



Exploring the Novels of Taslima Nasrin With Regards to Authority, Rebellion and Identity

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The first encounter with Taslima Nasrin happened through a copy of the novel, *Lajja*. Struck by the portrayal of communal riots triggered off in Bangladesh by the Babri Masjid demolition in India, the novel openly attacked the way fundamentalism could unleash such a reign of terror against a minority community at the hands of the majority. The intense and stark portrayal of the atrocities committed as a repercussion of a remote incident in India by some Hindu fundamentalists, only revealed how blindly religious extremism practiced by any community can leave a spate of violence and destruction in its wake.

Nasrin initially gained fame as a poet and a columnist. Later she acquired a bold notoriety and courage through a series of books that she wrote. Her writings span a variety of forms--prose, poetry, novels, short stories and translation of verses. Through her work she gives expression to her outrage at the high-handedness of males and the unbearable condition of women in a society where religious fundamentalism is progressively making inroads. She does not take up obscure or complicated theoretical issues. Her characters are centered on the restrictions imposed by the powerful over the weak.

Nasrin is a bold crusader of secular humanism. Since the publication of *Lajja*, and the controversies it led to, the writer has been issued a *fatwa* by the fundamentalists and is in exile ever since. The interest in her grew with the passing years, more so by the controversies that raged after the *fatwa* was issued, and with international human rights organizations such as PEN and Amnesty International, as well as the European Union, taking up her cause. In August 1994 *Nasrin* escaped from Bangladesh and was granted asylum by the Swedish Government.

She has received numerous awards, including the prestigious *Ananda Award* in literature in India for her newspaper column called "*Nirbachita*," and the Sakharov prize for *The Freedom of Thought*, awarded by the Parliament of the European Union; the *Kurt Tuckholsky award* from Swedish PEN; a human rights prize from the French government, and a humanist award from the International Humanist and Ethical Union. She still appears to be committed to demystifying and democratizing her chosen art.



The study has addressed contemporary concerns referring to subaltern issues, the concepts of authority, rebellion, and identity and the responses/reactions to them.

The concept of authority

The use of authority figures and their characteristics:

Bangladesh is a multi-racial and multi-cultural country. The state respects freedom of religion and belief, according to the government policy on religion. At the same time, the state also has an exclusive policy for Islam. Here, *Taslima* vociferously strikes at the duality of these policies and the marginalization of the minority and the injustice meted out to them by the state when there is a conflict. Wherever there is controversy, the state is silent and gives up authority to the fundamentalists to assert themselves against minority community interests. The state religion got its sanction in 1987.

Nasrin, in her novel, *Lajja*, brings out how religious extremism practiced in all its rigidity, takes over the reins of a secular nation. The aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in India by Hindu fundamentalists, where they were a majority, led to violence and mayhem carried out by the majority muslim community against the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh. In *Shodh*, *Phera*, *Lajja* and *French Lover*, *Taslima Nasrin* deals with the confrontation of authority in the form of established authority figures. The nature of the authority figure varies. Though the thread of religion runs through all four of these novels, the authority figures are not always religious in nature but can be seen in the form of a conservative patriarchal society as in *Shodh*, the secular elite in *Phera* and a typical Indian male authority figure appears in the *French Lover*. *Lajja*, on the other hand, is a novel which distinctly and exclusively represents the authoritarian voice of religious fundamentalism.

The authority figures as stated cannot be taken for study in isolation as they are intertwined. Religion has always, as Marx put it, been the opium of the people, a hallucinatory escape from reality, through the practice of rigorous self-discipline and self-denial. In this instance, in Bangladesh, Muslims had lost their power to the British imperialists and thereafter they refused to learn English and stuck to Persian and Arabic languages to uphold their cultural identity in Islam. After Bengali Muslims voted supporting the two-nation theory, they received a rude shock when Pakistan refused to accept their mother tongue as a state language.

On the other hand, there had been unity of all the citizens in the history of Bangladesh and there was no difference of a majority and minority when they fought together for the language movement. It was during this era that they celebrated their community festivals together, to affirm their common identity in a multicultural milieu. This unity of the majority and minority of Bangladesh shook Pakistan as it was according



to them the Hindu cultural revival. It was in the liberation war of 1971 that the Bengali Muslims discovered their roots in secular socialism and not in the Islamic state.

However, the renewed relationships of religious fanatics with their mentors across the border eventually strengthened and led to the fallout between the majority and the minority unity prevalent in the liberation and the language movement. In *Lajja* the author brings out very clearly and potently the interference of religion in politics, and the inability of the state to control any outcome issuing from it.

