Choice as Right: Revisiting Taslima Nasrin’s Shodh

‘Dr. Uday Singh Pathania
Former Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Jammu, J&K (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS
Article History
Published Online: 09 December 2017

Keywords
Choice, Patriarchy, Need, Shodh, Betrayal, Revenge, Economic empowerment, Jhumur

*Corresponding Author
Email: udayrulz14@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Patriarchy has always expected women to fit in the frame of morality and ethics constructed by it. Men had a free life, women were caged. The hypocrisy of this system has been exposed by many writers in their own way but Taslima Nasrin takes this issue up to brutally tear it apart and subvert the myth. Her protagonist enlivens this drama and proves that it is after all a matter of choice that either subjugates or empowers women. Choice defines one’s behavior. Patriarchy either denied choice to a woman or it suggested a restricted set of choices to her. Jhumur astonishingly chooses to challenge the wisdom of patriarchy and, to her satisfaction, wins convincingly. This paper studies Shodh with the choice theory framework.

INTRODUCTION
Patriarchy has always propagated its ideology, subjugated women and manipulated norms and means to deny the rights of women. They have been oriented to sacrifice their choice to let their selves submit to the conditions. Their behavior is not a matter of their choice; rather it is dictated by the parameters set by the patriarchal set up. Women face injustice and accept it as a matter of forced choice. If they choose to be different, again they face opposition from outside but seek satisfaction from within. One’s choice defines one’s behavior; psychologists feel that one can control, not others’ but one’s own behavior. This paper shall take up Taslima Nasrin’s novel Shodh within the theory of choice to study how her female characters respond to patriarchy, forced choices and personal world of choice.

METHODOLOGY
All the approaches to psychology make an assumption that people’s behaviour and life is defined by their needs. Choice theory, developed by William Glasser in 1980 in his book Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom classifies these needs under five headings: Power- to be skilled, successful and competent; Belongingness-feeling accepted and loved by others, and to establish social connections; Freedom- independence and liberty to choose , Fun- pleasure and happiness; Survival- food, shelter, safety and clothing. Our behavior is determined by our needs whether we are conscious about it or not.

In other words, these needs drive our choices and we decide to behave in a way that satisfies our immediate one or more needs. Glasser differentiates between our needs and wants and suggests a workable plan to meet them. The core of this theory is that controlling one’s life is synonymous with making appropriate choices.

“…we are much more in control of our lives than we realize. Unfortunately, much of that control is not effective. For example, you choose to feel upset with your child, then you choose to yell and threaten, and things get worse, not better. Taking more effective control means making better choices as you relate to…everyone else”. [1]

The major axioms of this theory include: The only person whose behavior we can control is our own; all long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems; what happened in the past has everything to do with what we are today, but we can only satisfy our basic needs right now and plan to continue satisfying them in the future; we can only satisfy our needs by satisfying the pictures in our Quality World; all we do is behave; all behavior is Total Behavior and is made up of four components: acting, thinking, feeling and physiology; all Total Behavior is chosen, but we only have direct control over the acting and thinking components. We can only control our feeling and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think; all Total Behavior is designated by verbs and named by the part that is the most recognizable. (www.choicetheory.com)

The feeling component is usually the most obvious one. One’s behavior is controlled by this component. But if we want to change our behavior, then a control over the doing and thinking component is a must. Once our doing changes, other components will automatically change. It is not the feeling of disappointment that is required to face life; rather it is the reflective and reflexive action and thoughts that address the failure.

DISCUSSION
In terms of women exploitation, emancipation and empowerment, Choice theory may be taken as motivational for women to understand that the strongest drive for their behavior towards patriarchy is internally controlled, not subject to the external variables. Their state is resultant to their choices. Though in a patriarchal system choices were denied to a woman, but the new women challenge those stereotypes and systems which traditionally subjugated them.

In her novels, Taslima Nasrin mainly deals with the gender bias which is the central reason responsible for the women issues of the world. In context of women, again choice is of utmost importance: choice of education, choice of love...
and marriage, choice of motherhood, choice of subjection, choice to re-think the relations, choice for freedom and liberty etc. Traditionally women chose as per the convenience of others. They were either controlled through the discourse of biological inferiority or of their lower status than men propagated through religion. They could never make out the operative ideological apparatus working towards their subjection.

