

“I Believe that Women have No Country:” Portrayal of the Displaced Self in Taslima Nasreen’s Exilic Autobiography *My Girlhood*

Dr. Praseedha G.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse Taslima Nasreen’s first autobiography, *My Girlhood* as an author-in-exile. The analysis focuses on the way in which she recapitulates her memories as a girl who questioned the dominant discourse on religious and gendered lines. While the narration centres around her family members, the choice that the autobiographer makes to speak out against all and the impact it generated aid in the sculpting of her individual autobiographical identity.

Keywords: autobiographical identity, exile, voicelessness, displacement, nationhood.

Taslima Nasreen’s writings have generated huge controversy across South Asia, mainly because of her radical views on women’s freedom and religion. She had published a few books before a *fatwa* was issued against her in 1993 by religious leaders in Bangladesh for her controversial book *Lajja*. She was forced to leave Bangladesh, and since August 1994, has been living in exile. Born in 1962, in the small town of Mymensing in former East Pakistan, which later became independent Bangladesh in 1971, she studied medicine and became a doctor in 1984. When she was working as a doctor in public hospitals, she started writing columns in newspapers and magazines. She has received numerous prestigious literary awards for her works.

My Girlhood, the first in her series of autobiographies, was published as *Amar Meyebela* in Bengali. It was later translated into English, and still later into French and German languages. Besides this, she has written six other autobiographies titled, *UtalHawa* (Wild Wind), *Ka* (Speak up), *Sei Sob Ondhokar* (Those Dark Days), "Ami bhaloneitumibhalothekopriyodesh" (Keep well, my dear country), "Neikichunei" (There is Nothing) "Nirbashito" (Exiled). She has also written thirty books in Bengali, and her books

have been translated into at least 30 different languages. Five of her books are banned in Bangladesh and her autobiography *My Girlhood* is one of them.

Taslima Nasreen's *My Girlhood* portrays the girlhood phase of her life in the backdrop of a nation in turmoil. In this moving autobiography, Nasreen writes hauntingly of a childhood of confusion and pain. During the violent 1971 war that created Bangladesh, her family fled from the city to the countryside. As a young girl in a Muslim family, she narrates of how her freedom was curtailed and how she was subjected to rape and molestation by her two uncles at a very young age. The individual experience is juxtaposed with the experiences of several women characters within her own family, including her mother and aunts who were forced into loveless marriages. Nasreen who had initially thought that her exile was temporary, realised that she was missing her family and country. Her writing had begun as a means to reconnect to her life at home.

Marie Claassen, a theoretician on exilic writings, in her *Displaced Persons: The Literature of Exile: from Cicero to Boethius*, proposes a definition for this condition faced by Nasreen in the following manner:

Exile is a condition in which the protagonist is no longer living, or able to live, in the land of his birth. It may be either voluntary, a deliberate decision to stay in a foreign country, or involuntary.... However, exile may be enforced. This last occurrence frequently results from a major difference of political disagreement between the authorities of a state and the person being exiled. Often such exiles are helpless victims of circumstances beyond their sphere of influence; sometimes, however, the exiles are themselves prominent political figures, exiled because of the potential threat to the well-being of their rivals. (9)

There are numerous possibilities of reading writers in exile and their fictional or nonfictional works. 'Exile' was employed to indicate more than simply the change in space of the creation of the literary work. Michael Seidel defines an exile as "someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another" (7). This paper focuses on how *My Girlhood*, a non-fictional autobiographical work written during the writer's period of exile captures the love/hate dichotomy for her homeland and its cultural practises, while paralleling a yearning/revulsion for these practices back 'home.'

The choice of events, its presentation, the language and the location of the writer-in-exile are all features to be taken into account while analyzing an exiled writer's autobiography. The book was originally written in her mother tongue- Bengali, and later translated to English. The choice of her native tongue in representing her 'self' is once again a political

stance adopted, to reconnect with her own land and her own people and also to explain and clarify her stance. The first volume of autobiography entitled *Amar Meyebela* (1999) when literally translated means "My Girlhood." While "amar" translates as "my" in English, the word "meyebela" which is not a term in Bengali, was coined by Nasreen to denote 'girlhood.' According to Barat, the coinage of this new term is an act of defiance and assertion on Nasreen's part, because "Bengali language does not have any gender-neutral terms for childhood, child or people: the accepted words are *chhelebelal* for 'boyhood'; *chhelemanushi* for 'little boy' and the term *chhelepil* for 'boys' and children and *manushi* for 'man,' 'humanity.' There are absolutely no words for girlhood. The term for woman / women is *meyemanush* - the prefix *meye* i.e. 'girl' is attached to the non-native *manush*, clearly underlining the irrevocable Otherness of women" (218). By coining a new word as for her non fictional work, Nasreen thus re-configures the linguistic discourse to suit her needs, which in turn opens up a new vista of re-configuring feminine experience to the Bengali reader.

