesh she captures the essence of her pain. She also realizes that giving expression to that pain is possible only when she, instead of distancing herself from the truth, subjectifies the truth. Debjani Sengupta, the translator of Nasreen’s Selected Columns also writes:

As Amitav Ghosh reminds us, Taslima Nasreen has invented a new ‘form’ suitable for our age—the controversial oral narration. It is always there in her poems and autobiographical works. Even when she writes fiction we sometimes see this mode. Most of the time, in whatever genre she writes, we hear her own distinct voice. It is a voice, particularly her own, sometimes without inhibition, sometimes full of outrage and betrayal, yet also simply human. Most importantly, this mode of narration allows her to speak directly to her real readers: the
oppressed, exploited, betrayed, abandoned women of South Asia, and ultimately all such women all over the world. (viii)

However, it is relevant to point out that this ‘I’ may not always be the authentic real self of the author. Otherwise too, all autobiographical works are only selectively autobiographical. The authors conveniently hide or ignore some inconvenient experiences or on the other hand, may ‘invent’ experiences to add some spice to the narrative. Sometimes they invent characters and episodes for artistic considerations also, for example, the compulsions of the plot may force them to invent things. That is why some critics consider Taslima Nasreen’s autobiographical works like My Girlhood and Wild Wind novels or fictional works. In Selected Columns, Taslima Nasreen writes:

The other day I met a man who praised my poem ‘Incurable Finger’ as my own experience. I told him that incident never happened to me. I had just tried to show how young girls are maltreated in our society. I like using ‘I’ in my poetry, but it was not my autobiography. (129)

But it is also to be noted that the first person narrative technique which in Taslima Nasreen’s case includes autobiographical renderings on the part of the writer with the help of the various characters makes Taslima Nasreen vulnerable to the charge that her works lack artistic detachment which is essential to give verisimilitude to a work of art. It is true that all great artists borrow matter for their compositions from their observation of real life and many a time masterpieces are created in this fashion. Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997), which brought her the Booker Prize for her maiden attempt, and so far, perhaps, the last, at fiction, is largely personal. The story of the unmitigated sufferings of the female protagonist Amu is, in fact, the story of Arundhati Roy’s own mother, Mrs. Mary Roy. Both are Christians, married to and divorced by, Bengali Hindu husbands. Even Arundhati Roy’s brother claims to have a place in the story. In this sense, almost all of Taslima Nasreen’s works can be fairly termed as an extended biography. Thus, in addition to the first person narrative, autobiographical mode is also a favourite technique used by Taslima Nasreen. She cannot help putting something or the other from her own life in her works. Her novels embody a series of interrelated themes under the thin veneer of familial stories. Various incidents in Taslima Nasreen’s life and her views and attitudes are incorporated in her works in the garb of imaginative reconstruction. Only the names
of persons and places have been changed. To illustrate this point it is worth taking parallel examples from her novels.

In her autobiography Part—III entitled Dwikhandit Taslima Nasreen describes that when the persecution of the Hindus by the Muslim fundamentalists subsequent upon the demolition of Babri Mosque was going on, she visited her Hindu friends like the poet Nirmalendu Goon and Ashem Saha to know about their well-being. Nirmalendu Goon, one of the promising contemporary poets of Bangladesh, is also visited by Suranjan, the protagonist of Lajja. Taslima Nasreen has not even cared to tamper with the names of real characters or change their dialogues. The author always seems to be inclined to favour Hindus, but this happens because of their minority status, though it is another fact that her own great grandfather was a Hindu who was converted to Islam by his landlord. Out of the four major novels under scrutiny, three have Hindu characters in the lead. As she considers herself to be a citizen of undivided Bengal and for that matter, undivided India, she yearns to be an Indian. She finds no distinction between Hindus and Muslims still she chooses Hindu characters for her novels because, perhaps, she has a predilection for some Hindu names like Chandna, Nilanjana and Anirban who figure in more than one novel. Anirban is the father of Nilanjana of French Lover; Anirban is also the name of the husband of Kalyani, the heroine of Phera.

In the same way, all the fathers of her novels seem to bear the shadow of Taslima Nasreen’s own father. Taslima Nasreen’s own attachment to Mymensingh is reflected in Kalyani’s memoirs. Kalyani’s description of her playing on the banks of the Brahmaputra reminds one of Taslima Nasreen’s playing in her girlhood on the banks of the river: “She had played building castles on sand bank, got her toes wet in water, breathless along the edges of the river to almost nowhere, and then returned home late in the evening...” (Phera 29). Taslima Nasreen has expressed her feelings for the river in her autobiography too. Away from home, the Brahmaputra haunts her like the memories of a lost beloved. Then, Taslima Nasreen was violated at the age of six and seven by her maternal and paternal uncles respectively and she could not speak about it as she had been threatened of ‘dire consequences’. In Phera, Kalyani is nearly assaulted by her cousin Saumitra. Taslima Nasreen’s younger brother used to crush red ants calling them Hindus and she exploits the incident to explain the disdainful attitude of Sharifa’s children towards Kalyani’s son, Dipan. The cold treatment that Kalyani receives at Sharifa’s house is also a reflection of Taslima Nasreen’s own visit to one of her own childhood friends,
Chandana, a character who recurs in almost all her works. Chandana, who was earlier a blithe spirit, was now a veiled daughter-in-law in her husband’s house. She could not speak loudly or laugh boisterously. She would walk slowly. She even could not recall (or perhaps did not want to), her past days spent with Taslima Nasreen. All these details have been given by Taslima Nasreen in her autobiography.

Some of the incidents from the author’s life have been bodily lifted and incorporated in her work, *French Lover*. When there was an agitation against Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh by the fundamentalists and the government seemed reluctant to protect her, she escaped to Sweden. There she was provided tight police security. Once she went by herself to Amsterdam to meet her brother ‘Chhotda’. At the airport the emigration officer allowed everybody else to go but Taslima Nasreen was detained. She was told that she had to go back to Sweden or Portugal from where she had come. When she said that she had a genuine passport and visa, she was rebuked by the emigration officer and told to stand apart. Then somebody told the officer that she was Taslima Nasreen, the famous writer, and then she was allowed to go. When she came out and her brother asked her why she was so late, she told him that she was not allowed to come out because of racism. If she had white skin or had a passport of a rich country, it would have been alright. This incident formed the basis of the first scene of Charles de Gaulle airport of Paris in her novel, *French Lover*. Nilanjana Mandal, the heroine of the novel, has come from Kolkata to Paris to join her newly-wed husband. She is detained by the emigration officers at the airport for a long time. The description of the unpleasant experience of Nila tallies with Taslima’s own experience. Sunil, the friend of Nila’s husband, explains the reason for detaining her: “The reason is the colour of your skin—it’s not white enough. And your passport—it’s not of a rich country” (11). Exactly the same words, as Taslima Nasreen has used in the novel, are reproduced in her autobiography Part-5 *Mujhe Ghar Le Chalo* (2007).

Nila, the heroine is a true copy of the writer Taslima Nasreen. She, too, like Taslima Nasreen is a voracious reader. She has read books by Balzac, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, Maupassant, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and many more. Nila, too, like Taslima Nasreen has a strong desire to walk through the streets and see the things there. Like Taslima Nasreen, Nila has love for Bengali. She has studied Bengali literature. Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s interest in literature, particularly poetry is reflected in Nila’s interest in literature and poetry. Taslima Nasreen had a lesbian friend Danielle and there is a lesbian character of the same name in
French Lover. Taslima’s own experience with Danielle has been incorporated in the novel. It is Nila in place of Taslima Nasreen but Danielle is the same. Danielle of French Lover was raped by her father when she was just six. Taslima Nasreen was raped by two of her own uncles at the same age. Uncles have been substituted for father.

