

Nasrin's French Lover: Women's Lives in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Background: This paper analyzes Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover* (2001) as a critique of patriarchal structures in Bangladeshi society. The study focuses on the protagonist, Nilanjana, and her struggle for identity and autonomy. The novel highlights how a patriarchal culture, compounded by its own rigid religious beliefs, targets women's and defines their lives in relation to men—often at the cost of their own freedom and identity.

Methodology: This study draws on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "Other," Abeda Sultana's analysis of patriarchal subordination. It will also use Taslima Nasrin's own critique of gender norms to examine Nilanjana's journey in relation to other Bangladeshi women. A close textual analysis will be run to explore themes of marriage, societal expectations, and resistance. The novel will set the broader context of gender dynamics in South Asia at the central stage to illuminate the lives of South Asian Women.

Results: The narrative reveals a visible impact of patriarchal expectations on the women characters, as their identity is shaped by their roles as daughter, wife, and potential mother, thereby restricting their personal desires. Nilanjan's marriage to Kishanlal, driven by societal pressure rather than love, reflects the systemic denial of female agency. Her eventual pursuit of independence in France signifies a rejection of those societal constraints. The novel critiques the societal scrutiny of women's appearance and behavior as well because these gazing behaviors would force women to be a conformist at the expense of their own freedom.

Conclusion: *French Lover* foregrounds the challenges Bangladeshi women face in asserting their identities within a patriarchal framework. Nilanjana's journey toward self-discovery offers a vision of resistance and empowerment. This study brings in the glaring examples from the text to highlight how patriarchy has limited the lives of Bangladeshi women and what needs to be done to fight back. The study calls for a redefinition of female identity that embraces autonomy and individuality.

Novelty: This study highlights Nasrin's contribution to feminist discourse by illustrating how *French Lover* critiques the intersection of gender, culture, and identity with reference to Bangladesh. Bangladeshi women's stories are usually unheard because of the strict religious code of conducts therefore this study tries to get into the lives of Bangladeshi women through Nashree's narratives, highlighting the novel's relevance to contemporary discourses on gender equality in traditional societies.

Keywords: Female subjectivity, Identity, patriarchy, Taslima Nasrin, Bangladesh

Introduction

Across cultures and centuries, women's roles have been deeply shaped by the collective unconscious of societies, rendering their domination often invisible. Women's experiences often reflect the evolution of our societal norms. The status and roles of women have been deeply embedded in cultural, social, and historical contexts across the world, evolving from rigidly defined expectations to more complex and fluid identities (Wetzel, 1993). In classical Greek society, for instance, women were largely relegated to domestic spheres, with limited participation in public or political life, particularly in Athens. This marginalization persisted through various epochs, including the medieval and Renaissance periods, where women's societal contributions were often overshadowed by their familial roles (Walcot, 1984). The Victorian era, though marked by slight advances in education and legal rights, continued to confine women to ideals of domesticity and virtue (Rasulovna, 2022). It is only in the modern era that significant strides toward gender equality have been realized, with women actively participating in all sectors of life (Giuliano, 2015).

In South Asia, and specifically in Bangladesh, women's roles and statuses have also undergone substantial transformations, influenced by traditional cultural norms, religious practices, and colonial legacies (Kabeer, 1988). However, Kabeer states, despite these changes, women in Bangladesh continue to tread through a landscape marked by deep-seated patriarchy and social conservatism. Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi feminist writer, has been dealing with this issue fervently for a long. She offers a poignant critique of the societal constraints imposed on women. Her novel *French Lover* serves as a powerful exploration of female identity, autonomy, and resistance in the context of Bangladeshi society (Alam, 1998).

In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore what women have been going through in Bangladesh through the literary corpus provided by Taslima Nasrin. Her magnum opus *French Lover* serves as a data pool to bring forth insights into Bangladesh and the women over there, their struggles for independence, and their challenges in asserting their identities. By situating the conditions of Bangladeshi women and their multifaceted harsh realities, the study attempts to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender and equality in the Asian context.

