



RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN TASLIMA NASREEN'S *LAJJA*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Taslima Nasreen has appeared on the literary canvas as a very definite, thought-provoking and influential writer addressing to give voice to the people who have wished, but dared not to admit and express what they have believed in for long. A multi-faceted personality—doctor, writer, feminist, columnist, novelist, short story writer and poet—Taslima Nasreen is an extraordinarily angry young woman. When human values are becomes worthless, humans become inhuman. The same happened in Bangladesh aftermath of Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya on 6 Dec. 1992. When the Hindus were maltreated in Bangladesh, the country turned a blind eye to the sufferings of a part of its citizens simply because they followed a different religion from that of the majority Muslim community. Thus, Islam is the major factor in deciding the thoughts and behaviour of its followers in Bangladesh. Hence, association with a few basic principles of Islam is necessary to size up the situations and events in the writings of the Taslima Nasreen, events in her personal life and the lives of her characters portrayed in her writings. Such intimacy is also important because Taslima Nasreen's fight for the cause of women becomes a fight against the darker side of her religion, rather a total rejection of religion.

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Karan Thapar, Taslima Nasreen said:

"We should not practise any religion because it is against humanity, against humanism, against human rights, against women rights, against freedom of expression" ("Devil's Advocate").

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The exploitation of women in her society was quite common and Taslima Nasreen was a consistent witness to all the atrocities and exploitation bring upon women by senseless men who firmly believed in the male dominance in the society. In a speech delivered at a women's forum, Taslima Nasreen says,

“My mother was not the only woman who was oppressed, for I saw my aunts, my neighbours and other acquaintances who were playing the same role, that of being oppressed” (“Speech”). And then Taslima Nasreen draws the conclusion: “Everywhere women are oppressed. And all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture and customs.” (“Speech”)

Religious fundamentalism is one of the major themes finds in Taslima Nasreen's novels. She has very strongly criticised those people who separate the society on the basis of religion. Religious fundamentalism is the biggest problem of Indian subcontinent. Clarifying about fundamentalism, she points out:

Fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of consciousness and individuality, and undermines their personal rights. I find it impossible to accept fundamentalism as an alternative to secular ideas. My first reason is the insistence of the fundamentalists on divine justification for human laws. Second is the insistence of fundamentalists upon the superior authority of faith, as opposed to reason. Third is the insistence of fundamentalists that the individual does not count, that the individual is immaterial. Group loyalty over individual rights and personal achievements is a peculiar feature of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in their particular jacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life everything would be determined by fundamentalist authority. Finally, though they proclaim themselves a moral force, their language is hatred and violence. Is it possible for a rationalist and humanist to accept this sort of terrible repression? (Interview with Matt Cherry and Warren Allen Smith)

Lajja is the controversial novel by Taslima Nasreen, is the most burning book by any writer dealing with communalism. It is a brutal accusation of fanaticism and man's inhumanity to man. The novel reveals the height of man's insensitiveness to man in the name of religion.

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The novel has a background related to a shameful extremist incident in India when Babri Masjid at Ayodhya was destroyed by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992 (Preface to *Lajja*, ix). This incident inflamed the religious feelings of Muslims all over the world. The most shocking consequences of this demolition were felt in Bangladesh where Muslim extremists treated Hindu society in a very horrifying way. The novel deals with the mistreatment with Bangladeshi Hindus, a religious minority, by the majority Muslims community.

The novel came out in February 1993 in Bangladesh and within a short time it sold more than 60,000 copies before it was banned by the Bangladesh government five months later, with the reason that it was disturbing the communal harmony. Extremists were marching on the streets of Dhaka clamouring for the life of Taslima. But she was not ready to take back her stand. She writes in the preface of the novel:

“But none of these things have shaken my determination to continue the battle against religious persecution, genocide and communalism.” (Pre. to Lajja, ix)

