

# A Gynocritical Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Women's Autonomy - Taslima Nasrin's Writing

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Received: April 25, 2023      Accepted: May 29, 2023      Online Published: June 14, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n6p414

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n6p414>

## Abstract

In 2003, Taslima Nasrin published one of her most renowned novels *Shodh*. Most of Taslima's work revolves around Radical Feminism. Taslima's writing portrays the plight of surviving in today's society by being a woman. Her writing shows how women oppress their fellow women in the name of tradition and culture. This research investigates the difficulties and conflicts specific to the experience of being a woman in today's culture. Unless we use the language of women writers, it is hard to speak about women's struggles with any degree of precision. The gynocritical study examines feminist literature written by female writers. It is the study of the female's inner consciousness. The field of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis investigates power dynamics in society by analyzing how language is used. Taslima's writing has the autonomy of voicing out boldly on women's issues, religion, how culture and tradition oppress women, and how the women's body acts as an agency. Taslima's writing can be noted under resistance writing.

**Keywords:** discourse, Gynocritic, radical feminism, feminist, resistance

## 1. Introduction

The research investigates the difficulties and conflicts specific to the experience of being a woman in today's society. Women's issues can be addressed precisely only through the writings of women writers. Writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Taslima Nasrin, and Monica Ali has used female entity to celebrate their femininity. Women were not heard if they did not write; only a victim can give the testimony with exact happenings. Thus, writing about women's issues is the core constitution of women's writing. The presence of women characters in Men's writing is represented as just an incidental in men's world. Thus, the writings of women writers have been seen as awakening the female consciousness. Their writing profoundly affects women's lives, helping them move quickly from the fringes of the marginal position to its very centre. Though male authors like M.R. Anand and R.K. Narayanan had female characters in the fiction, they could not accurately depict women because men do not have access inside the house.

In contrast, according to the patriarchy, the house is where women belong. Some women writers emerged with different perspectives focusing on female characters who play a major role in fiction. Such writers are considered feminists, and their works are categorized under feminist work. The proposed paper critically analyses the contemporary Indian author Taslima Nasrin's *Shodh*. Thematically, the main context of any women's writing is addressing women's problems.

## 2. Literature Review

Taslima Nasrin has made conscious use of her literary ability to represent the occurrences of society artistically in a congruent manner. The researcher has discussed that human rights, feminism and gender rights are connected with humanism and feminism. Moreover, has demonstrated the difference between feminist and non-feminist writers. Furthermore, how their respective approaches contribute to understanding gender exploitation and subjugation are fertile fields for literary activism (Mishra, 2020). The fight between the dominant and the weak and the struggle of the latter to free themselves from the grasp of the former are studied by examining three novelists works from three different countries by Vasavi, a researcher (Vasavi. A, 2008). The struggle of Bangladeshi women in the present era, analyzing the writings of Taslima Nasrin and Monica Ali, is carried out on how their works reflect and react to shifts in the social crisis that have gripped their countries. The research studies the female characters by showing how they emerge from their struggle against the influence of religion and cultural oppression (Mishra, 2019). A study has been done on the female characters in Taslima Nasrin's work are presented as subordinates, and the study explores the issues of sexuality, subjugation, and women's multiple roles. The study examines women's problems in various contexts (Yuvaraj, Kathale Subhash, 2017).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 The Gynocritical Framework

The present research explores the theoretical study of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of autonomy through the lens of the analytical framework of Gynocriticism. Elaine Showalter, in her essay *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1986), introduced the term 'gynocriticism'. Gynocriticism is a form of literary criticism that examines works written by women from a feminine perspective. Taslima Nasrin begins *Shodh* with the protagonist, Jhumur realizing she is pregnant and waits to make her husband, Haroon, happy. However, her husband Haroon ignores her pregnancy symptoms and accuses her of cheating. He wants to abort the child because he believes one cannot get pregnant in six weeks. Haroon believes that the child is not his and takes Jhumur to the doctor and forces her into having an abortion, which profoundly affects Jhumur's psychological state. As a result, she becomes vengeful and decides to get revenge on him.

'I'll take you to the doctor tomorrow.'

'why tomorrow?'