Literature Review

Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover* (2001) has been widely examined for its bold critique of patriarchal structures and its exploration of female identity in Bangladeshi society. Alam (1998) argues that Nasrin's work challenges the intersection of modernity and Islamic

fundamentalism, positioning her as a controversial figure who exposes the systemic oppression of women through narratives like Nilanjana's, whose marriage to Kishanlal reflects societal pressures to conform ([Alam](#), 1998). Similarly, [Kabeer](#) (1988) provides a foundational analysis of women's subordination in Bangladesh, highlighting how cultural and religious norms restrict women's autonomy, a theme central to *French Lover* where Nilanjana's identity is subsumed under her roles as daughter and wife. [Gaur](#) (2016) emphasizes the theme of self-actualization in the novel, noting Nilanjana's journey toward independence as a rejection of traditional expectations, while [Joseph and Sharmila](#) (2023) explore the portrayal of relationship intimacy, suggesting that Nasrin uses personal relationships to critique broader societal constraints. [Siddiqi](#) (2022) further contextualizes Nasrin's work within Bangladesh's gendered landscape, arguing that her narratives contest the marginalization of women by foregrounding their struggles for self-definition. These studies collectively foreshadow Nasrin's focus on the tension between individual desire and societal norms, with feminist frameworks like de Beauvoir's concept of woman as "Other" ([de Beauvoir](#), 1949) providing theoretical grounding to analyze Nilanjana's subordination and resistance.

Despite the robust scholarship on Nasrin's work, a significant research gap exists in examining how *French Lover* specifically interrogates the interplay of cultural and religious patriarchal norms in shaping Bangladeshi women's identities. While [Alam](#) (1998) and [Siddiqi](#) (2022) address the broader socio-political context of gender in Bangladesh, and [Gaur](#) (2016) focuses on self-actualization, few studies deeply analyze how Nasrin's narrative strategies—such as Nilanjana's internal monologues and her cross-cultural experiences—uniquely expose the mechanisms of patriarchal control rooted in both cultural traditions and religious conservatism. Moreover, existing research often overlooks the novel's multifaceted portrayal of secondary female characters like Molina and Mithu, whose experiences of marginalization due to appearance and societal expectations amplify Nasrin's critique. This study aims to fill this gap by offering a detailed analysis of how *French Lover* uses Nilanjana's journey, alongside the narratives of other women, to challenge the intersectional forces of patriarchy, thereby contributing to feminist literary discourse on gender, identity, and resistance in South Asian contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a close textual analysis of Taslima Nasrin's *French Lover*, guided by a feminist theoretical framework. Drawing primarily on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the 'Other' and incorporating intersectional and postcolonial feminist lenses, the analysis focuses on key passages that illuminate the protagonist's internal conflicts and the societal mechanisms of control. Specific scenes depicting Nilanjana's marital life, her interactions with her family (particularly the narratives of Molina and Mithu), and her cross-cultural encounter with Danielle are examined to deconstruct the patriarchal imposition of identity.

Discussion

The Imperative of Marriage and Social Legitimacy

In traditional societies, the process of a woman's development is deeply intertwined with the expectations, norms, and values set forth by her community ([Nasreen](#), 1995). At each stage of her life, women are bound by various societal aspects that dictate their behavior, appearance, and presentation in the public sphere. These expectations are so profound that they often revolve around the women's association with the male members of their society ([Sibal](#), 2014). In such contexts, women without male support are often denied full recognition and considered less than human ([Hashmi](#), 1995). Marriage becomes a pivotal point for women to gain respect and recognition in these traditional settings. It's not merely about whom one loves or desires to marry; it's a societal imperative that often compels women to enter into marriages without considering their personal desires and happiness ([Brie](#), 2009).

Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi author known for her outspoken views on various social issues, particularly women's rights and secularism. One of her notable works is the novel *French Lover* in which she explores themes of identity, love, and liberation. The story of Nilanjana, who, in the pursuit of societal approval and respect glaringly reflects a woman's search for identity. Her previous love affair with Sushant, which was not accepted by her family and society due to caste differences, had created a profound dilemma for her. To gain social acceptance and protect herself from societal scrutiny, she ultimately married Kishanlal, a man she did not love. In doing so, Nilanjana found herself pondering whether she married to truly live or if this was a different form of surrender—a sacrifice she made to conform to societal norms and expectations, which dictated that she must marry to attain recognition and respect ([Kannur](#), 2014).

