RE(CREATING) HOME FROM AFAR: MEMOIRS OF AN EXILE

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It is through preservation of memories that an exiled person is able to survive. Controversial Bangladeshi writer, too much often identified, or rather, construed by Western media as the "Female Rushdie", Taslima Nasreen is one of the many voices that reclaim homeland. She has learnt to live on the edge due to the openness in her writings. Threatened with death by political fundamentalists, censored, harassed, she was eventually forced into exile. This paper will try to analyze the way in which the exile furnishes a new experience, that of (re)writing home by rekindling the ghosts of the past, taking as point of departure the first volume of her autobiography, her first major work written in exile, *Meyebela: My Girlhood* (2002).

Taslima Nasreen, Bengali ex-doctor who took on writing about women's oppression and objectification, has been living in exile since 1994. She caught the attention of the media in October 1993, when a religious group issued a fatwa, i.e. a religious edict, sentencing her to death for her criticizing comments and writings on Islam. Nasreen had to leave Bangladesh in 1994 and spent the next ten years in exile in the Western world. After hiding for several months, Nasreen headed for the West again in 2008. She is working at present as a research scholar at New York University, but frequently thinks and speaks about the moment when she would be able to return to her home country, a country where a considerable amount of money has been offered to anyone who would kill her. In spite of this agony of being caught between two worlds, Taslima Nasreen has created a private space for herself where she can freely voice the injustices and cruelties she had to endure. Thus, she has written collections of poems, essays, novels, short stories and columns for various newspapers. Though successful in the Western world, Nasreen is but an exiled person, someone living neither here nor there, a displaced person who is living between two worlds, one rejecting and ostracizing her, the other welcoming and advertising her.

Edward Said defines the emotional side of displacement as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 173). In exile, the exiled person learns how to deal with the utter suffering brought about by this malaise, by learning the chameleonic art of

adaptation, inspecting the sheer layers of integration, teaching the subtle mechanisms of survival and acceptance. The discourse of exile is a discourse of resistance, resistance to any kind of oppression, but at the same time it is a discourse of reintegration, of 'rebirth', of a repositioning of the self within the world. The discourse of exile is also a discourse of remembering, of recreating old paths, creating places of safety in one's mind, sheltering escape realms, so that the terrors of the past will not surface again.

The writer can look back not with anger, but equipped with fresh perspectives, altered perceptions of space and time, i.e. a broader vision which would enable the exile to imagine the past as in a dream and consequently the future of that past. The exile will learn to convert, to adapt his / her imprisonment into acts of creation via a painful series of lessons.

For Taslima Nasreen, exile represents "a bus stop" (Nasreen, *Speech for Women's Forum*) where she is waiting for a bus to go home. It is in her craft, i.e. the art of writing, that Nasreen seeks refuge; it represents her means of asserting herself, of creating her identity at the crossroads between here and there. The very title of her autobiography is a proof that the writer is trying to create an identity, a voice: the term Meyebela is a word coined by Nasreen and it means "girlhood", as there was no equivalent in her native language.

The common theme of her writings is the prevailing sexual discrimination and abuse against women. She is sending the message of the oppressed women throughout the world, the same oppression she felt as a child and as a grown-up, after being exiled and even threatened with death. I believe the violent reaction to Nasreen's autobiography is two-fold: firstly, it contains attacks upon Islam, and secondly, the volume represents a declaration of freedom on the part of the writer, who is in search of constructing a self for herself and who refuses, rejects the rigid patriarchal norms of a society reluctant to acknowledge a woman expressing her opinions on male exploitation and oppression.

Further on, I will analyze the extent to which exile has affected the mindset of the artist Taslima Nasreen. The main effect of exile is considered to be a state of long-lasting suffering on the part of the displaced person. The displaced artist is a person banished from his / her native country. Within this context, the disposition of the displaced writers revolves around a two-fold logic where exile either produces creative, resourceful freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive pensiveness, melancholy. This melancholy, this nostalgia transforms the displaced person into an Other. The response to this newly acquired condition is that the exiled writer embarks on a journey, searching for his / her identity, the quest for a homeland, even if a fictional one, through self-discovery.

