


Physical and Spiritual Shades of Love in Taslima Nasreen's Love Poems

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ABSTRACT

Taslima Nasreen is a Bangladeshi author whose name is always in the news. Sometimes it's because she said something bold and honest about fanaticism, and other times it's because she gave a voice to oppressed people who had never dared to say what they felt inside. Today, the world is moving forward in the area of technology. Art and writing are getting better and better as time goes on. Still, it's sad to say that there is a corner where everything is dark, even though it looks like everything is fine from the outside. The author who has the courage to bring this darkness out into the open is Taslima Nasreen, who is not afraid of the oppressive powers. The poet in Taslima Nasreen can't ignore how important it is to touch the body, which also needs to rest and feel safe. Love is the medicine that makes the body feel better. The kiss is a way to show love. When the poet has done everything from early morning until late in the evening, he or she is too tired. Love is what she needs. She is used to getting two kisses on the lips from her lover. She can't get enough of love being shown through a kiss on her lips. She can't picture being able to sleep or rest without a kiss from her lover.

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Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi author whose name always remains in controversy—sometimes for her bold and frank statement about fanaticism and sometimes for giving thought-provoking voice to the oppressed people who never dared say what they felt within. Today the world is moving ahead towards the technological sphere. Art and literature are flourishing and making progress day by day. Still, it is sad to say that there is a corner where everything is dark though outwardly it seems to be all right. No one dares to put this darkness outside for the fear of the oppressive powers that are adamant to take lives. Everybody seems to be talking of the human rights but what is missing is the missing link of being human among the human beings.

Taslima Nasreen is the author who dares to put this darkness outside without being afraid of the oppressive powers. Being a multi-dimensional personality, she writes for the cause of women and is never afraid of criticizing religion. Her name is forbidden in Bangladesh. She

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is bold enough to give voice to the issues of women’s oppression and gender inequality. She employs the language of protest to colour the issues related to women. No doubt, she is very popular as a novelist but her poetry is equally significant. Her poetry becomes a mirror which reflects her new image of a love poet.

Love moves from physical to spiritual journeying via emotional and mental routes. Physical becomes the first step to climb in order to reach the desired goal. Presence leads to absence. Concrete leads to abstract. Love begins with attraction. Then, it moves slowly and slowly from physical to real love where there is no place of body which disappears to give place to soul to appear. Love begins to flow within. The flow does not stop in the absence of body. Taslima Nasreen is well aware of the various shades of love—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. The need is to have the proper balance otherwise it will lead into frustration, despair and disappointment.

Physical shade is painted on the body which attracts with its linings of touching, feeling, cuddling, kissing and holding. Presence brings closeness in the physical shade. Physical shade needs bases on which it rests. It needs face, character, money, fame, and sharp physical features. All these features raise the expectations of the lover and the beloved. But, when these features fade, they give place to differences between them. Such physical traits lack complete acceptance. Acceptance is confined to the presence of the body. As soon as the body appears, love also appears with its head high, but when the body disappears, love also hides in the dark corners in search of the presence of the other body. Love based on the physical beauty is temporary. What Thomas Carew says about physical and true beauty is right. In the poem “The True Beauty”, he writes:

He that loves a rosy cheek
Or a coral lip admires,
Or from starlike eyes doth seek
Fuel to maintain his fires;
As old Time makes these decay,
So his flames must waste away.
But a smooth and steadfast mind,
Gentle thoughts, and calm desires,
Hearts with equal love combined,

Kindle never-dying fires:

Where these are not, I despise

Lovely cheeks or lips or eyes. (The Golden Treasury 90)

The motivation of physical love is sex. Sex is the ingredient that makes the physical shade dark and attractive. It is sex that binds one in the unlimited desires. Desires lead to despair. Physical shade is a kind of biological attraction resulting in the love of the body. The whole physical shade is painted on the skeletal canvas.

Taslima Nasreen who has suffered much due to the patriarchal system which values more to the body than the soul of women. The person is lost somewhere in having possession over the body. In her famous poetry collection, *All About Women*, she composes a poem, titled, “Female Goods” which opens the truth about treating women as goods. She is good because she has female goods. Here is an excerpt which uncovers every item of female body for the use of the buyers of the patriarchal society.

Woman, you'd like a woman?

All kinds of women,

Fair skinned women, tall women, hair down to their knees,

Slim waist, firm and shapely figure.

She's got no fat, no salt, you won't find

Any wrinkles in her skin.

Pierced nose, pierced ears, pierced digestive tract,

Check with your fingers that nothing else is pierced.