Nila’s parents are modelled on Taslima Nasreen’s parents. Anirban is a doctor and so is Taslima Nasreen’s father. Nila was thrashed badly by Anirban when she did poorly in her exams. Taslima Nasreen’s father Rajab Ali did the same. Nila knew about Molina’s (her mother’s) wishes from her childhood—none of them had ever been fulfilled. Molina had wanted a little love from Anirban, her husband, she did not get it. Nila’s mother is neglected by her father as Taslima Nasreen’s mother was. Nila’s father is in love with Swati, who is fair-complexioned. Taslima Nasreen’s father loved Razia Begum, who was fairer than her mother, a plain-looking woman. Taslima Nasreen’s mother had to wear torn, cheap sarees as Rajab Ali never bought her any. Nila speaks to her father Anirban, “You married Ma because you needed money. That was taken care of by her dowry. Ma was like a servant in the house, right? You have enjoyed lording it over her and you have Swati Sen to give you other pleasures”(138). Taslima Nasreen’s father could study medicine because Taslima Nasreen’s maternal grandfather bore his expenses. This fact was repeatedly articulated by Taslima Nasreen’s mother before Taslima Nasreen’s father. Molina’s misery is Taslima Nasreen’s mother’s misery. Both are victims of domestic violence. Taslima Nasreen’s father did not give any medical treatment to her mother, when she was suffering from piles. Nila says to her father, “For ten years Ma was bleeding from time to time and you said it was piles, didn’t you?”(144). Nilanjana Mandal or Nila returning home to Calcutta to be with her ailing and dying mother is similar to Taslima Nasreen’s returning to Bangladesh to be with her ailing and dying mother, though she was not allowed to land on the land of Bangladesh. Thus, Nila’s parents and their relationship is only a duplication of Taslima Nasreen’s parents. Much of the text and the texture of the novel is the retelling of her family story with a little alteration here and there—a recast of a family affair. Hence, Ketaki Kushari Dyson bitterly criticizes French Lover for its autobiographical representations: “She superimposed a lot of details from her own Mymensingh background, her own father and mother for instance, on this fictitious heroine. Unfortunately the strategy doesn’t work. It generates inauthenticity” (“Some Reflections”)
Roland Barthes has declared the death of the author in his essay “The Death of Author” (1967). What he means by death of author is that an author’s intentions in creating a text are irrelevant in interpreting that text. But this does not hold good in case of Taslima Nasreen and her works, as her life and her intentions are the stuff her writings are made of. She is alive in almost everything that she has written. Like Kamala Das she writes in confessional mode and her works do not maintain artistic distance. Her autobiographical elements are not properly objectified. Though autobiographical mode of writing has been much prevalent in literature of all times and there have been many great writers like D. H. Lawrence whose novels were said to be fictional autobiographies, it needs a subtle treatment at the hand of a careful artist. For instance, in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Paul Morel is Lawrence himself. Even Paul’s parents are fictional representation of Lawrence’s parents yet nobody can deny artistic worth of *Sons and Lovers*. Taslima’s writings, on the other hand, are attempts to give expression to her commitment to certain social issues. Though her use of the first person narrative is a potent weapon to put forth her ideas which lend authenticity to the character’s personal experience and create a sense of immediacy, yet sometimes the overlapping of autobiographical details with the fictional ones betray unconvincing fabrication and lack of artistic maturity. Here, the problems of aesthetics arise. Sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish the character from the author.

However, besides the use of the first person narrative technique, Taslima Nasreen employs the third person narrative technique also. While in the first person narrative, the whole narrative is preoccupied by the protagonist, in the third person narrative, the author lends freedom to all the protagonists to have their say. That is why, in *Lajja*, Taslima Nasreen preferred the third person narrative technique to the first person narrative technique because this way the horror of the pogrom that unashamedly was perpetrated in Bangladesh is expressed by all the characters according to their own sensibilities and sensitivities. While in *Shodh*, with its first person narrative the main preoccupation is with Jhumur, and all other characters have secondary roles, in *Lajja*, the narrative shifts from Suranj to Sudhamoy and Kironmoyee and then back. Suranjan’s blood boils at the untoward happenings going on in his country and he wants the fanatics to be punished severely. He yells with excitement, “These fanatics should be whipped. These fake religionists are imposters who provoke in the name of religion” (71). On the other hand, Sudhamoy calmly philosophises, “Evil people have done evil work. All I can do is feel very sorry about the whole thing” (35). Thus, more than one protagonist hold the central stage
for a considerable span of time and the working of their minds is better represented. As an omniscient narrator, Taslima Nasreen manages concurring highly accentuated occurrences that take place at different places. Suranjan is having a stroll of the town while his father undergoes a paralytic stroke. Again, constantly engaged in impotent tirades with his friends, Suranjan is on the verge of a nervous breakdown while marauders are on a rampage in his house and take away Maya, his sister.

The third person narrative technique also comes in handy because there are more events to be described than actual happenings. In Lajja, the most important issue that troubles Taslima Nasreen is fundamentalism. With the historic background of Babri Mosque demolition, the novel resembles Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities (1859) in its structure as far as imaginative reconstruction of the French Revolution is concerned. Still, she deviates from the traditional art form as she makes abundant use of census, historic incidents, and statistical data about communal killings in riots in Bangladesh and large scale exchange of refugees in the texture of the novel. Then, there are reports from various newspapers giving authentic description of the destruction of Hindu temples. These newspaper details though thematically important, strike a monotonous note to the narrative of the novel. However, as Peter Priskil affirms, this disadvantage, compared with the good points of the narrative, is of little import. These details, with small interventions on the part of the author, tense the reader’s expectations. This increased tension becomes tauter with recalled atrocities of the past and the effect is increased by the protagonist’s awareness of the inevitable catastrophe which is reinforced by the outside information that Suranjan gathers through his friends and his own sources. Peter Priskil further comments, “Through this narrative technique the sensation of approaching, inescapable ruin and the feeling that the noose is gradually being tightened are evoked” (38).

With the third person narrative technique, physical happenings are associated with psychological happenings which take place in the minds of Suranjan and other related characters. Suranjan’s transformation into a communal Hindu could not be better conveyed to the reader than by transporting him into the former’s mind. Suranjan is at a loss to understand as to why he is relying more upon his Hindu friends than Muslims. When he goes to Pulok’s house, “He wondered why he had not gone to Belal’s house, instead of coming here? Was he actually becoming communal, or was the situation making him so?” (71). Similarly, he wonders why a Hindu friend’s advice seemed more sincere than a Muslim friend’s. Again, a bewildered
secularist as he has become, he questions his own values, “Lutfor had given him similar advice the previous evening. But Suranjan fancied he could see that Pulok’s advice was sincere and felt whereas Lutfor’s had been a manifestation of his arrogance and power” (77). In fact, Suranjan’s deranged state of mind is better reflected in the form of questions that create doubt in his own mind and do not provide any solutions or answers. Threatened by a group of boys in the market, he starts running but then reflects:

After he had run quite a distance, he stopped at a corner and looked back furtively. There was no one in sight. Had he fled for no reason at all? Were those words not meant for him at all? Was he beginning to hear things? Or were these auditory hallucinations? (83)

Suranjan engages in many dialogues with his own self. For a long time he keeps on analyzing his own thought processes and the role of his country and his countrymen in making him communal. When some Muslim boys chase him shouting “catch him, catch him…” Suranjan fears that just like his friend Goutam, next time it may be his turn to be the victim of communal hatred. A constant fear grips him and disturbs him. He is in a fit of hallucination and starts thinking thus:

They hadn’t beaten him up today, but maybe they would tomorrow. Just as they had thrashed Goutam when he had gone out to buy eggs, so also when he went to buy cigarettes from Moti’s shop round the corner, he might suddenly find himself receiving a hard blow on his back. His cigarette would fall from his lips and when he turned around to see who his attacker was, he would find Kuddus, Rehman, Vilayat, and Sobhan menacing him with sticks and knives. Suranjan shut his eyes and shuddered at the thought. Did this mean that Suranjan was afraid? (59)

Apart from this questioning of Suranjan’s own values and commitments, a minute observation of the novel reveals that there are a number of interrogative sentences in the novel and the most pertinent issues of the novel are raised in the form of debates and arguments with other characters as well as his own self expressing the protagonist’s dilemma over what the actual situation is and what it should be. These questions on occasions hang like naked swords in the air and compel a thoughtful reader to think hard to seek solutions:

What had happened to all these people after independence was won? Did they not notice the seeds of communalism being sown in the national framework? Were they not agitated? Agitation it was that had brought about the glorious war that
had resulted in their country’s independence. But why were all those warm
blooded people as cold as reptiles today? Why did they not sense how urgent it
was to uproot the sapling of communalism immediately? How could they nurse
the impossible notion that democracy could come to stay in a country in the
absence of secularism? (55)

In fact, this form of narration predominates the whole novel. Even in the last but second chapter,
when Suranjan urges his father to migrate to India, the heated debate between father and son
proceeds in the form of questionnaire. Sudhamoy, disgusted, asks, “Is India your father’s home
or your grandfather’s? From your family, who the hell stays in India? Do you want to run away
from your own homeland…doesn’t it make you feel ashamed?” (213). To this Suranjan’s
reaction is almost volatile, “What homeland are you talking about, Baba? What has this country
given you? What is it giving you? What has this country of yours given Maya? Why does my
mother have to cry? Why do you groan all night? Why don’t I get any sleep?” (213).