In this traditional society, women continually face questions, expectations, and demands from various members of their community. They are urged to adhere to social norms and rituals without considering the toll it takes on their individuality ([Gaur](#), 2016). Women, like Nilanjana, may make choices that defy their desires, all in the name of upholding societal expectations. These choices may range from their appearance to their roles in the family and society. As seen through Nilanjana's experiences, women often become objects of scrutiny and judgment when they do not conform to these traditional ideals ([Islam](#), 2023).

Women's identities in these traditional societies are closely linked to their relationships with male figures. After becoming mothers, their identities become linked with their children. This results in women being defined not as individuals, but as subordinates or subhuman in comparison to men. Their identities are limited to roles such as daughter, wife, and mother, each of which corresponds to their relationship with male family members ([Joseph & Sharmila](#), 2023). This research seeks to explore the impact of these societal norms on women's lives and the construction of their identities.

Throughout their lives, women in traditional societies are guided through a series of stages, each marked by specific expectations regarding their behavior and attitudes. These expectations extend to their appearance and how they present themselves in society, as they are

constantly reminded of what they ought to be to conform to the ideal woman. This societal molding comes with a significant caveat: women's identities in these traditional settings are inextricably linked to the male members of their communities([Nasreen](#), 1995). To the point that women without the support and association of men are often viewed as less than fully human.

In these traditional cultures, being unmarried often invites criticism and scrutiny. Marriage becomes a defining factor for women, offering them a legitimate place in society. This emphasis on marriage overshadows considerations of love and personal desire, often compelling women to enter into unions without genuine affection or understanding([Littrell & Bertsch](#), 2013). Such is the case for Nilanjana, who, in her quest for societal acceptance, married a man, Kishanlal, whom she did not love. Nilanjana's story illustrates the societal pressures women face, where they are constrained by norms and customs that dictate their choices and, ultimately, their identities. Nilanjana says:

She got married to Kishan instead and then wondered if she had done so to live if was this a different kind of death, or if she did it because one had to get married; otherwise, people would frown upon her. Perhaps she did it to defend herself against nasty conjectures about why she didn't marry until so late and also to prove to everyone that she wasn't deaf or lame and could still get a good match. ([Nasreen](#), p. 15)

The conflict between her love for Sushant, a relationship deemed unacceptable by society and family, and her marriage to Kishanlal raises profound questions about the sacrifices women make to conform to societal expectations. Nilanjana's internal turmoil, as expressed in her musings about whether her marriage was a means to live or a different form of death, sheds light on the internal struggles women endure in adhering to these rigid norms. The need to prove her worth and capability to society by marrying, even if it's not of her own choosing, underscores the immense social pressure placed upon women in these traditional settings.

The Male Gaze and the Tyranny of Beauty Standards

Women in traditional societies find themselves subjected to relentless scrutiny. The sacrifices they make in the process of conforming to societal expectations often come at the expense of their individuality. The pressure to maintain these expectations can be overwhelming, as exemplified in the case of Nilanjana. Her life took a tumultuous turn when Sushanta ended their relationship due to caste differences, leaving her emotionally shattered. While Sushanta easily moved on and married, Nilanjana's reputation suffered because, as a woman, her involvement in the affair was met with constant scrutiny.

Not only are women expected to conform to societal norms, but their appearance and behavior are also strictly monitored. Nilanjana's father and her husband, Kishanlal, both exercised control over her attire and conduct. Her father insisted she wear her wedding sari and jewelry on a flight, underlining the idea that men knew best what would appeal to other men. Her husband Kishanlal's watchful eye extended to her posture, constantly reminding her to sit properly, and prescribing her attire, even while abroad ([Kannur](#), 2014).

Upon her arrival in France after her marriage, Nilanjana had hopes of experiencing a newfound sense of liberty and freedom, expecting to escape the confines of traditional attire. However, these hopes were quickly dashed. Kishanlal enforced traditional dress upon her, insisting she portray the image of a newlywed bride. This control over her attire was a stark reminder of her role, as she was placed in a corner, akin to a doll on display for visitors ([Joseph & Sharmila, 2023](#)).