Nasrin also emphasizes that patriarchy and religion are intrinsically woven together in the social fabric since ages. Be it the secular and liberal society of France, the setting of the novel *French Lover* or the Indian context of society in *Shodh* and *Lajja* in Bangladesh, the crux of her assertion is that patriarchy in all its forms stifles the rights of women under the garb of religion in some cases, and independently in others. And this prevails and pervades beyond the geographical boundaries of nations. In her novel *Phera* there is a constant interplay of characters and situations where she brings out the inequalities between men and women. She portrays this through the character of *Kalyani* who had to put up with her husband's whims and fancies and was compelled to cope with the adversities that came her way. Like an average Indian male, *Anirban* worried his head about his patrilineal progeny. During *Kalyani's* pregnancy, she had been tormented with worry at the prospect of not being able to conceive a male child. She had aborted three times before giving birth to a girl-child *Jaisha*. A girl-child could not make her father *Anirban* happy.

The author blatantly exposes a gender-biased society. The difference between the two sexes and the power that is conferred to the stronger is deep-rooted in cultures and consequently cannot be uprooted easily.

Nilanjana, the protagonist of *Taslina's* novel, *French Lover*, finds it unbearable to be strictly confined to the house as per the dictates of her husband, *Kishanlal*, who wants her to be a mere puppet in his hands. The effects of domestic conflicts with her husband were deeply embedded in *Nilanjana's* psyche, wounding her sense of dignity as a woman. Her private space and freedom of movement was closely monitored by *Kishanlal*.

Nasrin finds patriarchal authority as a universally accepted form in all societies and religion, so much so, that she believes that the women in this era of commoditization have also been used as objects and the liberation which the third world women talk of is merely a farce and superficial in nature.



The Concept of Rebellion

The development of the human race owes a lot to the power of rebellion. In fact, progress and change is not possible without rebellion and history has stood a witness to this. Rebellion arises out of the utter dissatisfaction with the existing order. In this sense *Taslima Nasrin* is a progressive writer. Rebellion seems to be the most recurrent theme in her novels. Her observant and critical eye minutely scrutinizes and examines everything she encounters and experiences: the individual, society, family, culture nation, etc, leaving nothing out of its purview. She has a built-in antenna sensing "What is wrong" and "How it must be set right". As a result, she endows her characters with an irresistible urge for equality and human dignity and empowers them to rise above their circumstances.

Her protagonists sooner or later spark off their protest against all the forces that subjugate human freedom and dignity. All the four novels: *Lajja*, *Phera (Homecoming)*, *Shodh* and *French Lover* convince the reader that her characters belong to that class of human beings who would never shy away from raising their voice against any authority, majority or tradition. They are equipped to wage a war against any injustice and oppression. And her characters' rebellions seem justified. *Taslima's* novels, true to life, furnish plenty of examples of exploitation and oppression common in any society, with her characters raising their voices against these exploitative forces. In this sense, *Nasrin* is true to her calling as a serious writer.

Being a victim of the patriarchal system herself, *Taslima* also endows her characters with a "sense of vindication" for their rights. However this sense of vindication sometimes also degenerates into a "sense of vindictiveness" for the wrongs done to them. This tendency may be accounted for by the abusive sexual assault on her as a vulnerable young girl at the hands of her male relatives.

The author's keen insight and interpretation of man-woman relationships and the gumption with which she explores its depths is worth mentioning. She takes the orthodox patriarchal society head-on. *Nasrin* seems to agree with *D H Lawrence* that the most significant crux in the history of mankind is the man-woman relationship, as against the others, which are subsidiary. Her dialogues centre on the shackles and restrictions that bind a woman in a conservative, religious society, where the mental barriers created by the society were consolidated and internalized by the women themselves. It is a breakaway from the phallo-centric perception of a woman as man had perceived her, which was as a glorified entity rather than an independent one.

As the author of the third world, *Taslima* makes her protagonists dismantle the image of the ever-sacrificing symbol of motherhood. And the secular humanist then reconstructs the image of the protagonist raising concerns not for the glorified status but for justice, equality and the rights she holds not as woman but as an individual. It is in this



context that *Taslima* portrays her character *Jhumur* in *Shodh* to avenge the conservative patriarchal oppression meted out by her husband *Haroon*.