The accusations made against Nasreen by her fiercest critics have been the after effect of her candid presentation of issues that exposed the patriarchal dictum imposed on women in the domestic, religious, and social realms. In her first autobiography *My Girlhood*, she carefully documents the atrocities faced by the womenfolk of her family starting from the point of being born a girl child, which was equated with ill-luck, to teaching children to grow up in order to become someone's good wife, to being forced into child marriages, to forgo education, to bear children at a young age, to witnessing infidelities by the husband, and to live constantly in the fear of separation in case the man decide to separate from her – the female characters that undergo the trauma of inhuman magnitude. What makes it more pronounced is that all these characters who undergo trauma and the perpetrators of trauma are both her own intimate kith and kin, but of different genders.

While describing her own family and the circumstances in which she was born, Taslima writes that her mother had two sons before she was born. She adds, "Thank goodness for that, or who would have carried the family name forward? A girl wasn't any good for that. What she *was* good for was to add a touch of grace to a home, help her mother with household chores, and keep the men happy. After two sons, Baba wanted a daughter" (*My Girlhood* 23). Her own family structure and the matrix of domination within it are all brought out well in her delineation of her parents. She describes her mother as a person with a dark and plain complexion. She had studied up to the seventh standard, and had married her father at the age of twelve. When her first child began going to school, she

demanding that she be allowed to go too. Her father agreed to this suggestion initially, but her Grandpa had strong objections and said,

Your job is to raise your children and stay at home,” he told Ma in no uncertain terms, “and take care of your husband. There’s no need for a girl to think of education”. That was the end of it. Ma did not dare disobey her father. Baba rose higher and higher in life but Ma remained where she was, in the same dark corner, stuck at the seventh standard, in knowledge and intelligence. All she could do was open Baba’s fat medical books and leaf through them before dusting and putting them away, fully aware that, compared to her husband, she was wholly insignificant. One day, he just might leave her. It was this thought that made her turn blue with fear and prompted her to powder her dark face white, and line her small eyes with kohl to make them appear larger, so that she would not look entirely ugly. (*My Girlhood* 29)

The representation of her mother is in many ways the representation of women from the South Asian ethos. In describing her family, especially the representation of her father and his impact on the family is of great importance. His rank, his profession, his capacity to take care of his family is of utmost importance in a conventional South Asian family. It is the image of her father which also haunts her memories. Her father was extremely authoritarian, the rigid patriarch whom she describes as violent and hateful: “All I had seen in my life was his arrogance; all I had heard was his roars” (*My Girlhood* 281). Her family is a dysfunctional one: her father, a doctor, who had achieved wealth and respect through hard work, is depicted as a womanizer, who had sexual relationships with other women and was physically abusive and violent towards his wife and children alike. Her mother accepted her status and dedicated her life to religion and the teachings of Allah, religion that she tried to instil in her children as well. The paternalistic oppression ‘dismembered’ the family and the young Nasreen had to learn to live in a divided house, on the one hand confined by her father’s explosive character and witness to his affairs, on the other hand an astonished spectator to her mother’s submission, resentment and religious zeal.

Other women within the family had to experience similar treatment from the men in their lives. She narrates the metamorphosis of her aunt Fajli from a carefree, vivacious young girl into a veiled, submissive, dutiful wife, which she had to accept meekly, as she was indoctrinated completely into the Bangladeshi Muslim society after her marriage. Nasreen recalls how her own mother had also changed greatly after her marriage. These she recalls as narrated accounts from her mother’s close relatives such as her grandmother and her brothers. The change that came in her was mainly because of her father’s flirtatious nature.

His interest in other women and his frequent visits to them evoked rage and fear in her mother. Nasreen could see the transformation of her mother, who turned a religious fanatic.

The fear of infidelity of the male in the family, fear of being divorced, and fear of being marginalized in her husband's life, all play a major role in deciding the psyche of her mother. Her Grandpa had sent only his eldest son Siddique to a 'madrasa,' the religious school. Everyone else went to ordinary schools and colleges. Grandpa was a strict disciplinarian in the matter of education. Knowledge is invaluable wealth, there must be absolutely no lapses on her part when it comes to studies, he said frequently and sternly. But, of course, he said that only to his sons. To his daughters, he said, girls need not bother with higher studies.

In spite of all this, Nasreen recalls how her Aunt Runu went to college, and did her Bachelor's degree. Her Grandpa kept trying to get her married. Every now and then, he would invite prospective grooms and their families to come and inspect Aunt Runu. Aunt Runu, in turn, would smear her face with mud and grime, and deliberately make her hair look dishevelled, so that no one might find her suitable for marriage. The act of smearing the face with grime and mud was a strategy devised to protect her own interest at the individualist level. The experiences and after effects of the life evading marriage for Aunt Runu and another 'caged' within the realms of marriage - Aunt Fajli can also be seen as cases in comparison. Through the layers of women's perceived and experienced reality, Nasreen weaves in her *My Girlhood*, the potential impact these layers have on women's consciousness and on the construction of women's subjectivity.