The male characters in the novel reinforce the traditional expectations placed upon women. They seek Indian wives, emphasizing their preference for traditional and obedient women. This sentiment is articulated by Tariq, who asserts that Kishan needed a wife who embodied these qualities. The narrative reflects a prevailing theme that men expect their partners not only to fulfill their desires but also to serve them like maids and idolize them as gods.

In traditional societies, a woman's identity is inextricably linked to the men in her life. Before marriage, her identity is defined by her relationship with her father; after marriage, her husband becomes her identity, and after becoming a mother, her identity is reduced to that of a mother ([Van der Vliet, 2024](#)). This limited portrayal of women as daughters, wives, and mothers signifies their subordination and the denial of their individual identity. As noted by Nasrin, Nilanjana's sense of self is so deeply intertwined with her husband's name that, at times, she forgets her true self and identifies solely as "Mrs. Lal, Mrs. Kishanlal." This underscores the extent to which women in traditional societies are denied their individuality, overshadowed by their relationships with male family members.

Narsin's analysis sheds light on the entrenched gender roles in traditional societies, where women's identities are primarily linked to household activities, while men occupy the social spheres. This prevailing perception of women as inferior, dumb, and irrational is a viewpoint firmly challenged by feminists. The influential words of Simone de Beauvoir assert that one's identity as a woman is not predetermined by biology, psychology, or economics; rather, it is shaped by civilization as a whole. This reflects the belief that societal norms and expectations play a significant role in constructing the identity of women ([Siddiqi, 2022](#)).

The protagonist of the story underscores how women are socialized to conform to a feminine ideal. Deviating from these expectations by displaying more masculine traits results in mockery, internalized repression, and social exclusion. This highlights the rigid gender norms that restrict women's expression and autonomy in traditional societies. Within the same family, the unequal treatment of Nilanjana and her brother is evident in both the domestic and public spheres. Despite being raised by the same caregiver, Molina, her brother enjoys a level of freedom and choice that is denied to Nilanjana. He embodies the archetype of male domination, prioritizing societal norms and rituals over his family's well-being. In his eyes, Molina's role is reduced to that of a caretaker, with no regard for her personal needs or identity.

This unequal treatment is further demonstrated when Nilanjana's brother, Nikhil, prepares to fulfill the post-death rituals traditionally assigned to a son. However, he is unwilling to offer his ailing mother the love and affection she needs, an outcome of the rigid masculinity imposed upon him. The family's patriarch, Anirban, reinforces the devaluation of Molina's role, referring

to her as an "impractical girl" who should not be a hindrance to their routines. The family perceives Molina's care and love as a duty expected of her as a woman, and this traditional gendered division of roles allows them to overlook her personal needs. Nilanjana states:

You should because you never paid attention to Ma's health. For ten years Ma was bleeding from time to time and you said it was piles, didn't you? Now you know it wasn't that. When she had stomach aches, you said it was nothing, she was just acting up. Actually, she wanted to just take the day off, isn't that what you said? You said she was complaining unnecessarily to get your attention. Now know the truth. Don't you regret it? When you sit here alone don't you ever feel that you could have prevented this disease if you had treated her instead of ignoring it? You were a professor of gastroenterology, and still are. Don't you feel sorry that although you are a doctor and Ma relied on you, she is dying without treatments because you never spared her a second glance? You do regret it, right? (([Nasreen](#), p. 144)

In the above lines, Nilanjana highlights the urgent need for societal change, where women's health and well-being are taken seriously, and where gender bias and neglect do not result in needless suffering and, in some cases, tragic outcomes. Her words underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing women's experiences, both in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and as individuals deserving of attention, care, and respect.

In the larger societal context, women's identities are closely tied to their marital status and roles as wives and mothers. Marriage is presented as the ultimate source of identity for women, often overshadowing their individuality. Women are expected to conform to traditional symbols of matrimony, such as wearing bangles and sindoor, which signify that they belong to someone. The pressure to maintain a particular appearance is emphasized, with an emphasis on colorful attire, makeup, jewelry, and sindoor. This expectation is further accentuated by the scrutiny and judgment women face when they do not conform to these ideals ([Kannur](#), 2014).