Reminding the reader of the uncomfortable questions raised in the stories of Sadat Hasan
Manto, the debate-form used in the novel lends it a kind of pattern. The whole narrative, in the
novel divided into thirteen chapters, abounds in long debates. Thus, in Lajja Taslima Nasreen
combines various techniques like third person narrative and point of view with some kind of
experimental strategies like debates, fantasising and dream-form also. Showing signs that he is a
nervous wreck, Suranjan fantasises killing Muslims or setting mosques on fire. His nightmare
that forms the last page of the book confirms his deranged mental state but also assumes
symbolic significance with Sudhamoy emerging as his saviour. Niloo Kalaam writes in her
review of Lajja, “…her novel Lajja (subtitled Shame in English) is a political warning before it
is a novel in a strict literary sense. Nasrin utilizes fiction’s mass appeal, rather than its potential
for nuance and universality” (Peace Magazine) Still, written against a political backdrop, Lajja is
not a mere political tract. As a novel, Lajja is not considered up to the mark and some even opine
that it is not a novel at all in the true sense of the word. In Dwikhandit, Taslima Nasreen herself
admits to some flaws in the novel:

Of course I am ashamed of my weak expression, imperfect use of language and
inability to go into the depth of a character. There are mistakes and weaknesses in
the book. The plot-structure is loose. But there is no mistake about the subject
matter. It is quite true. (395-96)
To some extent, she is right. However, the litmus test of a genuine art lies in its authenticity to mirror life and uphold its values and in its appeal to wider sections of humanity. *Lajja* was translated into many languages, such was its demand, and as to its message, it was loud and clear: cruelty to humanity must stop. Only those who are insensitive can turn a deaf ear to it. Generally speaking, it affirms its own status as fiction and its claim to attention lies in its uncompromising honesty. Like Irshad Manji, a Canadian feminist, Taslima Nasreen also gives a wake-up call for honesty and change. Despite its weaknesses, Peter Priskil also praises *Lajja* thus:

However, the indisputable merit of the book remains in the fact that it raises a committed accusation against crimes committed in the name of religion. Each of these crimes is carefully denounced, time and place named, and their effects are portrayed with penetrating vividness using the example of one family. (38)

In her fiction, whether it is the first person narrative technique or the third person narrative technique, what is important is the point of view technique. Henry James first employed this technique in his novels. In his essay, “Point of View: James”, Joseph Warren Beach writes:

Thus in novels like *Henry Esmond, Kidnapped, Green Mansions, The Arrow of Gold* the narrative purporting to be composed by the central character of the story generally in the first person, must necessarily be restricted to the point of view of this central character. He writes as an eye-witness and participant in the action, he is the voucher for its truth and the interpreter of its meaning. (193)

In other words, by the point of view is meant the angle from which the story is told. Generally, it is the author who is the story-teller and the reader has to believe whatever details the author supplies. But in the point of view technique, the author establishes a central character around whom the whole story revolves. In *Shodh*, with first person narrative, it is Jhumur’s point of view that we come across in the whole novel. In *Lajja*, the use of third person narrative technique is combined with the point of view technique for the promotion of ideas of secularism and tolerance, and the narrator is not distanced from the author herself. Beach further writes:

Even when the narrative is given in the third person, if any one character holds the centre of the stage for an appreciable length of time, we have a strong tendency to identify ourselves with him, as children identify themselves with the hero of a
fairy-story. We see things through his eyes, we share his point of view, and it is his point of view to which the story is more or less for the moment restricted. (194)

The whole story of Lajja revolves around its hero, Suranjan, and it is his point of view that the reader follows. With him we, too, feel ashamed at the politicization of religion and criminalization of politics. This technique suits the author to scrutinize the theme of fundamentalism from different angles but as Taslima Nasreen’s purpose here is not just to condemn communal behaviour of the two communities, namely, Hindu and Muslim, or to traverse the causes or propose the solutions; rather, the point she emphasizes through the character of Suranjan is that the fundamental rights of the people of the weaker community must be protected. Niloo Kalaam writes:

To make the point that religious violence must stop somewhere, Nasrin purposely amputates Bangladesh from the rest of the world and the rest of the Indian subcontinent. She picks up a loop in a chain of causes and effects and says that here we must undo the sequence. Let us forget about the reasons that have led us here, let us simply acknowledge the shameful violence and stop it. (Peace Magazine)

Taslima Nasreen emphasizes that it is not the two communities fighting each other, it is the powerful killing the weaker. “Lajja, then, portrays not the fate of one family but of all minority groups—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist or of any other faith. In a way, this is the real shame afflicting the sub-continent” (The Real”). That is why, she does not digress in the Muslim consciousness by reflecting the working of the minds of Suranjan’s Muslim friends like Haider and Balal, who have only recently turned communal and would have stood firm with Suranjan on earlier occasions of communal violence. Niloo Kalaam further points out, “So intent is she on making her point that a Moslem herself, she writes a book in which every single Moslem proves him or herself incapable of understanding the plight of the Hindu protagonists” (Peace Magazine).

In Shodh there is the use of multiple points of view also as the reader looks at an event through the consciousness of various characters without an outside intrusion from the author. Jhumur marries hastily because her father does not want her to be jilted like her elder sister. But Haroon has suspicions that he was rushed into a hasty marriage because Jhumur had been
impregnated by one of her friends and wished to pass the child off as Haroon’s. Similarly, Jhumur is very happy at her pregnancy and expects a jubilant reaction from Haroon too. Haroon, on the other hand, reacts most cynically and shocks her by forcing her to abort the baby. Thus, a single situation is looked at by different characters from their own point of view.

In *Shodh*, Taslima Nasreen also exploits the technique of fantasy to shed lights on the unsatisfactory sexual life of Dr. Sebati who lives with her husband Anwar as a tenant in Haroon’s house. Even after a long span of time, Dr. Sebati and her husband do not have a child leading to emotional disturbance in her. This frustration leads her into a fit of hallucination, day-dreaming or perhaps fantasising about her brother-in-law Afzal, and she tries to actualise the dream by going to him. Later on, she passes on her guilt conscience in a different way to Jhumur.

You know that I sleep in another room these days. One night I was rudely awakened by a sound. I saw Afzal, without a strip of clothing, standing in my room. He began to pull at my sari…what more do I have to tell you? He wants to sleep with me. Shame! I scolded him and sent him packing. (180)

The reader already knows the reality through Afzal who has informed Jhumur, his paramour, that it was Sebati, who had approached him during the night in see-through clothes and tried to seduce him, and which he thwarted. Thus, Dr. Sebati’s inadequate sexual life leads her to lapse into a world of fantasy wherein she can visualise what she cannot actually get from her husband.

In *Phera*, too, the third person narrative technique is used and it is Kalyani’s point of view through which the reader sees the events. It is Kalyani’s point of view which the reader automatically accepts. The reader is acquainted with the sequence of events to which Kalyani is a witness and in which she is a participant and the reader’s responses are guided by Kalyani’s responses to the attitude of the long-lost persons and sight of the long-left places. When Kalyani goes to Bangladesh, first she visits Sharifa’s ancestral home. Kalyani’s own house was in the neighbourhood. Then she remembers the various kinds of trees growing in the yard of the house.

In *French Lover*, Taslima Nasreen employs the third person narrative technique to present the themes of diasporic confusions and feminism. What is going on in the heroine’s mind is also described objectively by the author, who seems to enter her character’s mind and reports from there. In spite of the third person narrative, it is always the protagonist’s point of view and the omniscient author seems to be with her at all places. Thus, in *French Lover* the point of view...
technique has been successfully employed. Here, the central character is telling the whole story and the reader reacts to the events as this character reacts.

Next to Taslima Nasreen’s use of narrative technique, her plot construction, an important component of a literary piece of art, needs to be analysed. According to Aristotle, plot is “a combination of incidents” (Poetics 88) and “probability” and “necessity” are Aristotle’s two criteria of dramatic coherence. E.M. Forster defines plot in a very simple way: “Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’, is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’, is a plot” (Aspects of the Novel 93). Plots are important as they are the means of presenting the author’s revelations about certain characters or human life in general. A carefully constructed plot gives added emphasis to the theme and explains the way reality is created in a fictional work of art. In modern literature, plot has been relegated to secondary status because the emphasis has now shifted to philosophical and psychological concerns. Similarly, for some novelists, sociological concerns become weightier and thus sometimes do not put much premium on plot construction. In Shodh, the very beginning of the novel pinpoints the conflict between the protagonist’s attempt to attain happiness through love and freedom and the antagonistic forces in the form of her conservative husband Haroon and his family. The central character, her relationships and her familial background are presented in the second and third chapters through the technique of flashback. After that there is, more or less, a linear movement in the progress of the plot and all the events that take place in the course of the novel contribute toward the resolution of the conflict. Everything falls into the scheme of the novel. Haroon’s younger brother is hospitalized and there is nobody at home to keep an eye on Jhumur. She, in the mean
time, seizes her chance to seek revenge on her husband. Apart from the conflict between Jhumur and her in-laws and the emotional incompatibility with her husband, Taslima Nasreen has endeavoured to focus the reader’s attention on the psychological conflict that Jhumur undergoes while having a relationship with Afzal outside her marriage. There is a see-saw battle in her mind whether to get into a relationship with Afzal but then she decides in favour of this relationship, as she realizes that it would be a tit for tat for the husband who has always been doubting her. So, one afternoon she decides to be pregnant with Afzal, not Haroon. Taslima Nasreen also affords the reader a peep into Jhumur’s mind while she analyses the thought process which goes in the latter’s mind, “I don’t have any sense of guilt about it. I wasn’t a loose
woman. I wasn’t deceiving him, I was merely paying him back…” (147). Suspense is built when complications reach their climax after Afzal starts making blank calls and Jhumur fears that he may spill the beans. However, the conflict is resolved when Afzal leaves the place of his brother after his sister-in-law’s amorous advances and the plot finally moves towards denouement on the expected lines, justifying the principle of plausibility and probability. Jhumur seeks fulfilment as her revenge is complete and she gets domestic and economic independence. In the end, all the loose ends are tied up and the story is over with Jhumur’s declaration of independence and her success in attaining her goals. After the feast given with the consent of Haroon to her friends, Jhumur announces that she has joined a school and shows the appointment letter. Her sly remark at Haroon has double-meaning: “If anyone gives me a slap and I return the slap twice over—is it wrong?” (222). Haroon’s pride is hurt and he cannot help showing his displeasure, “You have done all this without letting anyone know,’ Haroon asks. I give him a kiss, ‘Yes, dear, I did this in utter secret. I’m used to doing things clandestinely” (223). The import of these words is lost on Haroon and other hearers but to the reader the words ring clear and loudly how Jhumur has not only taken her revenge but also extracted her freedom from her bossy husband. Thus, Taslima Nasreen exploits the device of the dramatic irony to bring to the climax the preceding episodes involving distrust and conflict leading to a satisfying end of the novel. The innuendoes are aimed at Haroon. The ending of Taslima Nasreen’s Shodh, like the opening scenes of Shakespearian plays, is a fine dramatic piece skilfully structured by Taslima Nasreen and staged by Jhumur. Still the plot of the novel is not completely free from some faults. There are many digressions in the form of details of women’s sufferings that are narrated by Dr. Sebati and that have no direct connection with the central plot. A rather too lengthy episode of Kumud Phupu is another digression which could perhaps be avoided. The anguish of Dolon, Haroon’s divorced sister is not given proper coverage. The heroine’s success in her designs occasionally depends on chance factor.