No hand has touched her virgin limbs, her liquids

Have not spilled, a woman not yet enjoyed. (*All About Women* 44)

Taslima Nasreen has presented the parts of the female body for show. She knows the mentality of the male world where everyone is running after these items of the body. This is the materialistic world where body matters. A woman needs three meals—breakfast, lunch and dinner for living. She needs saris, ornaments and good soap to make her body attractive and smooth. She has become an item or a product that is introduced in the global market. She is a thing, not a person. A man has possession over her. She says: “This female item can be used any way you like!” The male world can chain her feet and her hands. She is not given the right even to think as her mind is in chain. It is really a paradox when the man does not find her

suitable for his use, he can get divorce from her simply by repeating this word. If the man likes or loves her for her physical features, his love comes to an end with the passage of time.

If you wish, divorce her, say divorce divorce

And you've divorced her. (All About Women 44)

The poet in Taslima Nasreen cannot neglect the significance of the physical touch of the body that also needs rest and comfort. Love is the balm that relieves the body. Love is expressed through the kiss. The poet, after performing all the activities right from morning till late in the evening, gets too much tired. What she needs is love. She is habitual of enjoying a pair of kiss on her lips from the lover. She is so addicted to love expressed through the kiss on her lips. She cannot imagine of rest and sleep without kiss from the lover. Here is an excerpt from the poem "The Ledger" which reveals the need of the physical shade:

all alone

I yearn for a hand to come and lift my chin

And a pair of lips to kiss my lips.

Without an intense kiss, my night is never made. (Love Poems 5)

Physical touch is the magic or maya which attracts all alike. Body speaks its own language. In her poem "Body Language", Taslima Nasreen attempts to know the truth of the body. Who attracts it? Why does it rebel itself? Is man responsible for the attraction? Is Nature responsible for the rebel of the body? She asks and asks wondering why she has become a slave of her passions of the body. Is it the touch of the man that awakes her from within? Is it Nature that plays hide and seek with her? She decodes the language and gestures of the body. She is well aware of her body, but feels that sometimes she does not know it. A kind of bell starts ringing in the nerves of her body when she feels the touch of a rough hand. She attempts to read her body but fails as it starts speaking its own language. She feels her lips, fingers, legs, thighs, breasts which, no doubt are hers but feels that they are not of hers. These parts of the body are not under her control. Who controls then? She questions herself but does not get answer. She is only a plaything in this world. Whose playing thing is she? She is a plaything of man or nature. Then, she comes to a conclusion saying:

Actually,

it's nature, not man, who plays with me.

I'm her fancy sitar. (Love Poems 31)

She is a fancy sitar of Nature who plays with her and her body. Nature plays with every pore of her body. It is true that she wakes up in her body with the touch of a man. But, suddenly she feels tide within her. She feels the fragrance of love in every part of her body. Now she is sure that it is not man but Nature who plays with her body. She is simply a sitar for the play of Nature. She admits this truth thus:

A man's touch wakes me up
from my childhood sleep.
Suddenly, my sea is in tide.
If she smells the fragrance of love
in my flesh and blood,
it's nature who plays me
I'm her fancy sitar. (Love Poems 31)

The poet in Taslima Nasreen is expert in painting the physical shade of love. Body is the beginning point of love. In her poem "Seascape", she paints the physical shade on the sand of the sea. She recalls when she was eighteen. She used to feel the sea throughout the night in her sleep. Eighteen is the sweet age when a man or a woman feels "the lapping of the sea" within her even without any attraction from outside. Now she is mature enough to make a dam over the tide of physical shade as she says: "I put the dam of life / to push back the tide" (Love Poems 15). Eighteen is the age which does not take much time to end. It turns into thirty or under thirty with the passage of time. The poet persona feels that with the passage of time, she has collected so much "waters of life" that the sea of youth seems to be a lake. She becomes serious when she utters:

The waters of life collect
become so vast
so endless
that, if you compare the two,
the sea seems like a lake in the afternoon. (Love Poems 15)

The poet persona in Taslima Nasreen talks straightforwardly in the poem "The Straight road" about the physical aspect of love. She asks the man directly if he wishes to fall in love with her. If he wishes, he should do. If he wishes to see her well-rounded hands, he is allowed not only to see but also to hold them. She cannot delay any further. If he wishes to love her, he should do otherwise it will be better if he goes away from her.