Marriage and motherhood are central to the societal perception of a woman's identity. The ability to bear children is closely associated with a woman's worth and identity. Those who do not conform to this expectation face societal criticism and are deemed inadequate as women ([Gaur](#), 2016). This emphasis on motherhood perpetuates the notion that a woman's role is to sacrifice everything for the happiness of others, primarily her family. In *Patriarchy and Women Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis*, [Abeda Sultana](#) (2010) states:

In this patriarchal system, men and women behave, think, and aspire differently because they have been taught to think of masculinity and femininity in ways that condition differences. The patriarchal system shows or accepts that men have or should have, one set of qualities and characteristics and women another. Such 'masculine' qualities (strength, bravery, fearlessness, dominance, competitiveness, etc.) and 'feminine' qualities. (p. 10)

A woman's identity is largely defined by her family, upbringing, culture, and traditions. Society expects women to conform to specific cultural norms, which shape their behavior and qualities.

They are raised to prioritize the needs of others over their own, and the concept of individuality is often overshadowed by familial and societal expectations.

Daughters are often identified through their fathers, and women are expected to give up their names and surnames after marriage. Nilanjana's experience at a French airport illustrates the challenges women face when they choose to retain their maiden names, as society strongly associates a woman's identity with her husband's.

Similarly, women are always taught to define themselves through men's perspectives. Their individual identity is always portrayed through the men's perspectives. Men find women with fair complexion, thin and well-shaped figures, and beautiful teeth eligible to get married. It is stated—"There was a mark from long ago cut on Kishan chin. Nilanjana had never said that it detracted from his looks in any way. But Kishan often soulfully commented on the tiny mark on her forehead, which was usually covered by the fall of her hair, and said that her beauty of old had gone" ([Nasreen](#), p. 50). A man with dark skin always wants to marry a woman with fair skin. A woman's identity is always mentioned with her beauty. Women are taught to become beautiful and are always asked to value their beauty. Nila's mother Molina was always treated without value and remained unidentified as a person because of her skin color. She always felt inferior and felt unloved in her family. Nilanjana states:

We had a mother, she used to feed us, put us to bed, never let us dirty, and never let us feel any hurt. People called her dark and plain, we did so. We called her silly and naïve. She felt sad but it didn't matter to us. Nothing about her mattered to us. We thought she was a mother, not another human being. Mother means someone who does not have a life of her own, who should not have. If she screams in agony, we say, that's nothing just your imagination. When she dies, we just cremate her and think we have done our duty. That she no longer exists, does not matter to us. ([Nasreen](#), pp. 149-150)

The ultimate indifference is evident in their belief that, upon her death, they can simply perform the funeral rites and consider their duty done. The mother's cessation of existence doesn't appear to affect them deeply. Molina was always a simple woman. She was always criticized for her color. Her marriage was just for society.

Women suffer under varying degrees under patriarchy. Molina always wanted to visit different places but she was not taken. She can be a wife and mother but not a lover because to be loved a person should be beautiful. She could not meet the beauty standard that was set up in the society. Therefore, she was not loved by her husband:

Molina had wanted a little love from Anirban; she didn't get it. It is not that Anirban Mandal didn't love anyone, he did. But not Molina. He loved Swati Sen. Once Molina Had seen Kanjivaram sari and exclaimed, 'What a lovely sari. I wish I could wear one.' Anirban didn't buy it for her. But he bought it for Swati Sen, who wore it and went to Simla with him. Molina had always wanted to go to Darjeeling. But Anirban never had time to take her there. Swati was fairer than Molina. That was the one quality for which Anirban loved her. ([Nasreen](#), p. 133)

The above lines suggest that one of the main reasons for Anirban's affection for Swati was her fair complexion, which Molina did not possess. This preference for Swati's fair skin played a significant role in his love for her.

In traditional society, a married woman's identity is entirely subsumed by her husband. Her desires and choices are disregarded, and she is expected to unquestioningly obey her husband's wishes. Molina's life exemplifies this subjugation, as her individuality was overshadowed by societal norms, and her aspirations were consistently undervalued. She had no room to fulfill her desires, while her husband's infidelity was deemed normal.

Anirban, Nilanjana's father, reinforces the conventional view that a married daughter should not reside in her parental home. Her sole identity is considered to be that of the wife of Kishanlal, irrespective of his character. He insists that Nilanjana should return to her husband's home and conform to societal expectations, and this places immense pressure on her.