The plot of Lajja is neatly divided in thirteen chapters with the proceedings of thirteen days in consonance with the retaliating violence against Hindus that takes place in Bangladesh after Babri Mosque demolition. The opening chapter introduces the protagonist, Suranjan and the central conflict that arises from his struggle between his own ideals and the fundamental forces that are on the rise in his country, Bangladesh. The second chapter mainly rests upon Suranjan’s conflict with the members of his family and Maya leaving home. All the characters belonging to
the Dutta family constantly move back and forth in time acquainting the reader with their past history. The past records of atrocities are given by transporting Suranjan to the events of 1979, the aftermath of Islamisation of Bangladesh. There is constant shifting of time frame upto the two-thirds of the novel. The tension is heightened with the progress in plot with every chapter and reaches its climax in the sixth chapter with Maya’s abduction and then the subsequent moral, intellectual and psychological degeneration of Suranjan. The novel ends on a not-so-optimistic note: the protagonist finally leaving Bangladesh the country which he has considered his own country irrespective of the fact that he belongs to the Hindu minority community. Thus, Suranajan’s migrating to India, a Hindu dominated country, is symbolic of the defeat of the tolerant liberal human values at the hands of fundamentalists.

Some critics have called Lajja structurally uneven because of the inclusion of long details of violence in the novel. Long reports of raiding, howsoever significant and authentic from the thematic point of view, do not fit in the structural scheme of the art form, and appear as a major drawback of the structure of the plot. Many critics find themselves in disagreement with Lajja’s ending. Just like the novel itself, the ending of the novel, Lajja, has also raised a lot of controversy. Suranjan’s inhuman act of raping a Muslim girl does not conform to his character, in spite of the fact that his mental horizon has been darkened because of communal bigotry. Peter Priskil remarks in this context, “Suranjan increasingly takes on the characteristics of his persecutors and tormentors as the plot develops. His individual act of revenge, however, when regarding the events of the novel, is hardly convincing: a humiliated pogrom victim, helplessly at the mercy of violence and without any orientation should hardly be in the position to commit such a deed” (43). Ketaki Kushari Dyson calls it a manipulated ending in order to generate man-hatred. She says, “In Lajja, she makes her Hindu hero rape a Muslim prostitute in revenge for the killings of Hindus in Bangladesh: an extremely manipulated fictional conclusion” (“Some Reflections”). Quite contrary to it, Suranjan’s ultimate degeneration is a case study in psychological decay. Suranjan rapes a Muslim whore to pay the Muslim extremists in the same coin. They had abducted his sister Maya, which drove him to an insane pitch of impotent anger and frustration. His revenge is not individual; it is against the whole race of those people who perpetrated atrocities on his sister. His action may not perhaps be justified by any stretch of imagination but can be fairly explained in a psychological manner. This happens when a person has lost all his sense of proportion. He is a victim of mental collapse. A fine idealistic young man
is defeated and done for. This also indicates that in spite of all liberal thoughts and theory, a man can still be a victim of patriarchal structures deeply embedded in the layers of his psyche. Degeneration on the social plane leads to deterioration on the personal level and vice-versa.

Despite severe indictment that Taslima Nasreen herself has got at the hands of extremists for creating a character like Suranjan who abuses his country and rapes a Muslim whore, she tries to justify her creation in her autobiographical work *Dwikhandit*:

*Lajja* is my protest against religious fanaticism. Suranjan criticizes the country because he loves it. He is deeply hurt. It is his motherland. Suranjan’s becoming a helpless escapist and raping a Muslim girl—do I like all this? Not at all. I protest against his degeneration. So I have to write *Lajja*. A genius and patriot like Suranjan has to leave his country. Why has he lost his courage to live in his country and fight for his right? This is my question. The government has no answer to this question and so it has banned the work. (399)

*Phera*, once again, is a story taking up the issues of fundamentalism on one hand and homelessness on the other. It is the story of Kalyani who is a helpless victim of fanaticism and fundamentalism and is forced to leave her homeland Bangladesh and seek refuge in India where she has to live with a refugee tag for around thirty years. During the volatile days of communal disturbance, Kalyani’s parents find that their young daughter’s honour is at risk, hence, their decision to send Kalyani to Kolkata which in their opinion is safe because it is a Hindu-dominated area. This is how Kalyani lands in her uncle’s house. It is a case of double irony that Kalyani’s honour is not safe in her own uncle’s house where her own cousin casts an evil eye on her. Similarly, her going to Bangladesh after thirty years of staying in India is fraught with irony as when she comes back to Bangladesh she comes with an expectation that she is coming to her own homeland. But the cold shoulder that she receives in Bangladesh leaves her highly frustrated and disgusted. Thus, the novel begins with an ironical situation and ends with irony once again, thus lending *Phera* the concept of a circular plot.

All the ingredients of the plot are well-integrated in the main story. The Badal-Kalyani episode seems loosely constructed in the beginning, but all the threads are properly tied towards the end of the novel, for it brings out Kalyani’s love for her lover as well as her country’s freedom-fighters who are neglected despite their invaluable sacrifices. The story of the family of Kalyani’s uncle, however, ends abruptly after Kalyani’s marriage, though, the episode has its
relevance for pushing Kalyani in a hasty marriage with Anirban. Sometimes, Kalyani’s rigid notions regarding the people and geographical facts of her country do not allow the reader to identify with her. With Kalyani’s painful reveries of the past, the novel has serious overtones that are maintained till the last page. Though the main events in *Phera* proceed chronologically, in between there are frequent flashbacks. Kalyani goes down memory lane as one thing reminds her of another thing that had happened earlier. Thus, Taslima Nasreen is able to create a plausible structural frame-work to the novel.

*French Lover*, which had raised the readers’ expectations from Taslima Nasreen a lot, fails to fulfil their hopes from structural point of view. Chronological order is maintained without much intrusion of flashback technique. The whole plot moves clumsily like Nila, the heroine’s life. Taslima Nasreen has endeavoured to balance the novel by creating two blocks—the Eastern and the Western—through which Nila’s life hurtles bumpily. However, Taslima Nasreen has not been able to handle the plot very artistically and the novel, because of this, becomes lopsided. The novel may, perhaps, be termed as picaresque as it deals with the adventures and misadventures of Nila. The whole novel is endowed with a bleak atmosphere with hardly a silver lining. However, the long details of Nila’s aimless wanderings do not have much relevance to the central theme. Various episodes concentrating on Mithu, Mojammel and several other characters also do not have proper connection with the central theme and render the plot rather episodic. Towards the end of the novel, Nila seeks Danielle’s help who had not treated her better than other Westerners. As pointed out earlier, all of Taslima Nasreen’s novels end with the protagonists’ evolution. The novel ends at an open-ended note. Nila’s search for the ideal of true love and freedom leads her nowhere though in the end she is sad but wiser than before.

Thus, a critical study of Taslima Nasreen’s novels gives the impression that she is not a careful artist as far as plot construction is concerned. Susan Chacko comments about *Shodh* that it is “a polemic with a tortured plot designed to showcase her view of oppressed women in South Asia. In contrast, *French Lover* is an unsteady exploration into a new culture” (“From Hooghly”). This comment in a way applies to her other novels also. The impression that one gets is that she writes spontaneously—she claims to have written *Lajja* in just seven days—and does not much believe in revising her drafts which only can give a flawless structure to her novels. No doubt, the concept of plot-construction has undergone significant changes because of psychological exploration of characters by the novelists for they believe in the stream of
consciousness technique only through which a character’s inner recesses can be perceived. Yet, keeping in view the themes that Taslima Nasreen takes up in her novels there was still a possibility that she could have created better and more satisfying structures for her novels.

As we read Taslima Nasreen’s novels we realize that in the course of developing the themes she creates certain patterns in matters of plot-construction and characterization. Arnold Kettle defines pattern in these words: “Pattern is not something narrowly ‘aesthetic’, something which critics used to talk about as form (as opposed to life or content). Pattern is the quality in a book which gives it wholeness and meaning, making the reading of it a complete and satisfying experience” (1:14). In other words, pattern is the proper arrangement of the subject matter. E. M. Forster borrowed this word from painting and observed: “But whereas the story appeals to our curiosity and the plot to our intelligence, the pattern appeals to our aesthetic sense, it causes us to see the book as a whole” (152).