She gives the reason for writing *Lajja* by pointing out that she hates religious fundamentalism and communalism:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote Lajja soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1992. The book which took me seven days to write, deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in the majority. It is disgraceful that Hindus in my country were hunted by the Muslims after the destruction of Babri Masjid. All of us who love Bangladesh should feel ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of all of us, and we all are to blame. Lajja is a document of our collective defeat. (Pre. to Lajja: ix)

Lajja is the story of Dutta family—Sudhamoy, Kiranmoyee, and their two children—Suranjan and Maya living in Bangladesh. Sudhamoy is an ardent nationalist and a non believer in God but he loves his motherland like a real son of Bangladesh. A great idealist, he believes with a childlike optimism that his motherland will not let him down in any moment at any cost. *Lajja* narrates the communal outrageous behaviour committed against the Hindu



minorities. It also attempts to document with statistics the unfair treatment dealt with the Hindus in Bangladesh over a long period.

The novel explores the chaos and anguish of the protagonist Suranjan—a liberal, leftist and nationalist who witnesses the breaking of all his ideals around him in a turmoil of communal frenzy. His outrageous emotion turns him gradually into a communalist. Sudhamoy, Suranjan, Kironmoyee, Maya and few of the central characters of this novel, not only face difficult and adverse atmosphere but more importantly, dive into an identity crisis: does being Hindu mean being Indian?

Here Taslima raises an important question as well. Does being a nationalist not stand above religion? She expresses her thoughts of nationalism:

Did this generation have no sense of values? Where had the spirit of past gone? That spirit which had propelled the youth in 1952 to stage mass protests to make Bengali the language of the nation? (Lajja, 123)

The novel opens on 7th of December, a day after the demolition of Babri mosque at Ayodhya. Suranjan is lying on his bed in an attacking mood when his sister Nilanjana, nicknamed Maya, comes to request him to give help to the family as earlier he did it in 1990 by taking his family to his friend's house. But this time, he is in different mood as he is not ready to take the family anywhere. He thinks that he is the equal citizen of this country as the Muslims. Therefore, he thinks that, he needs not to go in search of any safe place at the breaking of riots. Why should he leave his home only because he is Hindu? Does it really necessary for his family—Sudhamoy, his father, kironmoyee, his mother and Nilanjana, his sister—to run away like a refugee just because of their names and religion? These questions agonizes Suranjan's mind. Whenever riots took place in Bangladesh, it was he who had to go away from his home. He had to take shelter in Kamal's home, but Kamal never goes away from his home. It was a fact that Kamal was an old friend of Suranjan's and they did visit each other but not in such conditions.

Suranjan knows the seriousness of the difficult situation of communal riots in his surroundings. It has very little significance to him whether the demolished structure was the birthplace of Lord Rama or a sacred mosque. But it is apparent to him that the destruction of the sixteenth century structure has struck a brutal blow to the sentiments of Muslims in India and elsewhere. The act of demolition has damaged the Hindu community as well as it broke the communal harmony at international level. At the encouragement of the BJP, the *Kar sevaks* broke down the Babri *Masjid* only to strengthen the Muslim priests of Bangladesh. These ideas come in the mind of Suranjan. He is fully aware of the view that a crowd of

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Muslim people could enter his house anytime to loot and burn and even to break down it to the ground. He is also aware of his responsibilities toward his parents and Maya. But willingly and due to the anger, he does not do anything for the safety of his family this time. Because of this negligence, Maya takes shelter in the house of Parul, one of her Muslim friends.

In *Lajja*, Nasreen portrays the depressed condition of Hindus living in Bangladesh. She provides factual information regarding the destruction of temples:

A mob had set fire to the Dhakeshwari temple. The police had not made the slightest attempt to stop them. The main temple where prayers were offered was burnt to ashes and the dance hall of the temple had been damaged as well. The Shiva temple, the guest rooms and the ancestral home of Shridham Ghosh were all razed to ground. (Lajja:4).