In this traditional society, a woman's home is her husband's home, and she is expected to remain within it, forfeiting her personal freedom and identity ([ArunaDevi](#), 2015). Women are primarily questioned about issues within the family, and their personal lives are often shrouded in secrecy to preserve societal norms. The male-dominated social structure emphasizes the importance of reputation, which can result in daughters being forced to endure hardships in their marital homes rather than returning to their fathers' homes ([Siddiqi](#), 2022).

The story of Nilanjana's cousin's suicide underscores the significance of physical appearance in traditional society. Women are taught from a young age that they should conform to societal standards of beauty and attractiveness ([Hashmi](#), 1995). Marital identity is considered the pinnacle of a woman's existence, and those who do not conform face social scrutiny and are often marginalized. This pressure to get married and conform to societal norms can lead to personal sacrifice and suffering, as women like Mithu are willing to marry anyone just to gain the societal identity of a wife.

In this society, women who remain unmarried are often viewed as burdens, and they may face mistreatment and societal pressure to conform to traditional roles. The overarching theme is the subjugation of women's individuality and the suppression of their personal desires and aspirations in the pursuit of societal norms and expectations. As the author says:

Mithu's father Sadhanbabu, was wiping his tears with his shirt. The worry lines on his fore head were gone. Now there was no need to worry about Mithu. Now it was just burning ghats, the pyre, and ashes. Mithu would be wiped off the face of this earth. No one would be hassled about the black ashes of her dark body. Mithu herself escaped from the humiliation of being dark. But her suicide brought even greater relief for her parents, her brother, who could now marry a suitable girl for a huge dowry ([Nasreen](#), p. 154).

She was never accepted by society for her beautiful skin, long black hair, lovely body, and her manner and love that she showered everyone. But was always tortured for the color of her skin, for not being perfect to get married, and was always taken as a burden to her family. Thus, Mithu did not have any identity in the society.

Nilanjana knew she had the rest of her life to look around. But she felt a dance of impatience in all her nerves. She had felt the same way in that room with walls of steel. Waiting to be free, although she didn't know free of what or free to go where. In this room too, her heart beat like a caged bird. Her only identity is being a wife whose only duty is to please her husband selflessly. Even today women are housewives. Being a wife, she is supposed to know how to cook food, how to care for her husband, and how to clean the house, wash dishes, and all household. It is the sole responsibility of a woman to conduct or manage a household.

Daughters are taught to respect their families and husbands. Since childhood, they had seen how her mother had worked for the family. Slowly they too learn the behavior and make themselves realize that that's their sole duty. So, she also tried to copy her mother and become a wife. As it is stated:

It was the mother's job. Molina's job. That's what Nilanjana had known. All her life she had seen Molina cooking and bringing the food to the table and then serving it to her husband and children. They talked as they ate. Molina stood by the table just in case someone needed something- more salt or gravy or water or something, anything. Nilanjana tried to remember if she had ever actually seen Molina eating with someone. No, she hadn't. ([Nasreen](#), p. 35)

Week, passive creature and treated with very little or no respect. Their daily routine is to look after their house and take care of their husbands and children. They have no right to decide, property, reproduction, and so on. They are taught to look beautiful and learn household activities so that they will become good housewives.

Control and Confinement: The Domestic Sphere as a Cage

Nilanjana's life took a significant turn before her marriage, where she was an independent woman who taught young children and earned her income. Her education was a source of pride and self-identity. However, her desire for personal fulfillment clashed with the expectations of her husband, Kishanlal, and other male figures. Marriage required her to relinquish some of her self-identity to fit the societal mold of a dutiful wife.

In her married life, Nilanjana began to feel like a mere object, valued only when acknowledged by her husband. She performed tasks as if she were a servant, drawing a parallel between her life and that of her domestic helper, Chitra. She even drew a stark comparison to a prostitute, feeling that her status in the family reduced her to a point of exploitation and denial.

Nilanjana's husband, Kishanlal, continually asserted his superiority, relegating her to perform tasks he demanded. This control stripped her of her self-respect and independence. In her role as a wife, she found herself supporting her husband's decisions and desires, often at the expense of her own autonomy ([Kannur](#), 2014).