Nasreen's literary text becomes extremely important in outlining the woman writer's quest for a virginal space on a blank page that gives birth to

her hidden or latent thoughts and life experiences. The literary space that she has created throughout her banned books, autobiographies or novels, essays or poems, represents the link between the external world and the woman writer's mind plunging into its own recesses.

Deemed as blasphemous and pornographic, Nasreen's autobiography reveals the hidden underground of the South Asian patriarchal system, i.e. the subterranean ghastly sexual experiences, mostly violent and abusive (she was molested and raped by her two uncles). *Meyebela: My Girlhood* outlines three central concerns: exile, journey and sexuality. I will insist on the sexual tinge of her autobiography, since it furnishes painful episodes and unsettling images, whose depiction would have been impossible to be rendered without the writer's status of an exile. It is not the celebration of sexuality that Nasreen is capturing in her work, but on the contrary, she reveals the hideous representation(s) of violent, abusive physical sexuality. It is the cry of a woman's rupture in a male-dominated world.

Nasreen's autobiography starts with violence, blood and suffering, the memories of the 1971 war, when Bangladesh fought for its independence from Pakistan. The drama of the nine-year old girl and her family is unfolding against a background of violence and abuse. Rape was one of the main weapons of the massacre campaign. Susan Brownmiller published one of the earliest analyses of the disturbing events in her work dealing with the politics of sexual abuse, "Against Our Will" (1975), reporting that

> Rape in Bangladesh had hardly been restricted to beauty. Girls of eight and grandmothers of seventy-five had been sexually assaulted during the nine-month repression. Pakistani soldiers had not only violated Bengali women on the spot; they abducted tens of hundreds and held them by force in their military barracks for nightly use. (82)

The utter suffering and humiliation of women in Bangladesh provides us with an understanding of the nature of the horrid sexual abuses performed by the Pakistani soldiers. Rape in 1971 Bangladesh is not to be perceived as an act of sexual gratification or men's quenching their thirst for sexual desire, but rather as a political ploy in which women's bodies were used as mere vehicles to scatter terror and degradation. According to Catharine MacKinnon (2006), this would be

> rape as a method of extermination: it is also rape unto death, rape as massacre, rape to kill and to make the victims wish they were dead. It is rape as an instrument of forced exile, rape to make you leave your home and never want to go back (...) rape as spectacle, it is rape to (...) shatter a society, to destroy a people. (187)

Piecing together her earliest memories of war from the mosaic of tragedies that tormented and haunted herself and her family, Nasreen recalls the agonizing experience when their houses were inspected by Pakistani soldiers, who apart from plundering money, jewellery, also plundered women's bodies:

> I was simply pretending to be asleep, as if travelling the land of dreams, playing there with fairies, (…), as if I did not know that men wearing heavy boots had entered the room and were walking about, a rifle dangling from every shoulder. These men could kill anyone, any time, casually and without a care, even when they were laughing and joking among themselves. If they thought anyone in the room was awake, they would either kill him instantly or take him by force to their camp, where they would whip him incessantly, torture him with a bayonet, and make sure all his bones were crushed. So, little girl, never mind what those heavy boots do in your room. You must continue to sleep. Make sure your eyelids do not flutter, your limbs do not move, your fingers remain still. Your heart must not tremble for, if it does, you will be unable to hide the tremor from these men. When they lift the mosquito-net and look at you, lust and desire pouring from their eyes, they will shoot flames out of their mouths as they speak in a language you cannot understand. Keep absolutely still when they flash a light on your face, your chest, your thighs. They must see that you are not yet fully grown, you are not even an adolescent, your breasts have not yet appeared! (Nasreen, *Meyebela: My Girlhood* 18)

The child Taslima had to learn to read the hunger in the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers who were lustfully examining her young body. This experience is closely linked to a more horrid one, as in her early childhood, Nasreen narrates, she was molested and raped by her uncles. In fact, this experience of being sexually abused is shrouded in a veil of wonder to the young Taslima, 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. (Nasreen, *Meyebela: My Girlhood* 91).

For the two men, Taslima represented merchandise, a possession, a 'thing' to have and to take. Luce Irigaray argues that woman "is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men (...) She has functioned as merchandise, a commodity passing from one owner to another, from one consumer to another, a possible currency of exchange between one and the other" (157).