Patterns are important because they add beauty to the work of art. A creative writer creates patterns through repetitions, juxtapositions, parallelisms and contrasts in the matters related to the themes, characterization and even dialogue. Through these devices Taslima Nasreen is able to create certain patterns or designs which reinforce themes and characters. Jhumur’s pregnancy is contrasted with Shipra’s. Jhumur recalls the whole situation vividly. She recalls the exultation of Dipu, Shipra’s husband on being a father, and the love that he showered on Shipra on being the mother of his child. Later on, Taslima Nasreen creates a contrast between Shipra’s situation and that of Jhumur’s to highlight Jhumur’s plight. Her child is not welcome in this world as her husband suspects that the child belongs to someone else.

Similarly, Jhumur’s unhappy married life is juxtaposed with the unhappy life of Dr. Sebati who is a tenant in their house. While Jhumur’s life is blighted as she is having a husband with a suspicious eye and thus she is always under surveillance, Dr. Sebati’s life is also blighted because she cannot enjoy the normal sexual joys that a woman would expect in married life. Thus, though both of them are victims of different sets of circumstances, the end result for them is the same—sadness and misery.

In the same way, the environment at Jhumur’s parental house is well contrasted with that in her in-laws’ place. In one home there is liberality, peace and harmony, in the other, there is only craving, politics and suspicion. If in Jhumur’s parental house it is freedom and lack of patriarchal structures, at her husband’s place it is patriarchy in its most naked manifestation. In
the same way, Afzal, who is free-spirited and imaginative as an artist, is sharply contrasted with Haroon who in spite of good money in his coffers is constricted in his views. Similarly, Haroon, the lover is also in contrast to Haroon, the husband.

In Lajja, the protagonist Suranjan and his father Sudhamoy present a case of parallelism. In some ways they complement each other for they cherish the same values of secularism and humanism. Sudhamoy is a communist and so is Suranjan. However, the parallelism ends here. Suranjan fails to sustain the severe blow of fundamentalism and doubts his own values while Sudhamoy has stood upright even after so many misfortunes that he has to undergo—forsaking his ancestral property, leaving his hometown, receiving torments in internment camp and facing discrimination at every step because of his religious identity. His values remain intact even after he loses his only daughter to fanatics. Suranjan, on the other hand, is a cynic from the very beginning. His constant arguments with his friends bring him no good. He is a good-for-nothing angry young man with no earnings, no commitment to his family and his ideology at the time of catastrophe; his sound and fury just an ineffective escapism. Here, Suranjan presents another contrast to his animated worldly-wise sister who adapts herself to the prevailing circumstances and supports the family financially as well as morally at the time of disaster. She would have very likely converted to Islam had her lover Jahangir not turned his back on her. She, nonetheless, is a bigger victim of communalism than Suranjan. In the end, Sudhamoy and Suranjan become a mirror image as the former supporting the latter signifies a suggestively secure future.

In Phera, situational contrasts are created by Kalyani’s imaginary picture of her motherland, Bangladesh and her hometown, Mymensingh. Then, there are situational parallels in Lajja as well as Phera, too. In Lajja, Kironmoyee reflects that Maya could not be persuaded to go to Kolkata because of her not so happy experience of the past. She recalls:

…Maya had never shown any eagerness to go to Calcutta. She had been to her aunt’s house only once, and she had not enjoyed herself at all. She had found her cousins vain and egoistical and she was looked down upon by them. They would never invite her to join their activities and she would spend much of the day alone, thinking of her home in Bangladesh. According to the original plan she was to spend her Puja holidays in Calcutta, but long before her holidays were over she had pleaded to her uncle to be sent back. (96)
The same situation occurs in *Phera*, too, when Kalyani is sent to her uncle’s house in Kolkata and has to encounter similar problems with her cousins. She, too, like Maya, yearns to be back home but her pleadings go futile. In *Phera*, there is a constant juxtaposition of past and present and Kalyani contrasts the past image of her friend Sharifa with the present one. Then, there are parallel characters in *Phera* and *Lajja*. In her traits of tolerance and forbearance, Kironmoyee of *Lajja* resembles Sarlabala of *Phera* as both are committed to their husbands’ passion and idealism. They also offer a good parallel to Kakima of *Shodh*. A pattern of domestic conservatism is also created in the parents of Haroon of *Shodh* and Anirban of *Phera*.

In *French Lover*, the themes of feminism and diasporic confusions progress through comparisons and contrasts of various primary as well as secondary characters. In the first few chapters, the author compares and contrasts the two cultures, that is, oriental and occidental. At first, the West is presented through the point of view of a naive Easterner and then the East from the charmed vision of the same Easterner, that is, Nila, the heroine—the East’s squalor is contrasted with the crystal clear cities of the West, Easterners’ morality with Westerners’ free love, the East’s clamour with the West’s calm, the Eastern backwardness with the Western mannerism and the East’s poverty with the West’s affluence. Then at personal level, the protagonist compares all characters, whether there is love or repulsion between her mother and father and her own relationship with Benoir, her own free-life style with cramped and constricted life of her mother, Molina, Kishanlal’s base love with artistic passionate love of Benoir or ultimately Kishanlal’s crude chauvinism with Benoir’s sophisticated yet disguised chauvinism. Nila thinks about the wishes of her mother and imagines how happy she would have been, had she seen her living happily on her own terms. “Life held little meaning for Nila now, yet she bought expensive things to decorate her home. Molina had never been able to decorate their home according to her wishes” (215). Nila clings on to the exotic physical pleasures of Benoir’s love-making because “she was afraid to live a loveless life like Molina” (213). When she visits Benoir’s parents she compares her tastes and childhood memories with Benoir’s:

Nila liked to eat fish curry and rice, Benoir liked canarre and potato. Fauvorite city? Nila liked Paris and Benoir Rome. Had she ever been there? No, Nila liked cloudy skies and Benoir liked it sunny. Nila loved the rain while Benoir didn’t. Sad memories of childhood? Nila was thrashed badly by Anirban when she did poorly in her exams. For Benoir it was when Madame Dupont said to him too
much chocolate was bad for the teeth. Happy memories? When Nila did well in an exam she got a red frock and when Benoir went skiing with his friends to Austria. (206)

Thus, through a series of contrasts Taslima Nasreen is able to project different life-styles and different attitudes towards life and individuals who are trying hard to bond yet cannot in the ultimate analysis. East-West dichotomy forms the whole essence of the novel yet women suffer in the same way. Benoir’s wife Pascale has to silently bear with her husband’s infidelity. Nila, too, realizes in the end, that men are the same everywhere in their tactics of exploiting women. She tells Benoir, “I have realized one thing by now: you are no different from my father Anirban, my lover Sushanta, my husband Kishanlal and that Sunil” (286).

Next to the use of various techniques and patterns in her novels, Taslima Nasreen employs the usual strategies available to an author. She uses images, metaphors, similes, symbols, humour etc. with a specific purpose to augment her argument.

Images from nature fascinate all poets and Taslima Nasreen too is a poet besides being a novelist. Nature, in all its aspects, not only acts as a background of her novels, but also acts as a reflector of human situations and character. To show Kalyani, the protagonist’s attachment to her home she takes help of certain stock images that are repeated throughout her works. Many objects of nature, most commonly, trees, rivers, mountains, hills and birds are the most recurring ones. The tree image is the most repeated one and is often used in the context of home, childhood, freedom and human relations. The berry tree that stands in the middle of the ground where Kalyani’s house used to stand carries great symbolic meaning. When the tree was green, Kalyani remembers, it was a joyous life: “Lying on the grass, resting her body against the berry tree and gazing at the clouds above, she had gone on and on talking to Sharifa” (24).

The tree also stands for warmth of feelings, as later on, we find the berry tree gone dry, just like the people all around, devoid of emotions. Kalyani wants to visit the place once called her house. She urges Sharifa to accompany her there:

‘There may be something left…I noticed the berry tree.’
Sharifa looked up in surprise. ‘What’s the point in gazing at the berry tree…’
Kalyani stared at her, speechless. How could she make Sharifa understand what a glimpse of that tree meant to her. (70)
Earlier that day, when Kalyani visits Kalibaree, the place where they used to live, she remembers how her house was surrounded by so many trees: bamboo, mango, guava, custard apple, kamranga date and shiuili. She is sad to see that there were “no house, no trees. Only a solitary berry tree loomed in the landscape” (63). The black berry tree standing in the middle of the ground is symbolic of dark emotions and deprivation of sap of life, “She felt she was alone, solitary, like the black berry tree who must know her, as trees unlike human beings are never cruel” (94).

