

Identity and Cultural Conflict in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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Abstract. Taslima Nasrin was born on 25th August 1962, in Mymensingh, Bangladesh to orthodox parents. In 1980s she came to limelight as a poet, columnist, and strong feminist. She is a Bengali, Bangladeshi ex-doctor turned author who has been living in exile since 1994. She works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought, equality for women, and human rights by publishing, lecturing and campaigning. When Taslima got her first book *Lajja* published, she earned the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists and clergies. Her book was banned in her country and a Fatwa (religious ostracization) was issued against her. Further, she had to seek political asylum in France to save her life. Taslima was extremely bold; she remained untrammelled by all these and kept writing on similar lines. It is not just because she is intrepid; it is her uncanny knack of storytelling and an extremely limpid writing style that make her extremely popular among the erudite circle. This paper aims to assess the destruction caused by religious extremists in Bangladesh when Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu Kar Sevaks in India. It will also discuss the reasons why the demolition of temples and abducting and raping of the Hindu women took place during the period of riots.

Keywords: Communalism; secular humanism; religious extremism; exploitation; patriotism; cultural diversity.

From a modest literary profile in the late 1980s, Taslima Nasrin rose to global fame by the end of the 20th century owing to her feminist views and her criticism of Islam in particular and of religion in general. Since fleeing to Bangladesh in 1994 she has lived in many countries, and currently lives in Sweden after her expulsion from India in 2008 where she was denounced by the Muslim clergy and received death threats from Islamic fundamentalists.

Early in her literary career, she wrote mainly poetry, and published half a dozen collections of poems between 1986 and 1993, often with female oppression as a theme, and containing very graphic language. She started writing prose pieces in the early 1990s, and produced three collections of essays and four novels before writing the novel *Lajja*, or *Shame* in 1993 in which a Hindu family is persecuted by Muslims. This novel changed her life and career dramatically.

After the novel *Lajja*, Taslima suffered a number of physical and other attacks. In October 1993, an Islamic fundamentalist group called the Council of Islamic Soldiers offered a bounty for her death. In August 1994, she was brought upon charges of making inflammatory statements, and faced death threats from Islamic fundamentalists. A hundred thousand demonstrators called her an apostate

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appointed by imperial forces to vilify Islam; a militant faction threatened to lose thousands of poisonous snakes in the capital unless she was executed. After spending two months in hiding, at the end of 1994 she escaped to Sweden. One of the results of her exile was that she did not get to practice medicine anymore; she became a full-time writer and activist.

December 6, 1992 is marked as a black day in post independent India. It is the day which has changed Hindu-Muslim relations for the worse. Ever since the incident, the muslims feel themselves exploited in the land of the Hindus. This thinking and event led to riots in India. To avenge the ill treatment of the muslims in India, the Hindu population was targeted in Bangladesh. Communal riots began in Bangladesh and the minority of the Hindus was severely persecuted.

Taslima Nasrin as a person detested this fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason she wrote *Lajja*. She found it disgraceful that the Hindus were hunted by the Muslims in her country. She felt humiliated and defeated at the hands of Communalism. *Lajja* is a document of this defeat. It is based on the aftermath of Babri Masjid demolition in Bangladesh. It is a savage indictment of religious extremism and man's inhumanity to man. Taslima Nasrin has shown tremendous courage to show the world, the black deeds of the riotous temple-breaking mobs, in her own country. They have destroyed countless temples, raped thousands of women and killed a large number of Hindus and forced a big Hindu population to take refuge in India:

Why should he flee his home simply because, his name was Suranjan Dutta? Was it necessary for his family- Sudhamoy, his father, Kironmoyee, his mother and Nilanjana, his sister- to run away like fugitives just because of their names? (*Lajja*, 1)

Taslima takes the pain to keep a record of numerous newspaper articles, incorporating them within the narrative to show the shame, the 'Lajja' of humanity. It was not only a matter of communal violence that drove the Hindus out of their homes in Bangladesh; it was also a serious breach in the faith one person could have on the other. The shame lies not in raping women only, but taking women as the easiest target for crude physical satiation in the name of religion and ideologies. *Lajja* addresses the dark realities of the violence, which is not an innocent spontaneous outburst against a community, but has along with it the ulterior motives of gratifying the greedy desires of property, money, and women. Taslima talks about the essence of riots through the words of Sudhamoy where he says:

Riots are not like floods that you can simply be rescued and given some muri to survive on temporarily. Nor are they like fires that can be quenched to bring about relief. When a riot is in progress, human beings keep their humanity in

check. The worst and the most poisonous aspect of man surfaces during a riot. Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply a perversion of humanity... (165)

The Duttas Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee, and their two children, Suranjan and Maya have lived in Bangladesh all their lives. Despite being part of the country's small Hindu community that is terrorized at every opportunity by Muslim fundamentalists they refuse to leave their country, as most of their friends and relatives have done. Sudhamoy, an atheist, believes in a naive mix of optimism and idealism that his motherland will not let him down. The world condemns the incident, but its fallout is felt most acutely in Bangladesh, where Muslim mobs begin to seek out and attack the Hindus. The nightmare inevitably arrives at the Dutta's doorstep and their world begins to fall apart. The novel exposes the mindless bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and brilliantly captures the insanity of violence in our time.