In the patriarchal frame, a man is rational, protective and strong whereas woman is emotional weak and submissive. Women are expected to conform to these standards set for them; they become mere objects of exploitation.

Taslima Nasrin, on account of her personal experience of childhood sexual abuse and the deteriorating status of women in Bangladesh, contributes considerably to the feminist thought. In most of her writings, Nasrin gives evidences of her feminist leanings as she delineates situations pertaining to subjugation and marginalization of women by men who have patriarchal mindset. [2]

**FIRST CHOICE: BETRAYAL AND FRUSTRATION**

Her women initially suffer for their choices and are betrayed by it. Jhumur in the novel under study is the one such character who makes a choice of loving. She loves Haroon and marries him unconscious of the fact that the outer world is always hostile to a woman. She had never experienced any such thing till that time. Her childhood and her youth were full of exuberance and energy. Brought up in an unrestrained and liberal atmosphere by such parents who were proud of their both the daughters, Nupur and Jhumur. Jhumur was not only a brilliant student, and an excellent sportsperson but also an effective leader of youth. Her parents have never been unhappy with having no son; the father proudly boasts of his daughters: “See- she’s my son…she’ll do everything a boy can….” (41). Even the mother is unconventional: “Will a boy solve all the problems? He will take to smoking at thirteen; ogle at girls, standing in front of schools, at fourteen; take to alcohol at fifteen and carry sharp knives around his waist at sixteen. Girls are less troublesome” (43). The parents, instead of controlling others’ thinking control their own. In the heart of Glasser’s Choice theory lays the idea that the only person one can control is oneself. Controlling others’ thinking certainly brings frustration and disappointment in life.

The initial experiences of Jhumur with Haroon are rosy and romantic. She first met Haroon in her university where she was studying physics. Within few weeks the two fell in love. He was her first love, but Jhumur was not the first girl in his life. He convinced her that he never ever had loved someone so deeply. During their short period of relationship, they enjoyed each other’s company. She particularly liked his sense of humour. He always loved to hear Tagore’s songs and they enjoyed each other’s company. She particularly liked his exuberance and energy. Brought up in an unrestrained and liberal atmosphere by such parents who were proud of their both the daughters, Nupur and Jhumur. Jhumur was not only a brilliant student, and an excellent sportsperson but also an effective leader of youth. Her parents have never been unhappy with having no son; the father proudly boasts of his daughters: “See- she’s my son…she’ll do everything a boy can….” (41). Even the mother is unconventional: “Will a boy solve all the problems? He will take to smoking at thirteen; ogle at girls, standing in front of schools, at fourteen; take to alcohol at fifteen and carry sharp knives around his waist at sixteen. Girls are less troublesome” (43). The parents, instead of controlling others’ thinking control their own. In the heart of Glasser’s Choice theory lays the idea that the only person one can control is oneself. Controlling others’ thinking certainly brings frustration and disappointment in life.

The rosy days of the courtship changed into gloomy period of life. Her life got transformed abruptly after she married Haroon. His family was an orthodox one. His parents even objected to her calling him by name. Haroon’s instructions are yet more shocking to her: she had to behave well and keep his family gratified. She had married him for love but what it ended up in is isolation, coldness and alienation. Haroon is being provoked by his mother against her. Once when she was looking at the streets from her balcony, her mother-in-law immediately reported to Haroon to get her scolded from him: “Jhumur, you have no sense at all…most of the time you seem to forget you are the bou of this family!”(7)

Jhumur started feeling like a caged bird. All her free days seemed to her a distant dream. She couldn’t sit freely, move freely or even think freely as she was being strictly trained to shed off her earlier identity for a newer one. Haroon’s instructions are worth quoting here:

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

Her choice of Haroon had started to yield unpleasant results. She felt so dejected that she even started comparing herself with the maid of the house, Rosuni. She felt that they both were in the same position as they both shared the same work but a wide gap separated their social positions. Both of them cooked food, organized room but at times Rosuni was the luckier one as she could lift her veil whenever she wanted. But Jhumur had to keep her head covered whether she liked it or not. Nasrin here targets the Purdah system prevailing in the Bangladeshi Muslim society in which women are not allowed to take their veils off. Jhumur felt suffocated and disheartened to think that her education was rotting like a stagnant pool as she was not doing any job. Her choice for this marriage landed her up in a state of mistrust of which her veil was a testimony. John Gottman and Nan Silver comment in this regard:

Betrayal is the secret that lies at the heart of every failing relationship—it is there even if the couple is unaware of it. If a husband always put his career ahead of his relationship that is betrayal. When a wife keeps breaking her promise to start a family, that is also betrayal. Pervasive coldness, selfishness, unfairness and other destructive behaviors are also evidence of disloyalty and can lead to consequences as equally devastating as adultery” [3]

The height of this mistrust was to disown her first pregnancy by Haroon. He was not very convinced by Jhumur’s symptoms that she was pregnant because he felt that it was impossible to conceive so soon. Then he took her to the doctor where all tests proved that she was pregnant. She was very happy to know that she was pregnant. Haroon suddenly was glum-faced after the news. He ignored all her gestures. Jhumur was so hurt and anxious with this kind of behavior as she was expecting him to love as Dipu loved Shipra but Haroon was cold and restless. But Haroon decided to abort her foetus because he accused her of illicit relationship.

Haroon pushed my fingers away. I’ll take you to the doctor tomorrow. ‘Why tomorrow?’ ‘Haroon had scrambled out of bed. ‘to abort the baby.’ ‘What do you mean?’ ‘What I said, will have to get rid of the child.’ ‘What’s this terrible thing you are
Jhumur was confused over this decision of Haroon and tried to convince him that it was their first baby. Actually Haroon doesn’t trust this to be their baby. He feels that Jhumur was pregnant when married because her parents quickly married her off despite her decision to marry after six months. Jhumur took one of his hands and kept it on her stomach, and said “It’s your baby, I swear…you’re killing your own child.” I want to’. Haroon’s voice is rough” (83). This incident of utter mistrust questions the concept of love that led to their marriage. Actually, Haroon is scared of the autonomy of the educated woman that he had married. His killing of the ‘illicit child’ speaks of this paranoia.

Nasrin questions the institution of marriage that expects a woman to undergo a re-birth in order to satisfy her in-laws. This is mandatory condition to legitimize her position in the family. Her alienation from her family leads to her spiritual suffering. She wanted to hug her mother, cry in her lap and tell her about abortion but her forced estrangement makes it impossible. She was now different to her natal family; she is someone’s bau. For Jhumur it was a penance for being a woman. Gayatri Spivak is relevant here when she says that:

…the figure of a woman moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister/wife/slash syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as he is herself drained of proper identity. Patriarchal power, she argues, bases itself on the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument. [4]

SECOND CHOICE: REVENGE THROUGH LOVE

Though her first choice turned out to be a failure, yet Jhumur could not afford to be taken in by the feeling of disgust and disappointment. Her relationship with Afzal tells of her action and thinking. The choice theory proposes that though one cannot control others’ lives but one can certainly manage one’s own. Jhumur avenges upon the mistrust and maltreatment by Haroon through her new relationship. She started feeling a thrill and comfort in an outsider. The veil slipped of her head. She challenged the orthodox societal norms. This relationship infused in her a sense of independence and self-confidence. She returns to her family not to submit to the patriarchal edifice but more confident and self-assured to carry out her responsibilities. She becomes Nasrin’s ‘New Woman’ who goes against the norms of morality and ethics that perpetuated her subjection. A ‘New Woman’ places great significance on her choice of love and sexual independence. It is characteristic of Nasrin’s heroines to retrieve the authority over their body, tearing separately the moral cover up of the subordinating practices of patriarchy in Bangladesh. Fatima Mernissi is pertinent to quote here “Curbing acting female sexuality, preventing female sexual self-determination is the basis of many of Islam’s family institutions” [5]. Taslima’s portrayal of this extra-marital affair is highly ironical here. Nobody in Haroon’s family is able to have any clue of this affair. Haroon was not able to sniff the odour of another man’s body in Jhumur’s body, and thought he was enjoying a trace of her chastity when holding her tight in his arms. He was more than determined to make her pregnant this time. Jhumur for the first time refused to have sex with him. To quote from the text:

‘No’. I said flatly…I muttered to myself, ‘Take care Haroon. Don’t touch me. My body carries the signature of another man…Your bride is an adulterous now; she has become what you had taken her to be and what you don’t think her as…I felt peculiar glee in succeeding to ward off Haroon’s physical moves’ (146).