Nasreen narrates about her devastating brush with sexuality, at a tender age of seven. The readers are exposed to the murky side of patriarchal tyranny- child abuse and molestation by members of the family. In fact, this experience of being sexually abused is shrouded in a veil of mystery to the young Nasreen,

... (who) had no idea what this game was called, this business of stripping me naked. Nor could I guess why Uncle Sharaf and Uncle Aman wanted to climb over me. Uncle Aman had told me not to tell anyone else. I started to think he was right. It was not something one talked about. At the age of seven, suddenly a new awareness rose in my mind. It told me that whatever had happened was shameful, it would not be right to talk about it, it had to be kept a secret. (*My Girlhood* 91)

Even though her innocence/ignorance prevents her from knowing that her uncles' designs upon her are sexual and demeaning, her instinct tells her that she has been abused at a

physical level. She dared not speak of this to any of her family members for fear of being misunderstood, disrespected or looked down with disrespect and contempt. She began questioning if the deed had really happened or if it was a figment of her imagination. She tried to convince herself that they could possibly not be her own uncles, but that she had mistaken them, when in fact they were two other men in the guise of her two uncles. She writes,

Was I afraid that, if I did talk about it, no one would believe me, they would dismiss my allegations, say that I was possessed by some evil spirit, or that I was either a liar or totally mad, a trouble-maker? No one would then hold me close and kiss me, but slap me and hit me hard instead? Or could it be that no one seemed to be my own, no one was close enough to whom I could go and cry my heart out, tell them everything without holding anything back, show them my wounds? Even Ma was not that close, although she was my whole world. I lived under her protection, she was like a tree, I sat in its shade when I was tired; she was like a deep, clear pond, I drank its water when I was thirsty. She had given me life, she nurtured it. If I could not turn even to her at a moment like this, who else could help me? (*My Girlhood* 92-93)

The lines echo the mental scars and the battle that she wages to redeem herself from the threshold of familial child abuse. This also throws light on the internal dimension of Bangladeshi life. In many ways we realise that the irony lies in knowledge of the fact that her wounds were not visible and that they were never addressed while her mother continued to think that she was shielding her from the aggressive male world which she had confronted. The guilt, shame and fear signal the loss of female agency – her voice, her capacity to articulate the pent-up emotions. This loss of agency she expresses in the following manner:

After that incident, I felt myself split into two. One half went out with all the other children, played games and ran around. The other half sat alone and depressed, by the pond, or the railroads, or the steps by our door. Alone, even in the middle of a crowd. Thousands of miles began to place themselves between this lonely girl and all the others. Even when she stretched her arm, she could not touch anyone across all those miles, not even her mother. If she tried, all her hands could ever grasp was emptiness. (*My Girlhood* 93)

Interestingly, the autobiographer makes a distinction here of her ‘self’ being split into two with one half ‘acting’ normal while the other half feeling vulnerable and lonely. The lonely inner self looks for refuge but fails to find one. The sense of displacement that the autobiographer feels at a foreign land in- exile and the sense of displacement that she feels in her own country, her home, as a young girl, amidst her family members whom she

realises she cannot place her complete trust on makes her distance herself from them. This split in two finds its place in the delineation of all the characters, whom she looks at as an outsider, an observer.

Nasreen as the autobiographical narrator, (now in Europe as an author-in-exile) is plagued by a sense of displacement, homelessness and identity issues. It is this turmoil that provokes her to construct an identity that is rooted deeply within her homeland and its culture. Her homeland, Bangladesh, the culture and the political backdrop that she had resisted and rebelled against, and that which had forced her to flee to a foreign land, ironically, becomes the site of her autobiography narrative. From her location far away from home, she negotiates multiple identities through the re-construction of the girlhood phase of her life - as a Bangladeshi, Muslim woman who is a doctor by profession, she crafts her own 'personal' history. The writing of this 'personal' history from a displaced author-in-exile point of view, re-confronts and questions certain practices at the social, cultural, economic and religious levels. Nasreen in the "Preface" to the book *No Country for Women*, published in 2013, where she puts together 46 autobiographical essays writes: I believe that women have no country. If country means security, if country means freedom, then women obviously do not have any country. Women do not get freedom, then women obviously do not have any country. Women do not get freedom anywhere in the world. They are not safe- this is realized when one reads the daily newspapers. Many of the articles in this book are reactions on everyday stories of women's unsecured life. (*No Country* xiii)

These words sum up the individual plight of the writer while also throwing light on how gender, a biological construct; can be used to limit women's agency. The idea of a 'country' for men and their dominant discourses alone, excludes the whole of female agency making one half of the population of Bangladesh mute spectators. Bangladesh thus stands as a stereotype for other cultures that are male dominant, excluding the women's agency. "The binary opposition between absolute freedom and total silence, a by-product of the affair, redefined Nasrin as a writer as well as Bangladesh as a nation-state" (417), writes Manmay Zafar in the article titled "Under the Gaze of the State: Policing Literature and the Case of Taslima Nasrin." These words by Zafar also remind women in general that the need for stability and security, and the need to belong, make women think that absolute silence brings about absolute freedom, and they begin to internalise patriarchal norms as normative practices within the society. On completing 25 years of exile, in 2019, braving death threats, repeated shifting and relocating between cities, and countries, Nasreen continues to use her fictional and non-fictional space to voice her pain and anger against

unjust practices for a fairer society and country while simultaneously understanding that she is “the one who is homeless everywhere” (*Sarai Reader* 462).

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