Babri Masjid was demolished in India by the so-called communal forces. The story is a work of fiction and is made up of thirteen days just after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. One also comes to know of all the incidents that have happened in Bangladesh after independence in 1947. The story is of a struggle of a Hindu family living in Bangladesh during those days. There are four main characters who belong to the Dutta's family - Sudhamoy, the father; Kironmoyee, the mother; Suranajan, the son and; Maya, the daughter.

All through the pages of the novel, there is a mention of all the incidents that have happened during those days, like the killing of Hindus, the ruining and destroying of Mandirs, the abduction and rapes of Hindu women etc. More than 200 mandirs were destroyed and more than 1000 Hindus were looted and rendered homeless. Almost all the relatives and friends of the family left the country and moved on to live in India but the family hated the idea of leaving their own country in any circumstances.

Sudhamoy, the father, is a man of high ideals and doesn't want to leave the country of his origin. He had fought for his country during all movements like Language movement and Independence struggle in the hope that when the Pakistanis would be out of his country the Hindus would be able to have a happy and prosperous life there. However, the scene comes out to be different. The son also has the same ideology as his father; he treats everyone as a human being, rather than a Hindu or Muslim. But now it breaks their hearts to see that the Hindus in their country are treated wrongly at the hands of the Muslims for the wrong doings of some Hindus and that too in another country, India! One day a group of muslim rioters ruin their house and take away their daughter, Maya too, before their eyes. Suranjan tries his best to locate his sister but all in vain.

Lajja has been influenced by Taslima's very staunch feminist views, but it does not contain much of her life. The incidents expressed in the novel are the ones she has witnessed, but has not gone through herself. She has expressed her views against her own religion that can be accounted as a dislike she has had for her religion from childhood. In one of her interviews she said she did not like the way Islam has been preached or is being preached. The flaws of Islam have been brought up in this novel, which are solely based on the thinking of the author itself.

There is a dramatic change in the characterization of the novel. The personality of the characters is somewhat dubious. Their behaviour changes from time to time throughout the plot, which may be accounted for chaotic social situations. Taslima in her tale buttresses her fiction with facts. Her attempt in this novel is not to malign any religion, it is an earnest beseech to the human race to embrace humanity and shun fanaticism. The story is partially gripping and extremely poignant.

Sudhamoy Dutta had seen many disputes and riots in his lifetime. From the partition of 1947, to the relatively recent independence of Bangladesh in the 1970s, he had lived and participated through every kind of struggle that his country had to endure. His fundamental ideology in life is that why he should leave his homeland and go somewhere else. If he lives, it will be on this soil and if he dies, it will be in the very same place. Sudhamoy Dutta's ideas are courageous and blatantly patriotic. He strongly believed that he was a Bengali first and a Hindu later. Unfortunately, the system in which he lived did not allow such ideals to flourish and repeatedly he was reminded of his minority status in society, be it the matters of career or personal life. His fight for survival, literally, put him on stake many times. His decisions and choices led his family into an unfair trial, which forms the crux of the plot.

Suranjan Dutta, the son in the family and the young blood of the nation, had ideals similar to his father's but only stronger ten-fold. For him, his country, the way he'd always seen it, was what it was. Religion was the last thing he considered during his daily endeavours and he believed himself to be no different from any of his Muslim friends and acquaintances. He refused to even acknowledge the fact that he had less of access to his fundamental rights just because his religion was not in majority in the country. How his ideas come crashing down like pack of cards and put his family into danger is the high point of the narrative.

Nilanjana Dutta Maya is Sudhamoy's daughter and Suranjan's sister. She was an independent young girl who chose to go with the system rather than defy it. As the sole breadwinner of the house, she was concerned about her family's safety and disappointed with her brother for being unable to protect her family in a time when her family's religion had become their biggest enemy. With hopes and dreams for a better life ahead, she preferred to follow the path of safety, than a fight for righteousness. Kironmoyee Dutta is the home-maker, the mother, the glue in the

family of incoherent pieces of strong individuals. She lives for her family and for that only. Her wishes and dreams are only for the betterment of her family.

The feminist in Taslima Nasrin made sure that the leading male characters in the story are irresponsible and selfish, projecting the two female characters as good souls. She made hardly any contribution to the family and yet she expected a lot from them. The damage control ordered by the doctor later was not affective where this irresponsibility assigned on the male characters took away the chance to create sympathy for them. The author goes to the extent of saying that it is the daughter who always looks after her parents in their old age. Sons always move out with their wives to live separately; but daughters even forsake their husband's homes to look after their parents. One knows this is not a general rule, but a different perspective. Woman after all were like commodities, and therefore, stolen just like gold and silver.