And this is exactly what happens to young Taslima: she is traded and possessed, she is silenced into sexual oppression and, more than that, she learns how to silence herself in order to protect her life. Incapable to expose what had happened to her, the young girl felt split in two, hence a part of her continued to lead a normal life, but the other part became silent, depressed; she was silenced by her oppressors and only through the craft of writing did she recover her self-esteem.

For Susan Brownmiller, rape is politically motivated; it is a means to dominate and degrade women. She believes that it is never an individual woman being raped, as rape is a means by which men keep all women in a state of fear. It is through this state of fear that men control women from a distance. From early childhood, the seeds of rape seep into a woman's consciousness at various levels. Susan Brownmiller suggestively laid the setting of this early encumbering in our minds of the threat called rape:

> Women are trained to be rape victims. (...) We hear the whispers when we are children: girls get raped. Not boys. The message becomes clear. Rape has something to do with our sex. Rape (...) is the dark at the top of the stairs, the undefinable abyss that is just around the corner, and unless we watch our step it might become our destiny. (309)

For Brownmiller, rape is therefore a biological issue: men are superior in terms of physical strength, therefore they use this ability in order to satisfy their sexual urge: "when men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it" (14). Women are kept under a state of control by men via terror, which is a man's weapon of force against her: "his forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood" (Brownmiller 14).

The appalling experience of young Taslima leads to a devastating loss of identity and speech. The cruel attacks which devastate her mind and spirit reveal the volatility of any speaking self. She silences herself and later on she will be able to voice her tragedy and the tragedy of women through the profession she has been acknowledged for in the Western world, that of a writer.

In her acceptance speech of the 2004 UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Prize, held at Unesco Headquarters in Paris on 16 November 2004, Taslima Nasreen declared: "A woman's destiny is to be ruled by the father in childhood, by the husband when she is young, and by her son when she is old". The ubiquity of the male-rule is in fact a pervasive theme in Nasreen's autobiography, a controversial book told by an angry and rebellious child.

Drawing from Kate Millett's definition of patriarchy, a social organization which "guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female" (26) and which is political in the sense that it engages "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23), I will enlarge upon Millett's ideas and delineate patriarchy as the social structural basis of all power relations. Patriarchy manifests itself at the core of society and within the institution of the family. The family becomes the main 'player' in encouraging its members to conform and abide by patriarchal ideologies and demands. Thus, the human being becomes the repository of a dichotomous and tyrannical code of behaviour, where men are regarded and act as superior beings, whereas women have to humbly accept their status as the inferior sex, as the Other. According to Millett, this dichotomous border is "based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue", and ineffectuality in the female" (26).

Taslima, her mother, her sister, together with the maids in their house, they all lived in homes clouded with patriarchal oppression. Nasreen's disdain of the patriarchal system is clearly expressed throughout the pages of Meyebela. 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" (Nasreen, *Meyebela: 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 the maids who worked in the house, a physically violent man 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 will try to instill in her children as well. The paternalistic oppression 'dismembered' the family and the young Taslima 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.

Not only did she live her traumatizing experiences in childhood, but she also outlines the experiences lived and felt by the other female

inhabitants of the household. These women revolt against their marginal position, but unfortunately they are silent victims and they silence themselves through a process of self-mutilation, these victims of rape who learnt how to deal and live with their shame, "carrying their unwanted foetuses in their wombs" (Nasreen, *Meyebela: My Girlhood* 186). It is through the process of cleansing their minds of the atrocious moments spent on that battlefield that these women were able to survive, sinking deep into a sea of total oblivion.

One can speak about heroism of survival that Nasreen endows these women with, she praises their strength of character, their stubbornness to live, but at the same time she acknowledges their weakness, weakness which is encumbered in them by patriarchal oppression, by the male rule, to use Kate Millett's terms. Nasreen depicts the female body as the humiliated body, the tortured body, the abused body, the female body as it is constructed by the Bangladeshi patriarchy. She maintains the idea that women should have total control over their bodies, which may seem a strange idea in Bangladesh. The moment her inner biological barriers are violated, through sexual abuse and rape, it is her mind's eye which allows Nasreen to create a happier fictional existence, a fictional realm where she has the freedom to escape whenever she wants to, in a world which she fully understood that can only be cleansed through the act of creation, by words, by her act of rebelling against the pillars of male domination.

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