Being a nature-lover, Kalyani, like her creator Taslima Nasreen, identifies her country more with trees than with any other object. She, at once, associates trees, the river, the pond or rain to her memories of the days spent in the lap of nature. On reaching Bangladesh, she is dazed to see the scenic beauty of her native land:

She saw kadamba flowers in bloom in the roadside trees, as she walked—the first bloom of the rainy season of Ashad. O! If only rain came splashing down! Kalyani wanted to get wet in the rain. She thought of the days when she ran about the courtyard getting soaking wet, sitting on the edge of the pond and listening to the sounds of raindrops. (77)

While taking a round of her town she notices that many things have gone missing and among those many other things she laments the loss of the old trees that used to be there. She wonders what happened to the Shimul tree that stood there in the premises of Anandamohan College.

The recurrence of tree-images becomes a kind of motif. There is always a mention of trees whenever there a reference to the childhood memories. In Shodh, Jhumur remembers her childhood days when her mother and sister would listen to the holy man, “…while I clambered up to the topmost branch of a mango tree and filled my sari end with quantities of mangoes” (40). We hear Taslima Nasreen speak when Jhumur says, “the sight of a tree would make me soar, a pool of water make me want to dive” (40). See the following extract from Phera related to Kalyani’s childhood days spent with Rukshana, who says:

‘The mangoes are raining let’s go and gather them.’ Her house had six sweet and sour mango trees. When Kalyani followed Rukshana and ran below the wild rose tree she heard Sarlabala calling out to her, “Don’t go, the tree branch will give away and come down on your heads.’ When the wild wind tossed the trees
fursiously and people sat indoors shivering, shutting doors and windows, she came bounding to Rukshana’s courtyard, white with hail stones. They picked up mangoes in the intermittent light of the lightening streaked sky. Do the girls of these days gather mangoes when there’s a storm? Rukshana and she had also climbed the guava trees told stories to each other, eating guava and swinging their legs. (91)

Like trees, the Brahmaputra also forms a part of Taslima Nasreen’s consciousness. It signifies the sap of life, the flow and continuity of life. Whenever Kalyani summons up the memories of her lost house, it is the other side of the Brahmaputra.

In India, she craves for a drop of the Brahmaputra water to quench her thirst. The Ganges seems a narrow stream to her because of her love for the Brahmaputra. She would tell her children that the Brahmaputra was far bigger than the Ganges. When Anirban, her husband, takes her to the banks of the Ganges, she feels disappointed:

‘It’s not a river like this one I had in mind,’ she said. Her mind had stroked the waves of the Brahmaputra even as breeze blew from its depths caressing her dreams on lonely nights….She couldn’t even make people understand how comforting the touch of pure, clean water of Brahmaputra was. (49)

When the Brahmaputra was brimming, Kalyani found her friends warm with feelings; now the waters of the river have receded and Kalyani receives cold contempt from every corner. A low ebbed Brahmaputra symbolizes the lack of juices of life. Kalyani could not express her anguish over Sharifa’s lukewarm treatment to her (Kalyani). In a single sentence she sums up her whole experience of the town. She is grieved to realize that the river Brahmaputra has shrunk and so have the people in their outlook, “She felt that like the river Brahmaputra the people of the town had also become thin, unhappy and dirty” (116).

Kalyani’s son, Dipan wants to see the town with his mother’s eyes. He is sad that Kalyani’s wish has not been fulfilled: “But aren’t we going to see your house, swim in the river, pick mangoes from the trees and eat” (116). When she is at a loss of words to describe her heart-felt emotions towards Sharifa, she just says, “Do you think the river will ever be on tide again and swell up to its brim?” (116). Even the emotional upheaval that has taken toll of Kalyani’s heart and soul is described to Dipan in terms of a natural disaster:
‘There was a big earthquake in this place, Dipan, the houses have been destroyed, nothing is as was before.’
‘Like the ‘Last Days of Pompeii?’’
‘Something like that.’
‘And the trees?’
‘They have got uprooted in the storm, a tornado has blown them away.’ (117)

Thus, Taslima Nasreen, in a very apt manner, is able to connect the human emotions with natural phenomena. In a way, the deeply embedded scenes of nature in her psyche propel her to use a natural situation in the context of human life. The up-goings and lows are reflected through the appropriate moods of nature. Dipan knows his mother’s passion for the Brahmaputra and connects his own desire with his mother’s desire.

‘And the Brahmaputra, your river, won’t we go boating?’
Dipan was almost on his feet now as he was about to jump out of the bus and take a plunge in the river.
‘The Brahmaputra has also changed its course, Dipan. It’s no longer where it used to be. (117)

The difference between the two parts of Bengal across the border inflicts much pain to Taslima Nasreen’s heart and she fails to understand how the land with the same environment could be divided. As a child, Kalyani would listen to her mother’s stories about her uncle. She felt he was quite nearby:

…she felt she could touch him only if she stretched out her hand. He seemed so close by…She imagined travelling to the mountains, climbing on top of his shoulders.

The sky on the other side of the river seemed to be covered with shadowy forms when seen from the terrace of her Kalibaree house. Jyotiprakash would often point them to her, and say, ‘See…those are the Garo hills.’ (10)

In Phera, Taslima Nasreen denounces man-made barriers. Just like Thamm’a of Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines (1988) Taslima Nasreen does not believe in the lines marked on maps by man. Through her characters she emphasizes that geographical and physical similarities are greater realities than political differences. When Kalyani sees Bangladesh from the other side of the border she finds no difference between the physical features of the two countries:
In Bourgaon, for some school work, she had gazed at the country’s border feeling desolate and empty. The sky on the other side seemed an extension of the one above her; she felt she could stretch her hands or hold them up and touch it, yet there was a different sky overlooking another country. (19)

When Kalyani talks about her homeland it comprises the same natural elements as in India. She gets annoyed when her husband refers to her homeland Bangladesh as a foreign country:

The other day you walked from Agartala to Comilla, did you find the earth or the grass take on a different colour? Did the people speak differently; did they dress differently? You described how the trees on this were shedding their blossoms on the other side, how birds from there winged their way back home to this part of the land. Cows and goats can move freely across borders, only human beings can’t…. (33)

Sometimes there is a casual mention of hills, mountains or the river to describe geographical details of her house in Bangladesh. When Anirban purchases land to build a house on it, Kalyani wishes to plant ‘Madhabilata’ on it. When her request is turned down by Anirban, she keeps sulking and spends sleepless nights dreaming about the beauty of Madhabilata. She expresses her wishes to her husband:

‘You must plant betel palm trees along the boundary wall,’ as if she were asking for something fancy—jewellery or sarees. Inwardly she felt that a Kamini tree next to the window, a pond if there was place for it, a wild rose bush growing next to it shedding its white petals on the water, and Khalsa fish leaping in their midst would complete the picture. (25)

When Anirban is irritated by the list of her demands at such a late hour, he dumps the idea saying that a coconut palm tree spreads its roots far and wide and can damage the foundation of the house, Kalyani retorts, “Our house in Mymensingha was surrounded by so many trees—mango, berry, leechi, coconut and betel trees. Did cracks appear in any of the walls?” (25).

Kalyani compares her life in India to an “uprooted tree”. “Passing a span of time she began to appreciate that life was like a tree which when uprooted throws up leaves but does not
flourish” (24). In Lajja, Kironmoyee too, cries to think about her trees in the old house that they had to leave. Now the trees are left uncared for.

Taslima Nasreen’s obsession with the nature-images like mountains, rain, river and open sky is discernible in her other works also. In Shodh, Afzal is lost in a reverie, “He recounted how he had once silently communicated with a tranquil stream that ran down the mountain, glided into the woods and got lost. Afzal forgot everything, even how to paint, when he was in the midst of nature” (117-18). Jhumur is a free-spirited creature like a bird, though her feet are bound. When she sees Afzal’s paintings, her aesthetic sense is invoked. Always desiring to have a flight in the open sky, or to land on mystic mountains, she too becomes a poet while describing his art:

The sun was going down besides the still river; the betel-nut tree tossing and turning in the storm; the mountains in deep slumber, with their back pressed against the sky; a gloomy rock standing in knee-deep water; a man getting wet in the rain taking the village pathway; a bright red patch lighting up the corners of a smoke-filled sky and casting bronze shadows on the surface of the river; a flock of homebound birds traversing the blue firmament. (118)

All these images almost sum up Taslima Nasreen’s whole universe of aesthetic joy, and undoubtedly lend the same to the reader also, inviting him to escape into the world of pure nature, untouched by human corruption where Suranjan of Lajja wishes to escape with his beloved, “Come, let’s go to the saal forests, where you and I can lie down together, and the moon will protect us” (119).

However, it may be pointed out that while in Taslima Nasreen nature forms a part of her characters’ psyche and the mental landscape, it hardly seems to condition and shape their attitude towards life. If we compare Taslima Nasreen’s novels with Hardy’s we come to discern the basic difference between their art. Hardy, too, seems to be deeply immersed in the colours, sights and sounds of nature, but then we find that it is not merely the physical description of nature, it is, in fact, the impact of physical nature on a person’s nature that becomes significant. Take, for example, the case of Egdon Heath in Return of the Native (1878). The impact of the internal vastness of the heath is duly reflected in the behaviour and attitude of the characters. In the same way, the ravished Tess is rejuvenated in the midst of the blossoming nature and all her mental agony is gone and she is emotionally and physically resurrected once again to fall in love with
Angel Clare. Almost in the same vein, we can make a reference to Ruskin Bond’s fiction. Here, once again, we find nature impinging upon the psyche of the various characters. In this sense, nature in Taslima Nasreen, more or less, serves the role of external imagery and is not able to soak into their psyche.