Haroon scrambled out of bed. 'To abort the baby'... we'll have to get rid of the child.'

'Can one conceive in six weeks time eh! Because it's not possible to become pregnant that soon.'

'How would I know ... how can I tell whose baby you had in your womb when you stepped into our house. You were in such a hurry to get married, gave me no time to think. Now everything has become clear.' (Shodh, 2003, Pg 72 – 74)

Gynocriticism aims to develop a female-centric framework for evaluating literature, focusing on female identity, consciousness, agency, and language issues. It is related to the efforts of the feminist to involve women in the 'tradition of writing', which had previously been structurally dominated by male writers. The meticulousness of women's writings, known as gynotexts and female experiences, Gynocriticism focuses on female subjectivity, female language and women's writing career. It attempts to construct a female framework for analyzing women's literature.

Gynocritics begins when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (Showalter, 1979, p. 125)

The two core elements of Gynocriticism, namely female subjectivity and female language, are evident in Taslima Nasrin's writing, as seen in *Shodh*. The protagonist, Jhumur, is an educated, open-minded, brave woman, yet, her voice is suppressed while being the 'bou' of the house. Haroon was happy when the family was happy, and the family was happy when Jhumur made them feel secure that she was the good 'bou' of the house (Shodh, 2003, pg 4). Jhumur does not dare to forget that she is the 'bou' of the house, even for a second. The traits of how the 'bou' of the house should be are mentioned through Jhumur in the novel.

I knew I had to lower my voice, reduce it to a murmur, and keep my eyes fixed on the ground so that they didn't catch the eyes of any other person. How else could I become Haroon's bashful wife? I had known it is my bones, what it was to be a daughter-in-law, a self-effacing, shrinking creature. I had known all that on the day of my marriage. (Shodh, 2003, pg 7) Shodh, 2003, pg 7)

Jhumur should not call her husband by his name; she is not even to laugh, as only men are expected to have the freedom to laugh loud, 'It's not wrong to laugh, but you mustn't create a ruckus like a menfolk' (Shodh, 2003, pg 8). Jhumur is expected to keep her head covered even when she is at home alone and should not be on the balcony as she is expected not to be seen by outsiders.

Haroon nagged me to tell him whether or not my head was covered when I was on the balcony. He was horrified when I said I didn't remember... have you ever come across womenfolk loitering in their balconies? Housewives stay indoors. They don't flock to the veranda brazenly. That's how it is in this country. The bous of the house remain unobtrusive; the more they keep themselves hidden, the better their reputation. (Shodh, 2003, pg 8)

Marriage changes the lives of every woman overnight, but men do not face many changes. As we see, this is evident in *Shodh* through the protagonist Jhumur. Marriage has completely changed Jhumur's life, but it remains the same without changes for Haroon.

Marriage has altered my life – I could sense that – but had it not transformed Haroon's personality as well, I wondered (Shodh, 2003, pg 10)

Though Jhumur is well-educated, she is not allowed to think of having a career. She is expected to stay home and serve her husband's family until the end.

I think it were better I had a job.

'why do you want to work?'

'I had studied so that I could work. Is it right for an educated person to sit idle at home?' (Shodh, 2003, pg 52)

Jhumur questions whether it is the right act for an educated person to stay idle at home. Moreover, her father educated her in the hope that she would make her own money. But her husband Haroon is stubborn in making her stay home to care for the family.

My darling, you're responsible for my parents, my brother and sisters; take care of them. You are the elder bou; they all depend on you. Your success lies in winning their hearts... This house is yours; you must look after it, arrange everything, and run it

smoothly. There's so much work, and you say have nothing to do (Shodh, 2003, pp. 52 – 53)

As years passed, Jhumur lost love for her husband and herself.

I became the prisoner in my own house, powerless to step outside to visit friends or relations. I didn't hold a job, although I was qualified. ... I speculated if Haroon would ever know how unfair he had been to me, how cruel, how he had destroyed my faith in the truth and the purity of my love. I waited endlessly for him to change his mind, to come around to my side. No such miracle took place (Shodh, 2003, pg 111)

Jhumur meets Afzal, the artist who becomes the biological father to her son and with whom she satisfies her vengeance at the end.