The physical shade may be a part but not the whole of love. It may be a chapter in the novel of love. What is important for Taslima is not the body but the person of the body. She is not happy when a man is lost in the possession of the body while forgetting the very person of the body. For her love is the best solace. There is nothing better than love for her. She is herself sharp but considers love sharper. This is the love that can cut the snares of the body and show the real person the body. She does not hesitate to ask the question:

Can you give something
better than love?
A sword which is sharper than
me? (Love Poems 49)

Taslina Nasreem is bold enough to recall Anna Karenina and admit the truth that every woman has more or less Anna Karenina in her. The need is to recognise the complex web of various shades of love. Though she paints love with physical shade, she values more to the emotional shade which directly appeals to the heart of woman who wishes to be loved as a person and not merely as a possession. Anna Karenina is a symbol of love with various shades. Understanding woman is possible only through understanding woman as a person and not as a possession. She cannot neglect physical shade as it makes woman appear in concrete form before man. She gives a clue to the male world when she writes:

One Anna Karenina lives in every woman.
I don't know whether women know it or not.
Perhaps not. (All About Women 17)

Sooner or later, one has to realise the truth of the physical shade which becomes dim with the passage of time. If a person who loves the colour of the physical shade in the beginning, starts going into the depth and finally realises its temporariness. If he or she really loves, the physical shade becomes the step that takes him or her to the next step that leads him or her towards spiritual shade—the dark, mystic and unexplored. Taslima Nasreen lies somewhere in between. She feels for the physical shades while attracting towards the mysterious spiritual shade. The spiritual shade is what counts in life but the attraction of physical shade does not leave her despite the fact of her recognising the permanence in the spiritual shade.

Taslina Nasreen who understands the value of spiritual shade also employs it in her poems though it is not as dark and deep as some other shades are. She is more emotional than spiritual.

Even then, some of her poems are replete with the spiritual shade of love. Her poem “Love” reflects the spiritual shade of love while revealing all the dimensions that a person embraces while making a progress in the journey towards the destination of spiritual love.

The years fall off
the branches of my life.
Still love blooms in the heart
unrestrained...
The Baltic Sea has no tides.
But see, sitting on its shore,
my whole body is in tide. (Love Poems 50)

Taslima Nasreen loves beyond the love of the body. The Body becomes insignificant leading place to the Soul. Now, it is her soul that speaks, feels, and converses with the world, within the world and beyond the world. As she grows in years, she realizes the importance of love. This love is on the verge of spirituality which makes the body disappear culminating in the appearance of the soul. The branches of her life are fallen off with the passing of years. She is growing old but she realises, in Browning’s words, “the best is yet to be” with the passage of time. Attraction of the body disappears in the darkness of the blind world. The diya of spiritual love is lightened and the light has brightened the whole heart. Love is still there in her heart. It blooms to the full. But this love is still. There is no looking and after for love from this man or that man. Stillness of love makes her love profusely. Possessiveness is now absent. She becomes love saint who loves all equally realising the same soul in every person. This love is flowing without any check or control. Till now it was restrained to the dear person whom she loved physically. Now this love has broken the barrier and started flowing out unrestrainedly. She recalls the Baltic Sea in her mind. The Baltic Sea has no tide as it is small and its opening is very narrow. Its result is that the North Atlantic tides fail to influence the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea of her heart which was small and confined to physical love exits no more now. She has crossed the boundary of physicality and entered a world where there is no place for the body. The body is not body but is soul. She loves the body, no doubt, but she loves the body not for the body’s sake but for the soul’s sakes. It is the soul that lives in the body. The body has turned itself into the soul. The water that flows in her heart has created so much tide that breaks all the confines resulting in the overflowing of love which embraces all. This is the effect which she feels while sitting on the shore of love. Her whole body has become tide in

itself. The tide of love has made her spiritual. This tide has given her a meaning of life, has given her energy to have relationship with all and has turned her chemistry of physical love into spiritual love resulting in embracing all with the feeling of love so profoundly that she sees her own self in all alike. She identifies her ‘Self’ with love. Love is the water that flows in her endlessly and this is the water which is flowing to have an association and identification with the water of love flowing in others’ hearts. Her whole body embraces the tide of love that flows from within towards all.

True love lies in giving, not in expecting the return of love. If one expects the return, it will not be love but it will be a trade of giving and taking. The poet in Taslima Nasreen knows it fully well. It does not matter if the man, whom she loves, does not love her. She believes in giving, not in taking. Her love is selfless, not selfish. She recalls her lover in her memory and the fire of his memories makes her warm with love. His memories prove to be the source of love that gives her a meaning to her life. In her poem, “No matter, if he doesn’t know”, while recalling her love in her memory lane, she interrogates herself saying:

Does he know
that even now I remember him,
want him?
That even now
I warm my body at midnight
in the fire of his memories? (Love Poems 33)

The poet in Taslima Nasreen is quite conscious of the fact that true happiness lies within. Heaven is within her, not in the body of the love. It does not much matter if the lover does not know about her love. What counts for her is love. She does not expect anything in return. If she expects something in love, it will be a trade for her, not love. She searches for spirituality in love. So, the important thing for her is that she loves her lover and here lies her happiness. Very frankly she admits in “No matter if he doesn’t know”:

If he doesn’t know
what does it matter?
This is my happiness
that I love him
whether he loves me or not (Love Poems 33)

The poem “Giving” reflects her nature of giving, a sign of spiritual love. When a person loves and reaches the point of spirituality, he or she begins to give. She never refuses if one comes to her or puts out hands for begging. She asks to apply what she has just uttered. She utters very clearly and practically:

Beg. Ask and see:

I can never refuse anyone

once they put out their hands. (Love Poems 28)

For the poet, spiritual love is neither in mosque nor in temple. She sees the spiritual love in “the welfare of humanity”, not in the religious places. She ardently wishes to burn all the religious places like temples, mosques, gurudwaras, and churches. The moment these places are destroyed by the fire, the flower gardens should grow and spread their fragrance. She knows the value of education in the society. She wishes to construct the children’s school and study halls so that they may get proper education and remove the darkness of ignorance. Her love for the human beings is on the verge of spirituality. This love makes her think of turning the prayers halls into “hospitals, orphanages, universities.” What she wishes is to see scientific research institutes in place of the prayer halls. Sample the lines from the poem “Mosque, Temple”:

For the welfare of humanity, now let prayer halls

be turned into hospitals, orphanages, universities,

Now let prayer halls become academies of art, fine art centers,

scientific research institutes. (Mosque Temple)

What she searches in life is peace. This peace comes by giving, not by taking. She has the tendency to give. This makes her spiritual to the very core. Religion does not give her peace. Spirituality for her lies within. So, she always listens to her heart. She does not listen to the commands of the society. She does not care for what people will say about her. She feels that this feeling of spirituality will come with education. Hence, she always remains in favour of education. She does not hesitate to admit that all the prayers halls might be turned into the centre of education and research. This very feeling makes her quite aware of herself that introduces her to her.

She is for humanity. She can feel the tears of humanity. For her religion is not religion in the traditional sense; it is the other name of humanity. She attempts to search for religion in the

humanity. She wishes to turn prayers halls into the golden rice fields. Very clearly she wishes in the poem “Mosque, Temple”:

Now let prayer halls be turned to golden rice fields
in the radiant dawn,
Open fields, rivers, restless seas.
From now on, let religion's other name be humanity. (Mosque Temple)

Such feelings and thinking of hers make her a bit spiritual in attitude and emotional in behavior. What counts her in life is humanity. She thinks and feels for humanity. The poem, “Absence in Presence” by John Donne is quite applicable in Taslima Nasreen’s case. Here is quoted the complete poem “Absent in Presence” thus:

Absence, hear thou my protestation
Against thy strength.
Distance, and length;
Do what thou canst for alteration:
For hearts of truest mettle
Absence doth join, and Time doth settle.
Who loves a mistress of such quality,
His mind hath found
Affection’s ground
Beyond time, place, and all mortality.
To hearts that cannot vary
Absence is present, Time doth tarry.
My senses want their outward motion
Which now within
Reason doth win,
Redoubled by her secret notion:
Like rich men that take pleasure
In hiding more than handing treasure.

By absence this good means I gain,
That I can catch her,

Where none can watch her,
In some close corner of my brain:
There I embrace and kiss her;
And so enjoy her and none miss her. (321)

The mindset of Taslima Nasreen is just like the poetic persona of the poem “Absent in Presence.” Taslima Nasreen, whose senses see the physical shades, paints them on the canvas of her poetry, particularly love poetry. But, when she turns her senses within, she feels the fragrance of the unexplored spiritual and thus becomes conscious of this mystic shade. She begins to see it even in physical shade. Absence becomes presence for her and presence becomes absence. She endeavours to see the spiritual even while wearing the specs of the physical. She tries to make balance though the weight of physical becomes heavier than the weight of the spiritual. That is why she is compared to Kamala Das who also paints the spiritual love in her poems but remains in-between the two worlds. What brings both of them close is love.

Taslima Nareen in love searches for love though her journey begins with the body. The feeling of love gives her an understanding of life. She takes the string of physical love and colours it in the spiritual colour and attempts to bring the very truth of Shakespeare’s phrase, “the marriage of true minds” (The Golden Treasury 20). She begins to feel at the mental level and thus raises a genuine question. She has a question to ponder. The touch of a man on her body makes her unchaste without his touch to her heart. What will happen when a man touches her heart in place of her body? Her poem “Chastity” reveals her mind at physical as well as mental level.

If a man touches my body
I’ll become unchaste
and not if he touches my heart? (Love Poems 1)

Such questioning, at the mental level, makes Taslima Nasreen ponder over the shades of love. She moves ahead and goes in the direction of spiritual shade. She paints the canvas with the spiritual shade which is visible along with the physical shade. The fusion of physical and spiritual shades makes her poetry attractive, somewhat mystic and full of understanding.

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