Hindus in Bangladesh were treated cruelly by the Muslims in these communal riots. They were beaten brutally till their death. Many of Hindu families became landless as they were forced to abandon their own houses. Their women were raped again and again. Even children were not left by the extremist mob. Most of the Hindu families shift to India due to this exploitation. But Sudhamoy not even thought to leave his country as he believed that this country is as much his as that of any Muslim. He thinks about his past days when he was a young man, all his relatives had begun to leave Bangladesh one by one. As they migrated, they would request Sudhamoy’s father to go with them by pointing out that this was the motherland of the Muslims and therefore life was uncertain in the country. But Sudhamoy’s father, Sukumar Dutta was decided not to betray the values he had always upheld. He would say:

*If there is no security in your own country, where in this world can we go looking for it? I cannot run away from my homeland. You go if you want to. I am not leaving the property of my forefathers.....
I
 cannot leave all this to become a refugee on the platforms of Sealdah station. (Lajja:6)*

Sudhamoy has handed down all those values from his father. But he has to suffer the incidents of torture due to his firm decision to stay at his place. The irony is that the same Hindus who had once participated energetically in the freedom struggle for Bangladesh, became the victims of religious fundamentalism. These Hindus had contributed a lot in every

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movement. In 1952, Sudhamoy was an enthusiastic young man of twenty four. At that time on the streets of Dhaka, there was a great deal of anxious enthusiasm as the Bengalis moved for the use of Bengali as the national language.

Through *Lajja*, Nasreen has portrayed the evil face of communist people. Sudhamoy is the leading character in *Lajja*. Ironically, he is a communist and therefore he is shown as an atheist, which is a very thing with Hindu communists to raise their intellectualism and liberal nature. He even always tells his family members to eat beef:

Kironmoyee had cooked the beef after a good deal of Cajoling on Sudhamoy's part who had explained to his wife, at great length, the futility and illogicality of observing such customs. (Lajja:86)

But all his Muslim communist friends are hardliners and practicing Muslims who even backed the communalisation of Bangladesh.

Often, If he went to a Muslim friend's house he would be met with statement like 'Sudhamoy, please sit in the other room while I finish with Namaaz..... As his leftist friends grew older, they had begun to turn to religion. (Lajja:92)

Communist characters shown in *Lajja* have been described as fake secular, a Suranjan feels. He did not remember having ever prayed in his life. Not even had he ever visited a temple. Though 'Suranjan clenched his fists in disgust at the Hindu fanatics,'(140) yet his father, Sudhamoy was so feared of Muslims that he asked his wife not to use *sindur*, *loha* and *sankha* on her wrist and he too had given up his beloved *dhuti*.' But he could not even to ask his Muslim comrades to shun fanaticism.

Nasreen is very strongly critical of the opportunist and coward behaviour of communists of Bangladesh. The protagonist of the novel, Suranjan, who belongs to a communist family, he does not have any faith in the socialist party or in any communist leader. Even Hindus in the communist party were also submitting themselves to the current situation. Krishna Binod Roy now becomes Kabir Bhai and Barin Dutta, has changed his name to Abdus Salaam. Muslim communists bent completely towards the wishes of Islamic fanatics; their surrender was complete and final:

When comrade Farahd passed away, a Quran Khani and Milad Mehfil were organized by the CPB office..... Why did communists have to take shelter under the Islamic flag? Because they wanted to escape the misplaced accusation of the public, that they were non-believers, wasn't

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that so? He blamed the so-called leftist leaders, who were themselves completely bewildered and lost. (Lajja:135)

Therefore, the novel *Lajja* made Taslima Nasreen a literary celebrity, is a story of stern annoyance of the Duttas, a Hindu family, by the Muslim fundamentalists. *Lajja* is a true representation of sufferings of many Hindu families in Bangladesh in which the Muslim fundamentalists play the villain. From beginning to the end it portrays the devil-dance of death, violation and destruction brought by the Muslim fundamentalists of Bangladesh. But it is not only the case of the Duttas family. Actually, Dutta family represents a large number of Hindu families which also victimised for their religion. Hence, we can say that Taslima Nasreen very skilfully portrays the theme of fundamentalism and communalism in her novel. In fact, she is quite successful in exploring the religious atrocities were quite common against the minorities in Bangladesh.

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