I wasn't a loose woman. I wasn't deceiving him, I was 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? (Shodh, 2003, pg 148)

The study of gynocritics seeks to understand the peculiarity of women's writing not as a result of sexism but as an essential component of the experience of being a woman. Gynocriticism is an approach to understanding women's literature that recognizes gender differences and the uniqueness of women's writing. It is a way of studying women's literature born out of the second feminist wave's acceptance of sexual differences and the uniqueness of women's writing.

### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

#### A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis focuses on language's cultural, political, and psychological aspects. This research applies Foucault's discourse theory to analyze the writings of Taslima Nasrin. The concept of discourse conceived by Michel Foucault is examined here as a construct within the larger matrix of power dynamics. Hence, it holds a significant position in the field of feminist study. The study views discourse as a constant dynamic process in which the ideas of power and identity that emerge from it align with how the discourse is constructed. The Foucauldian perspective of power differs from the common perception of power as a static and repressive entity. Understanding the gender dynamics in *Shodh* requires attention to how power structures influence the discourse. According to Foucauldian theory, patriarchal authority resides in the subconscious mind of those subjected to repressive discourses. Foucauldian discourse philosophy provides a theoretical framework for identifying the emerging female discourse that shapes gender ideology in *Shodh*. Taslima Nasrin's writings can be analyzed through a Foucauldian lens to examine how power, knowledge, and discourse intersect in her work. Nasrin's writings often critique and challenge existing power structures, particularly those related to gender, religion, and societal norms.

A Foucauldian analysis focuses on how power operates within these domains and how knowledge is produced, controlled, and disseminated. For example, Nasrin's exploration of women's oppression and the subjugation of marginalized groups could be examined regarding the discursive strategies used to perpetuate these power imbalances. Nasrin's use of language, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies can be analyzed through a Foucauldian lens to uncover how she challenges dominant discourses and constructs alternative narratives. Her writings often employ vivid and provocative language to disrupt established norms and question the legitimacy of prevailing power structures. By deconstructing dominant discourses, Nasrin aims to bring attention to the mechanisms by which power is exerted and maintained. Nasrin's works often give voice to marginalized individuals and depict their struggles against oppressive systems. A Foucauldian analysis would examine how her writings contribute to forming subjectivities and identities that resist dominant power structures. Nasrin's writings can be seen as acts of resistance that challenge and subvert prevailing discourses.

#### 3.3 Gynophobia

Women are seen as fearsome 'goddesses', and society fear women's power. The core issues of women are the position in which they are placed and the stereotypes and expectations placed on them by society. Women's attempts to project their ideal selves as a counterpoint to the negative portrayal of women is a fascinating thematic variance. The other main issues addressed in this paper are the exploitation and oppression of women and the questioning of established patriarchal norms where women are oppressed under the name of tradition and culture. Women have been objectified as 'goddesses' since ancient times in Indian society, but they are not celebrated and respected as goddesses. Throughout history, women have received contradictory notions about their bodies. They are either praised for the ideal image of 'goddesses' or shown as 'shameful, embarrassing, vexatious, fearful and disgusting' (Sabala, 2019, p. 44). Women in Hindu Ideology are seen with duality, as 'fertile' and as a 'destroyer' (S. Wadley, 1977, pp. 114- 117). The woman is seen as a bestower and a destroyer, as quoted by Lawrence A. Babb, "in times of prosperity she is Lakshmi, who bestows prosperity in the homes of men; and in times misfortune, she becomes the goddess of misfortune, and about ruin". This dichotomy of femininity is reflected in two aspects of what it means to be female and may provide some insight into the cultural reasoning behind it.