Kishanlal's reaction to Nilanjana's education emphasized the male priority to maintain power. He belittled her education, insisting that her knowledge was meaningless and that she should remain dependent on him. Her husband preferred her in a subservient role and resisted her independence, which he viewed as a challenge to his authority. Her desire to work and be self-

reliant was seen as an act of disobedience, something undesirable in the traditional husband-wife dynamic. Nilanjana says:

I've seen a different you ever since I started working. You are insulting me at every step. But have you ever thought that I can't possibly be enjoying that box-packing job and that I didn't take a degree in this kind of thing? The reason why I took that job is that I hate begging you. I know you don't consider it begging. You feel you're looking after your wife, doing your duty. But it comes with a price. I have to live according to your wishes because you are the master, you are the boss; without my life matters and I am a mere servant who'll clean your house, cook, serve, and provide sexual gratification at night. Is there any other role in which you see me? ([Nasreen](#), p. 79)

Her relationship with her husband was more like master and servant than husband and wife. She was given the identity of Kishanlal's wife. No one knew Nilanjana Mandal. All her friends, family, and relatives respected her with the identity of her husband. Therefore, she had no rights and identity in her husband's family. After marriage, Nilanjana is compelled to give up all her individuality and turns into someone else. Her identity as a person is never given any priority. Rather her identity is always linked with her family.

Nilanjana's decision to leave Kishanlal reflects her desire to rediscover her own identity. Leaving his apartment signifies her newfound sense of freedom and the hope of establishing a new identity for herself in Paris. She celebrates this newfound freedom, dancing and feeling elated as if she has broken free from Kishan's servitude. She embraces the opportunity to be just Nilanjana Mandal, a person who had been buried under different identities for too long.

However, her relationship with Danielle complicates her sense of identity. Nilanjana is not attracted to Danielle in a homosexual way; instead, she seeks emotional and mental support from her as a friend. This relationship becomes a source of confusion for her, as she is trying to explore what it means to live with a girlfriend, despite not being homosexual herself ([Gaur](#), 2016).

Danielle, on the other hand, presents herself as a feminist and advocate for women's equality and liberation. Paradoxically, she also assumes a dominating role in her relationship with Nilanjana. She projects a generalized perspective on third-world women, assuming they are all oppressed and uneducated. She belittles Nilanjana despite her knowledge and education. Danielle's desire for Nilanjana to be her girlfriend is an attempt to control her life and body, which is contrary to Nilanjana's own beliefs and identity. Nilanjana doesn't subscribe to the idea of such love, viewing it as insufficient to make the world a better place ([Islam](#), 2023).

In *French Lover*, Nilanjana's journey is one of transformation and self-discovery. She begins as a woman who, like many others in society, is burdened by the false identities imposed by patriarchy. Her identity is shaped by her family, her husband, and societal expectations, relegating her to a life of servitude and dependence. Throughout the novel, Nilanjana's quest for true identity is both challenging and enlightening. She encounters various men, each representing different aspects of the patriarchal system, including Kishanlal, Anirban, and

Benoir. They all seek to control her, limit her independence, and define her identity according to their desires.

As she navigates these relationships, Nilanjana's perception of herself evolves. She realizes that the false identities imposed upon her are not her true self. She sees the tragic consequences of women like Molina and Mithu, who succumbed to societal pressures and oppression, ending their lives without ever discovering their individuality ([Joseph & Sharmila, 2023](#)).

Nilanjana's determination to break free from these constraints reflects her modern sensibilities. She strives for psychological and economic independence, a pursuit that challenges traditional gender roles and the societal norms that have been imposed upon women. Her journey is not without its difficulties, and she faces adversity, prejudice, and even violence. However, through her experiences, she begins to find her true identity and value as an independent woman ([Siddiqi, 2022](#)).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *French Lover* offers a powerful exploration of the impact of patriarchal norms and false identities on women's lives. Nilanjana's journey towards self-discovery and independence serves as a symbol of hope for all women who aspire to break free from the limitations imposed by society. It is a reminder that the quest for true identity may be challenging, but it is a journey worth embarking upon, as it leads to the liberation and empowerment of women in a world dominated by men.

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