Jhumur is not ready to forgive Haroon for what he had done to her. She keeps him at distance by one excuse or another. She secretly makes love to Afzal and appropriates the right to her body. As she was all determined to pay him back, so she decided to swap her position with that of Haroon in this patriarchal set up. As she had been advised by Dr. Sebati about the fertile days for pregnancy, so she was able to be impregnated by Afzal. Haroon is befooled beyond his imagination by Jhumur. She said:

I wanted him to sow his seed in a fallow land and wait foolishly, day after day, to see its sprout. I didn’t have any sense of guilt about it. I isn’t a loose woman. I isn’t deceiving him, I is merely paying him back… I had followed all the rules of society, had kept him and his family happy while living a desolate, loveless, friendless existence. I had reduced myself to a nobody. I had the right, hadn’t I, to claim something for myself in return? (147-48).

Haroon happiness knew no bounds after the pregnancy test comes out to be positive. Jhumur subverts the patriarchal agenda of appropriation and effacement of the female by conceiving a child outside marriage and passing him of as her husband, Haroon’s legitimate son. She is neither guilty of for what she had done to avenge upon his mistrust to her nor did she have amorous feelings for Afzal when he left for Australia. For her the baby was not the desired child but of pain and revenge. She did not feel like confessing her sin and ask for forgiveness: “Should I feel sorry for Haroon? …Haddn’t I been racked enough for my waywardness? Why should I suffer a second time for any dereliction?” (208). Though her new action is beyond the moral and social code of the traditional woman but her assertion of individuality is what establishes her as a ‘New Woman’ whose ideals are far too advanced for her environment. The birth of a son elevates her stature in the family.

THIRD CHOICE: ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Jhumur was now no more a weak girl but a strong woman who by exercising her right to choice transformed her life. By now Ananda, her son, was three years old. She would go alone out to shop. She spent time with her friends and often invited them for dinner. She resumed her hobby of singing. Now she opted for another choice that would make her economically independent. She decided to take up the job of a teacher. Though Haroon was reluctant to her decision but could not stop her: “How will you work with Ananda on your hands” (224). Jhumur had gained confidence after Ananda’s birth. She had understood how to be herself. She felt proud of doing her job. She wanted her economic independence and refused Haroon’s offer to take money from him:

I tell Haroon…it’s your money-not mine. I want to find out how it feels to earn money of one’s own, what it’s like to spend on what one wants. I too wish to give money to others, to you, to Ananda, to
my parents. I want to take on the responsibility of others like you have done. (225)

Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* observes in this connection:

It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separates her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice. Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator. [6]

So we find that by exercising the right of choice and by controlling her own life in her own way, Jhumur emerges as a strong woman, a new woman who after regaining her self-respect and independence, lives a life on her own terms. She loved Haroon without surrendering herself and without doing away with all her aspirations. Her strength is apparent when she says: “I feel I am strong…separate and distinct from me as Haroon’s wife, Ananda’s ma, Ma in laws bou-ma, Dolan, Hasan, Habib’s bhabhi…I’m Zeenat Sultana, Jhumur, a teacher…I am not a thing…to add grace to a house…Haroon recognizes I won’t tolerate his cruelty….I have remade my own life” (227).

**CONCLUSION**

Jhumur’s behavior remained defined by her needs. Her need for love and compassion makes her submissive. She accepts Haroon to any extent till he breaks the sacred thread of trust and betrays with the abortion of her child. She was controlled through the deadly habits of control that the choice theory talks about. She was criticized unduly, blamed for nothing, nagging, threatening, punished for a crime not done and rewarded with frustration and alienation. Whereas what she required was caring, listening, supporting, contributing, encouraging, trusting and befriending by those for whom she was supposed to undergo a re-birth after marriage. Her needs urge her to take control of her life in her own away as per the pictures of her inner quality world. She stops feeling, starts acting and thinking. By making choice as her right she rebuilds and redefines her life. Her reflective and reflexive action is what makes Shodh a worthwhile work of English literature.

**REFERENCES**