In Hindu ideology, the female is addressed as 'Sakti', meaning "energy" or "power." She is the animating essence of the universe and is also known as 'prakrti,' which translates to "nature," and is the undifferentiated matter of the universe. Thus, women are constantly referred to as nature (Prakriti), and her counterpart is known as 'purusa', which translates to the inert or male element of the cosmic person. Thus purusa, the cosmic person, is the 'spirit' in contrast to prakrti, which is nature, seen as the 'matter'. The union of this 'spirit' and the 'matter' leads to the creation of the universe, and no life exists without this 'spirit' and 'matter' (Wadley, 1977, p. 114). Thus, women are seen as natural, and men are seen as culture. Women are seen as the earth where a man plants his seed, as we see this in the book *Laws of Manu* "By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seeds; the production of all corporeal

beings through the union of soil with the seed." *Law of Manu*, known as Manusmriti, is an ancient Sanskrit text called 'Manava-dharma-shastra' and was translated into English by Sir William Jones in 1776. Brahmins created a book on how life should be led in public and private spaces, codes for the untouchables, kings and priests and a code of conduct for how women should be. According to this text, the seed is more important, for it is believed that the offspring of all beings in the universe emerge from this seed, for it is seen as "The seed is the hard substance or structure as opposed to the soil, the soft substance or nonstructured. Women, then, automatically partake more of Nature than men, who symbolize Culture" (Ortner, 1974, p. 171). Thus women are seen as nature and power, and if not uncultured, she is considered to be dangerous.

According to Hinduism, the woman is the one who receives the seed that the man carries, and she is also seen as the one who is being benefited. The male force is considered a culture. Thus, the culture controls nature, i.e., man controlling woman. The female power is considered dangerous; thus, the male is regarded as taking control. For instance, in Hindu mythology, Lord Siva has many wives, and Kali is one among them; she was sent to earth to destroy a Rakshasa and his army; upon the defeat, Kali performed a killing dance which resulted in the trembling of the earth. The gods feared of earth's destruction and sent Siva, who laid down on Kali's feet; while she was about to step on him, she returned to her senses as it is considered a sinful act for a Hindu wife to keep her feet on her husband. Siva regained his control over Kali, and the earth was saved. This is an important example that Hindu ideology gives to depict how dangerous is the nature of female power. Therefore, it is expected to be suppressed and controlled by the culture, the male power.

*The Laws of Manu* stress the necessity of men controlling women because it is considered that the woman's passion for men is dangerous, and they turn into heartless beings with an uncontrollable temper; therefore, they end up disloyal to their husbands matter how well their man guards them. Still, they are seen as instilled creatures that a man should exert himself to an extent to guard (Buhler, 1964, pp. 327-30). *Charaka Samhita*, an ancient Sanskrit text on Ayurveda, emphasizes the necessity of a beautiful representation of the women's body to gain men's appreciation. The book mentions five sensual attractions that males highly value and concurrently attracted to in women's bodies: 'attractiveness, scent, fluidity, touch, and flavour' (Singh, 2007).

It is considered a duty for women not to attempt a thing that hurts others and to be responsible for the growth and well-being of her people (Singh, 2007, p. 68)

The ancient Indian texts like *The Laws of Manu* and *Charaka Samhita* are two-thousand years old, and so are the laws and traditions that emphasize women. However, there has been no change in the treatment of women for more than two thousand years. Inequality between the sexes has been prevalent in Indian culture for thousands of years. The Holy texts' guidelines on the appropriate code of conduct for men and women, the culture and tradition are emphasized through Holy texts. Hence, it is difficult to free the mind from this established prejudice. Our society tends to romanticize the concept of female martyrdom, and different myths praise the qualities of women who renounce themselves. It is an integral element of the cultural inheritance of the Indian people. There are distinct forms of religious practice and social stratification for women.

Women are socialized and brought up through the models of timelessly feminine emblems of Indian womanhood, such as Savitri, Indrani, Branda, and Sita. A woman who has been trained in the gender role for a long time embraces feminine values; as a result, it is difficult for her to give up the idea of thinking of her own or creating a separate identity of her own. This could lead to various psychological issues that could appear in many ways. For many women, the prospect of losing a relationship is much closer to the loss of one's entire identity. Because women tend to view themselves in terms of their relationships with others, they integrate and organize their lives to best care for their homes, husbands, and children. As a result, their sense of identity and value are tied to these responsibilities. They are willing to give up their life for the sake of others. Since they can give birth, maintaining a healthy body and house falls on them.