Since the works of Taslima Nasreen taken up for thematic analysis are all translation works, it is not quite easy to judge these works from the point of aesthetic beauty of her prose style. Critics have praised her highly for her linguistic fluency in Bengali. Tilak D. Gupta quotes that Sudeshna Chakravarty, an eminent Bengali literary critic speaks highly of Taslima’s beautiful prose style. (“Autobiography,” Tribune). In translation, much of the import and verbal beauty seems to be lost. Still, the use of some literary devices like similes, metaphors, symbolism, irony, treatment of humour and sarcasm which do not undergo much change in translation may be discussed at some length.

Besides the images from nature Taslima Nasreen also picks up her images and allusions from the world of literature, art, classical mythology as also from the world surrounding her. She turns the phrases in a refreshing manner. Same is the case with her similes which sometimes emerge as truly refreshing and remarkable. Taslima’s mother compares her to growing tall like a banana tree. The simile is quite suggestive, taken from the vegetable-world. The simile of monsoon rain is quite common in the literature of Indian sub-continent. “When her [Taslima Nasreen’s classmate and friend, Chandana’s] loose, long, thick hair tumbled down her back like monsoon rain, it secretly soothed my entire body” (Wild Wind 12).

Imagery from the vegetable world is used in French Lover also. Kishanlal runs a restaurant, and Taslima Nasreen employs an apt simile which refers to his calling: “Kishanlal’s beady eyes grew as big as potatoes” (55). Here is another simile from Wild Wind that appeals to our sense of perception, “Having slipped on the wet roof she [Geeta] had rolled down like a ripe pumpkin torn from its stalk” (45).

Sometimes Taslima Nasreen, in order to capture an abstruse idea like that of pain, seeks the help of images which enable her in defining the whole idea. Take for example, the one given in Shodh, where Jhumur expresses her state of shock over Haroon’s command to the gynaecologist to clear up Jhumur’s womb of the undesired (by Haroon) foetus:

It was as if I was shrouded in a fog of silence, my sinews suspended and I had turned into a stone, my body toneless beneath the skin and the bones. As if I no
longer existed but had escaped from this prison of physicality to some unknown realm, beyond human reach. (84-85)

Another simile of a similar nature explains a similar state of Jhumur’s mind, when her mother-in-law expresses her desire for a grandson and a pained Jhumur is transported to the same situation: “The bloody spectre was haunting me now, a mass of knotted blood was leaping towards me as if it would envelop me—not with shame but with the red vital fluid” (92-93).

Nevertheless, it may safely be said that Taslima Nasreen is not very innovative in the use of imagery and has to draw from the traditional images and similes to give expression to a situation or a character’s attitude. Take for example, Haroon’s beastly passion which is described with the use of traditional imagery: “He was bent on taking me, like a tiger takes a doe in its clutches and mauls it over and over again” (30).

Being a very straight-forward writer, Taslima Nasreen hardly manages to get into symbolic details, yet in a serious work of art it is but natural for the reader to unearth various symbolic patterns. In Lajja, Suranjan’s deliberate acts of getting drunk, burning his books and raping a helpless, harmless whore are symbolic of his moral and intellectual degeneration which comes to its climax in the last scene described through a dream event with Suranjan getting caught in a whirlpool and being drowned in it and completes the cycle. Here, with Sudhamoy lending him a helping hand and thus being his saviour, his awakening from the dream is symbolic of his resurrection with a new life to be started in a different land, India. Jhumur of Shodh also assumes symbolic significance when she first descends the stairs of her house. Her act of going downstairs is like going down in her morals. The artist lover, Afzal, too, reveals his anguish at her leaving him alone by painting his last picture as a woman in sari going upstairs.

Plain-speaking as she is, Taslima Nasreen uses sarcasm and irony as instruments of venting her anger and anguish. The whole texture of Shodh is woven around an ironic situation where a foolhardy husband gets his own child aborted and showers affection and gifts on Afzal’s baby taking it to be his own. The text of the novel is loaded with many ironic instances and dialogues full of sarcasm and has an ironic ending. Then, there are many ironical situations in Phera. There is irony in Kalyani’s parents’ expectation that their daughter will be safer in India than in Bangladesh, while quite conversely, she fears rape from her cousin. Kalyani’s expectations on the part of her friend Sharifa result in complete antithesis. Kalyani had expected a joyous reunion with Sharifa. On seeing her, Kalyani ran forward extending her arms to give her
a good hug. Sharifa knitted her brows, did not relax, and said, “Don’t think, I know you” (66). In *Shodh*, too, there are many instances of verbal and dramatic irony.

By and large, humour, the spice of life, is conspicuous by its absence in Taslima Nasreen’s novels. This may well be because the kind of life she has been made to live has afforded her little scope for laughing. Her life has seen more shadows than sunshine. Still some examples of sardonic humour can be traced in her works. In *Shodh*, there are shades of grey humour. The young lovers seek privacy, but they cannot have any. Jhumur, the heroine, describes the awkward situation in which Haroon finds himself: “Whenever Haroon made his appearance, a stray dog howled. A flock of hens and geese wandered at will over the entire sitting room and settled down on the sofa with the chicks” (31). *French Lover* also has a few instances of humour. In the very beginning, the narrator describes characters in adjectives like Bucktooth, Red sari, Yellow-teeth, Steel-face, Labour-pain etc. which generate tongue-in-cheek humour. There are some other examples of sardonic humour like when Kishanlal humorously asks Nila why she has not cooked anything and if she wanted him to die from starvation. “Nila couldn’t decide what to say. She had no intention of becoming a widow so soon” (27). Mojammel’s joke that he has told at home that he works as a D.C. (dish-cleaner, in fact, but suggesting Deputy Commissioner), arises more pity than laughter.

There is absolutely no humour in *Lajja*, which may aptly be called a dark book. Still, there is an instance of dark humour or sarcasm in *Lajja* also when mentally shaken Suranjan sees a cat and starts thinking about animals too in terms of communal identities. But the joke turns into a very biting satire and leaves little scope for a sensitive reader to laugh or even smile:

Hadn’t the cat been to the Dhakeshwari temple today? Which community did the cat belong to? Was it Hindu? Presumably it was Hindu, since it lived in a Hindu home. It was a black and white cat, there was a softness about its eyes. It seemed to pity him. If it had the ability to pity, the cat must be Muslim! Must be a liberal Muslim! They normally looked at Hindus with a touch of pity. The cat got up and left. Perhaps it was going to the Muslim kitchen next door, since there wasn’t much food being cooked in this house. In that case the cat had no communal identity. (58-59)

Taslima Nasreen’s fame rests on her unorthodox ideas that she projects through her art. These ideas are conveyed to the reader through various characters that are framed in Nasreen’s
consciousness to serve her purpose. It is through the speeches and actions of the characters that we see the life depicted by the novelist. She creates characters who express their creator’s views about the problem they face and thus act as her mouthpiece. Suranjan, Nilanjana, Jhumur and Kalyani take shape in the writer’s mind and then she invents events to illustrate the characters who are representatives of her ideas.

Generally speaking, there are two methods of drawing characters: one is ‘telling’ and the other is ‘showing’. In the ‘telling’ method, the author describes the physiognomy, habits, thoughts, feelings and actions of a character. In the ‘showing’ method, the author merely presents her characters in such a manner that they reveal themselves through their actions and expressions and leave it to the discretion of the reader to make his own evaluations. The ‘telling’ method is called the didactic method whereas the ‘showing’ method is considered the dramatic method of drawing characters in a fictional narrative. Taslima Nasreen mostly uses the dramatic method of characterization, relying on the dramatic device of dialogue. The use of dialogue is an effective tool in the hands of Taslima Nasreen for portraying characters. Dialogue also serves an important function in throwing light on the kind of character he/she is. Here, an example from Shodh can illustrate the point better, where Jhumur wishes to enquire about family matters and Haroon reveals his suspicious and envious nature through his dialogues:

‘What good will it do to you to know?’
‘Am I so stupid that I won’t understand?’
‘Who says you are?’ Haroon’s eyes were glittering.
‘Say that then!’
‘You’re clever as a fox—as cunning, or else you wouldn’t have landed me in such a spot.’
‘What have I done?’
‘Rushed me into marrying you.’(97-98)

E. M. Forster’s definition of flat and round characters applies to a great degree to Taslima Nasreen’s characters. There are some characters who remain the same throughout the story. They are flat characters. On the other hand, there are some characters that undergo an unexpected transformation under the stress of circumstances. They are called round characters. All the protagonists of Taslima Nasreen’s major novels are round characters. Suranjan is, no doubt, a round character, in Fosterian sense. Jhumur, too, is a round character with her evolution into an
independent woman who is a complete somersault from what she has been. She takes initiative in all matters concerning her. It is certain that she is not going to play a second fiddle to her husband, Haroon. She is Taslima Nasreen’s dream of an emancipated woman come true. Even the minor characters in Taslima Nasreen’s fiction are not supernumeraries or extras. They also play their important parts in the stories. They reveal various qualities of the major characters by throwing them in high relief and by their evaluation of them.