The characters portrayed in the novel are strange and unique, very unlike a common man. In case of a riot, a common man will focus more on its safety, rather than his principles or the concept of right or wrong. Sudhamoy on the contrary is adamant to keep his principles intact and in the end loses his family because of his principles. The whole story was based upon this thought and whole family got destroyed because of it. Also, the reaction of the brother after his sister is abducted by the hooligans leaves a lot to be desired. No matter how big a riot is, no brother is going to sit and brood about his ideologies.

Taslima depicts brilliantly the agony and pain of being a woman when hatred spreads or the virus of communalism rears its ugly visage. It's the women who suffer the most and who more often than not are victims to gruesome acts of cruelty in the name of religion and God. She is assaulted not only physically but also emotionally and her very motherhood becomes a target for the mob. They would molest her and in the name of being the self-proclaimed votaries of religion, they would force themselves upon her so that the next generation is born to their religion. The story of the Hindu girl in this novel, *Lajja* (Shame) talks about this same hatred.

Another deeply humiliating situation in *Lajja* that cannot escape the people's notice is the horrible situation of the Hindu women in Bangladesh. Violence, against women is used as a weapon to subjugate women, humiliate their men, and race. Rape on Hindu women was a very common scene in Bangladesh. Otherwise, also, rape on the non-Muslim women has been a very popular game of muslims. Even the Mughal emperor, Babar, on whose name this disputed structure, was named and who was an icon of Indian secularists; used to encourage his soldiers to rape the Hindu women. History repeated itself in Bangladesh, when Hindu kar sevaks, tried to correct the crime committed by Babar four centuries ago :

‘The government has declared Islam as the national religion, So, if you wish to stay in an Islamic state you must become muslims, and if you don’t then it will be the best for you to leave this country’. The holy men had looked on helplessly as their homes were looted and their temples were destroyed...The women were brutally raped and tortured, and some of the people who were attacked had never recovered completely. (43) When Gouranga Mondol’s wife, Benu, had tried to stop them the policemen took her into the house and took turns raping her. The other women in the house who tried to come to her aid were all harassed and insulted. Sanatan Mondol’s daughter, Rina, was also forcefully raped, and later abducted. Rina had still not been found. (44)

Hindu girls were highly insecure in Bangladesh. They used to receive anonymous letters that threatened to kidnap Maya. Hindu women were afraid even to use their religious symbols like *bindi*, *sindoor*, *sankha* etc., because of identification as Hindu women. They were of the view, ‘it’s better to safe than sorry’. Almost all the political parties in Bangladesh support an agenda of Islamicization, points to the deep roots of fascism. The notorious communal ideology uses the institution of parliamentary democracy to grow, often being dangerously successful in its efforts. But the kind of Islamic fascism poisoned not only the political realm but also the social one.

Long before, the demolition of Babri Masjid, a hate campaign was going on against the Hindus in Bangladesh. The Hindus were plotted to eat beef:

... Faroukh had taken him aside during the lunch break and said, ‘I have brought something delicious to eat, I won’t tell anyone about it; you and I will eat quietly upon the roof, okay?’ It was not as though Suranjan was famished, but he had approved of Faroukh’s proposal... To his surprise, once they had finished eating Faroukh had cheered aloud. Before Suranjan could react, he was bounding down the stairs, and before long he and the rest of the class were yelling with joy over the fact that Faroukh had made Suranjan eat beef.

(63-64)

The gruesome depiction of communal hatred and exploitation of the women is indeed very painful. Every time the girl is molested, she is per force converted to the religion that the perpetrators of the crime belong to, who feel they have fulfilled their moral responsibility by doing so. In the end, the poor girl is just

reduced to a bundle of flesh. The story is numbing and makes one abhorrent of what had happened then and now in the name of the pious religions we all swear allegiance to.

Lajja talks about the impact any religion has on minds of people irrespective of their countries or geographical boundaries. A Hindu in a country relates with a Hindu in any other country. A Muslim in a country relates with a Muslim in any other country. However, the same cannot be said about a Hindu and a Muslim in the same country. Why? What makes them hate each other? Coward human beings under the mask of Hinduism shamelessly marched to a holy place and demolished it into pieces. The base being, once a temple of a Hindu deity Lord Rama stood there, which was demolished to build a mosque. Therefore, for the past, which is a mixture of some facts, some factors and some beliefs, which is deep lost in the history, people are ready to give up their present.

The Babri Masjid gets demolished in India and some other coward human beings under the mask of Islam all over the world react violently to the event. So what is the importance of geographical borders or countries that we have defined calling each other by name? If an unknown person, staying in the Far East can relate to an unknown person staying in Far East, why can't two people staying in the same country relate to each other? Something seems terribly wrong. A question, one would ponder upon: Does the Almighty follow any religion?

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