### 3.4 Power and Autonomy

The term 'feminism' alludes to a profound knowledge of a woman's individuality and an interest in issues unique to women. Though the term was first used in a French medical text in 1871, the oppression of women has been a major truth throughout history. It is the primary factor contributing to the prevalence of all psychological problems in contemporary society. When women are oppressed for a long time by thousand-year-old laws of culture and tradition, they lose their self-identity and unconsciously get into serious psychological problems. When such women become mothers to a child, the identity problem is passed on to the child, affecting the child's identity development. When such children grow into adults, the mother's trauma of suppression, loss of identity, and patriarchal oppression are carried on to the next generation as a chain reaction. Therefore, today's women's liberation is the solution for the betterment of tomorrow's society.

Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladeshi writer, is known well for her rebellious nature of protest writing as a radical feminist and activist for women's liberation. Her writing is against all the fundamentalism of a patriarchal society, giving importance to the liberation of female sexuality, women's civic rights, and freedom of speech. Taslima Nasrin's writing aims to bring about social equality and reform, regardless of the reader's religion, caste, or gender. This goal serves as the driving force behind her work. In her writings, she exposed the harsh reality and unpleasant truths that society faces without expressing any restraint. She has an authority of autonomy in her writing.

Autonomy is the technique through which women can navigate between individual autonomy and contribution as they see fit within their cultures and religions. Howard Hassmann defines autonomy as 'the individual's legal and practical capacity to make and act upon her own life choices' (Hassmann 433). Autonomy is the methodology that enables women to express their thoughts. The primary goal of autonomy is to exercise it as an agency to fight for women's rights. Earlier in Britain in 1928, through autonomy, women won their voting rights.

According to Hassmann, autonomy is the individual's constitutional and practical authority to decide and operate independently with her life choices. It denotes that the woman acts with her own 'sense of self' and makes decisions in her individual and societal life.

The concept of agency is closely linked to the concept of autonomy. The characters that Taslima has brought to life through her writings have a strong agency of autonomy in making their life decisions that challenge the pre-constructed patriarchal norms. The novel *Shodh* is about the character Jhumur who is raised as a free spirit girl by her father, later forced to become a conventional Muslim wife and an obeying daughter-in-law. However, towards the novel's closing, we see Jhumur's transformation as an outcome of Taslima's autonomy. It depicts the violence against women, whether it be a sociocultural crisis, a dispute among a group of people, or even a war; it seemed that women were the primary victims of violent behaviour and the associated persecution and disgrace. Taslima has personally witnessed the violence of the patriarchy. Her writing states the right to freedom, healthy living and equal opportunity among all genders. As a result, this book is a significant blow to the Capitalistic patriarchy in which a woman's fidelity is always veiled in the shadow of insecurity and doubt. Thus, she is condemned to physical and psychological anguish and hurting.

Taslima's writing has an essence of resistance to the marginalization, oppression and discrimination against women. *Shodh* is a story of Jhumur's revenge against patriarchy. Though she is married to Haroon, the one she loves, life transforms for Jhumur overnight. She is demanded to obey a new set of rules by her in-laws. Haroon asks Jhumur to obey them; the protagonist of *Shodh*, under constant violence by her husband and his family, begins to threaten the patriarchal ideology by being unfaithful and having a child of another man. She is asked to keep her head covered constantly; her husband does not have time to talk with her. He talks with loving words only when he wants to have sex with her, and love is used to subdue women. Haroon asks her to set some boundaries for her liberating thoughts. Jhumur becomes pregnant, but Haroon does not trust her that it is his baby and asks the doctor to abort it; Haroon asks: 'Can one conceive in six weeks, eh?' (*Shodh* 5). Jhumur tries hard to prove that it is his child, but Haroon fails to get convinced. Jhumur arrives at the clinic for an abortion, where she is disturbed mentally and physically. The abortion of the child is an extremely violent act that changes Jhumur's perspective towards Haroon, her marriage and herself. She gets detached mentally from her husband as he does not care for her health or love her even after aborting the child. Where there is no love, there can be no emotional attachment. Jhumur's physical relationship with Afzal, carrying his baby and making Haroon the legitimate father to the child that is not his, is where Jhumur seeks her vengeance over Haroon for the pain he caused her by aborting him the child. Her husband and his parents violate Jhumur's body in many ways. Haroon uses Jhumur's body for his sexual needs. He doubts her fidelity and decides to abort the child without her consent. His parents control Jhumur's clothing, ornaments, and even the place she can occupy in the house. The violence against women is seen from ancient texts to the women during the war, and it prevails even today. The violation of a woman's body leads to the violation of her psyche. Women's realization of their bodies leads to the awakening of self-realization. As the oppression has become intolerable, the women have started to voice out and set boundaries to protect themselves. Throughout history, women have lived in either a 'subservient way' or in a 'subversive way' (Sabala, 2019, p. 43).