Nevertheless, it may also be pointed out that Taslima Nasreen, as a writer, believes in the traditional descriptive mode, as far as her art of characterization is concerned, which means that she is not able to enter the soul of her characters and, as such, is either incapable of or is not interested in depicting the churning going on in the recesses of the characters’ souls. But it may also be pointed out that as a story writer in the traditional mode, whose job primarily is to process her ideas, psycho-analysis may not be the right strategy for her. Thus, she rests content with more or less external description of the character with a pinch of psycho-analysis, self-assessment and self-examination here and there. In this context, it may also be pointed out that it would be unwise to make a comparison between her and the modern writers whose forte is psycho-analysis and whose arena is the indecipherable human sub-conscious and unconscious. In the same way, there is another weakness discernible in her art of characterization. She heavily relies on a few types of characters who are useful in working out her themes. Here, too, it is the author herself who has some strong thoughts and feelings about something and she creates characters and devises situations which become the objective co-relative in Eliotian sense of her thoughts and feelings. Whether male or female, all the protagonists are Taslima Nasreen’s mouthpiece. In characterization of her heroines she sometimes repeats herself. There is overlapping in case of heroines of *Shodh* and *French Lover* as both dovetail into each other. Both revolt against the dominance of their husbands, though their methods are different. Jhumur defies Haroon’s power and stays with him whereas Nila severs her relationship with him for good and leaves his house to enter a world of absolute freedom. There are many doctors in Taslima Nasreen’s novels perhaps because her own knowledge of the medical profession facilitates a realistic depiction of the characters. Almost all the fathers can replace one another. In *Lajja*, Sudhamoy, Maya’s father; in *Shodh*, Jhumur’s father; and in *Phera*, Harinarayan, Kalyani’s father, have similar traits and are repetitive in nature. So Taslima Nasreen has been regularly criticized that her characters have no independent existence of their own. Ketaki
Kushari Dyson writes about the characters of *French Lover*, “the characters, barring the character of the French lover himself, are cardboard cutouts” (“Some Reflections”). Sudipta Dutta regards *French Lover* a disappointment in three aspects, “the characters lack imagination, they are steeped in gender biases and the story is cliché-ridden. All the men in the book are scoundrels; the women victims of a patriarchal society” (“A Search”). In fact, Taslima Nasreen does not have much variety in her characterization; many of them, are stereotypical and repetitive. This aspect emerges as a major weakness in Taslima Nasreen’s fictional art.

Still, this may be true about many characters but not about all. This is not correct to say that all her characters are wooden or puppet-like because their strings are in the author’s hands. The characters move with psychological validity. Although they are manifestations of certain ideas or passions, yet they are made of flesh or blood and have certain touch of reality. The protagonists, in particular, are dynamic towards change and seem to grow psychologically. They have a deeper meaning and significance than appears from the outside. So each novel may be regarded as the case-study of its main character. *Laajja* concentrates on Suranjana, *French Lover* on Nilanjana, *Shodh* on Jhumur and *Phera* on Kalyani. It is obvious that the main character occupies the larger space on the canvas which is not overcrowded, but other characters are also given space, even if limited, in the novel.

Another drawback of Taslima Nasreen’s novels is that her characters sometimes lack action. In *Laajja*, the major characters wait to be acted upon rather than act themselves. They act not like subjects but objects. Suranjana procrastinates and does not take the required safety measures for his family. The only decision that he takes in the eleventh chapter of the novel is the act of raping the Muslim whore. The other members of the family also lack much action. After Nila of *French Lover* leaves Kishanlal, there is little action in the novel except her rendezvous with her French lover. She goes to this or that restaurant and eats this or that food. She visits this or that place and the whole narrative seems like a travelogue.

Next to her weakness in characterisation, Taslima Nasreen is censured by critics for her rhetorical expressions which are sometimes misinterpreted as attempts to scandalise or sensationalise, and propagate her ideas. Proper to confessional mode of writing, Taslima Nasreen gives free expression to details and desires of a female body and is commonly accused of using sensational and sensual details to create scandal. It is true that Taslima Nasreen treats the subject with frankness but it would be exaggeration to accuse her of being obscene. Her works do not
stench of scandal mongering, rather, the questions that she has raised regarding biologic urges of modern woman are quite relevant. Moreover, her aggressive literary behaviour is conditioned by Muslim consciousness and religious literature which forces her to enquire why it is always a male prerogative to talk about his sexuality and a taboo for a female to do so. Economic independence and education make her think that she is as independent as a male to give expression to her repressed feelings.

Then, Taslima Nasreen is concerned with social realities, and in her speeches and interviews, she openly condemns social evils prevalent in the Bangladeshi society that curb an individual’s growth. In this sense, she is blamed for being a propagandist. She has hundreds of times repeated that religious scriptures are out of time and out of place. She clearly expresses the motive of her writings: “I exposed the crimes of religion, particularly the injustice and oppression against women” (“For Freedom”). In her novels under scrutiny, too, there are several statements that line her up with the propagandists. For example, in Lajja, Suranjjan says, “These fanatics should be whipped. These fake religionists are imposters who provoke in the name of religion”(33). At another place, he says to his mother, “Let them damage as many temples as they want to. So what? Let all these religious structures be razed to the ground”(55). At yet another place, he declares, “The Hindus here are second rate citizens”(81). In Shodh, Jhumur says, “Women have no place in this society”(190). In Phera, Kalyani asks, “What do you think—can we become one country again?”(101). In the same breath, she asks, “What is the duration of any religion, and are we going to live our lives burdened with religion?”(101).

If these statements are quoted out of context, they seem controversial and propagandistic but in her novels, Taslima Nasreen does not deal with them in the fashion of a propagandist. Rather, she studies their impact upon the individual who struggles hard for a meaningful existence. Therefore, in her novels one comes across severe criticism and condemnation of those social institutions that hold a feeling of antagonism against human dignity and sometimes edification becomes so dear to her that the artistic beauty is suppressed.

However, what unifies all her works is the compelling agenda of bringing Bangladeshi patriarchy to a serious scrutiny. And never does she abandon that project. The recurrence of the first person narrator with her relentless focus on gender issues demands the attention of the reader and disturbs his/her sense of complacency. She calls upon women to rise against their
subordination. The burning pain of Taslima’s personal suffering breathes life into her writings. In her review of My Girlhood, Nora Boustany says about Taslima Nasreen:

The theme of injustice towards women in Islam has become routine, but here it gains fresh currency, thanks to the fervour with which the author looks, through the inquisitive eyes of her younger self, for the truth behind seemingly innocent family incidents, her condemnations can sound repetitive and sophomoric, but they come from within a Muslim society emerging from the puzzling contradictions of post colonial South Asia. ("Blossoming")

When all is said and done, let us remember what Thomas Hardy said in the Preface to his novel Tess of the D’Urbervilles that novel is an impression, not an argument. When we finish reading a Nasreen novel we are compelled to think on the issues which she has raised in her novels. George Eliot has also said, “The greatest benefit which we owe to an artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies” (Pinnes 70). A Nasreen novel does extend our sympathies if our minds are not stuck-in-the-mud.

Whether Taslima Nasreen’s works come up to the standard of works of great aesthetic beauty is a highly controversial and debatable issue like everything else about her yet it cannot be denied that she deals with communal themes and gender issues with the rare sensitivity of a woman and clinches the issue with sincerity. Susan Chacko has also said, “Taslima Nasrin’s fame rests in the content rather than the elegance of her writing” (“From Hooghly”).

In spite of repetitive imagery and alleged scarcity of originality, Taslima Nasreen emerges as a powerful artist because she is raw and spontaneous. Her lack of art becomes her strength, perhaps, because free from artifice, she is able to communicate her ideas forcefully, without frills. So, in spite of being called an inferior artist by many, she hits hard and is able to achieve the objective, that is, debunking of all that is rotten and uncouth in the society.

To conclude the argument, it may be said that in her novels Taslima Nasreen does not emerge as a very careful and meticulous artist. Of course, she needs a framework to give expression to her ideas against fundamentalism, male chauvinism and all other kinds of injustices and exploitation perpetrated upon humanity. For this, she has to weave a story and create a framework. However, these frameworks, generally speaking, are loose and just serve a purpose for her characters some of which act as her own mouthpieces to comment upon the sordid state of affairs in her country afflicted with fundamentalism. Of course, she tries to give expression to
her characters' inner thoughts yet since most of her novels emerge as commentaries she is not able to get into the dark recesses of her character’s psyche and analyse him or her adequately. Her analysis of motives is sketchy and superficial. As far as the other fictional devices like imagery, irony, humour and patterns are concerned, she exploits them as any other novelist would do. What is important for her is her ideas and her commentary on various social, political and religious situations and she exploits characters and situations for this purpose. In the process, if she allows herself to ignore the technical or artistic finesse that does not seem to be her problem. What is important to remember is that in spite of all these short-comings, the seismic disturbance that she creates in the minds of her readers makes her perhaps the most discussed writer after Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chaterjee in Bangla language. It is her passion for human dignity, liberty and equality which covers some of her artistic weaknesses.
Works Cited