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Discussion & Findings

#### *Deconstructing the Constructed Notions of the Body*

Feminists have attempted to deconstruct the structures that are pre-constructed over the female body to have a better understanding and appreciate its significance of it. Gender construction on women's bodies begins in childhood and continues throughout their lives. This occurs when girls are repeatedly taught to acquire the pre-conceived gender roles that are feminine and that enhance men's superior masculine attributes. This transformation takes place in the bodies of women throughout their lives. Women are still held captive within these feminine bodies today. This predicament gives rise to the ideals of motherhood and the preference for giving birth to a son. It also perpetuates the concept of being a "good woman" or a "bad woman," and these notions hold women captive. Jhumur gives up on trying to prevent the abortion after a certain time and ignores the violence inflicted on her body because she believes she will earn her husband's love. However, Haroon completely ignores the medical condition of Jhumur and does not even talk to her about it.

Feminists in the post-modern era put the body at the centre of their critiques of patriarchal power dynamics. 'The body became a political issue as feminists struggled to gain control over their fertility and sexuality' (Sabala, 2019, p. 44). In *Shodh*, Taslima portrays the female body as a subject of violence. It is believed that the submissive female body should be under constant vigilance of the patriarchy. As Butler says

Women writers, taking radical positions about female bodies, politicize its corporeality and produce an oppositional discursivity of the body (Butler, 1993)

### 5.2 Control Over the Female Body

Women are constantly put under pressure to cater to the needs of their families, communities, and societies. Women in India are shaped by their families into ideal roles such as mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and so on. The material body is trained and moulded within the context of the family as the primary institution. The male body represents authority, culture, perfection, and always being ahead. In contrast, the female body is seen as the one that has to be tamed or controlled by the male members, such as the father, husband and son. Women are bound to be kept inside the home, as most cultures consider their thoughts and desire dangerous. The female body represents nature and is thus seen as dangerous and unpredictable. The male body is seen as a culture, and the female body is seen as nature.

### 5.3 The Emergence of 'The New Woman'

Sarah Grand coined the term 'New woman' in 1894. Women have always been oppressed, even in ancient times, and this oppression has been the primary factor to give rise to all the psychological problems in modern society. Taslima portrays Jhumur, the protagonist of *Shodh*, as the new woman who challenges the patriarchal rule of her husband and lives her life according to the parameters she sets for herself. In *Shodh*, Taslima discusses how her statement of female desire outside of the marital relationship affirms female sexuality in a society built on the comprehensive regulation of religion and culture. Following the footsteps of the cultural phenomena known as the 'New Woman', a new literary genre called 'New Woman fiction' emerged. Much like Egerton, Taslima dealt with the subject of women's sexuality openly and honestly, which surprised many of her contemporaries. Through the autonomy of women's writing, women get a chance to break the existing writing convention and can convey the message of womanhood from her point of view. As Virginia Woolf pointed out in her *Room of One's Own*, A woman should have a room and money if she wants to write; women's writing is a powerful medium to voice out the issues they face in everyday life. In *Shodh*, through Taslima's writing, we hear a partial autobiographical voice through Jhumur. Towards the end of the novel, Jhumur chooses to have a relationship with Afzal, bores his child, and convinces Haroon that it is his baby, through which her vengeance of pain gets satisfied. Believes it is in the contemporary literary world, women writers are emerging and trying to break the conventions to find a new language to voice out their experience of womanhood. Taslima has given complete control to Jhumur to voice out her side of the story.

### Acknowledgement

Thanking the Research Supervisor for valuable input and thanking the Head of the Department for critiquing the manuscript.

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