It is the rebellion against religion-supported-oppression against the minority in *Lajja* that *Taslima* empowered her protagonist *Suranjan* with. However as a result of disillusionment with his secular humanism he rebels and becomes communal himself in the end. Oppression by the majority communal authorities makes the protagonist *Suranjan* avenge himself by raping a prostitute who belongs to the majority community because they had raped and abducted his sister. *Suranjan* and his family who have been a part of the struggle for independence were now pushed to the periphery of existence and their faith in a secular society collapses.

Taslima's characters try to find a way out that would liberate them from their self-destructing subjugation, to eventually enable them to regain their lost identity. *Jhumur* in *Shodh* emerges as rebellious after her period of subjugation in an ingenuous way. However from *Taslima's* perspective, *Jhumur's* rebellion comes to an end with the beginning of a new order that promises to protect and nurture the values for which the entire rebellion stands for.

The absolute control exercised by *Kishanlal* on *Nilanjana* in *The French Lover* makes her blatantly rebel in order to free herself from his possessive ownership. *Kishanlal*, being a businessman looks upon his wife not as an individual but more as a commodity to be used as and when required, an object to be showcased and guarded with rights to ownership. Equality and liberty are two cherished goals of mankind. All the rebellions, both public and private, aim at restoring these values. But as a crusader of secular humanism is this rebellion which the author upholds, in a true sense, justified?

The Concept of Identity

a. The identity crises and multicultural society

It was unity that made the people of Bangladesh survive partition and this was partly strengthened after the 1971 independence struggle. It was the fundamentalists who apparently found it difficult to accept the new trend that had set in favor of a secular society. It is this multicultural society that *Taslima* portrays in *Lajja* and brings out all the cultural amalgamation in a society which fosters the values of secular humanism before religion takes over. The clerics felt that the gentry would tend to focus away from the religious divide and thereby will deprive them from exploiting their naïve sentiments. The apparent insecurity of these fundamentalists of losing their grip over the religious community made them bounce back with absolute power and effectiveness. These developments became a potent threat to social peace and communal harmony which existed in the sub-continent. At the slightest provocation the minorities felt discriminated.



This insecurity brought them together across geographical boundaries binding them with the common thread of religion in times of trouble, resulting in *ghettoisation*.

This is what *Taslima* as a crusader of secular humanism feared and brought to the fore the ill effects of dominating religious dictates. The protagonist *Suranjan* in *Lajja* who once had all his friends with him in times of need, now feels that they are all a part of the conspiracy in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid issue. The nightmare inevitably arrives at the *Duttas*' doorstep and their world begins to fall apart.

Taslima right until the climax of her novel pitches the father and son against each other. *Sudhamoy*, is a staunch believer in secularism and *Suranjan* who is no less a supporter of the same. But the aftermath of the communal violence and the abduction of his sister turned him against secularism. *Sudhamoy* a model of secularism succumbs to the communalism and decides to leave Bangladesh after suffering much at the hands of the religious fanatics. Eventually, defeating the very purpose of humanity, *Taslima* portrays that it was a shame and a collective defeat on the part of the majority to incite and perpetrate violence against the minority for their own appeasement.

Despite being a 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 relatives have done. *Sudhamoy*, an atheist, believes with a naive mix of optimism and idealism that his motherland will not let him down . . . and then on 6th December 1992, the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in India is demolished by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists. 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. *Lajja* is perceived as an example of the mindless bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and it brilliantly captures the insanity of violence in our time. It is a savage indictment of religious extremism and man's inhumanity to man.

The displacement of those affected by the fundamentalist leads to identity crises and this is well- described when *Kalyani* the character in *Taslima*'s *Phera (Homecoming)* is sent back from Bangladesh to Kolkata. Her lifestyles, her Bangla language with its idiosyncrasies are all mocked at. The story of *Kalyani* is a paradigm of loss and displacement and a failure to connect even though she is driven by the passionate power of nostalgia. Every time *Kalyani* is engaged in the daily chores of life as an expatriate in India, they trigger off memories of her girlhood in East Bengal and she longs to return to the country of her birth. *Nasrin* convincingly describes the conversion of a secular society into a religious one with piercing details when *Kalyani* visits her motherland. The oppressive atmosphere culminates in the creation of an unbridgeable gap between the two close friends: *Kalyani* and *Sharifa*.



The bond of humanity which once prospered between the communities seems to erode away with time as religious fundamentalism has slowly crept into the intrinsically woven fabric of the society. *Kalyani's* journey back to Bangladesh reveals to her that her homeland had existed merely in her imagination, and that she must share the fate of millions of others who have left one country for another and do not belong to either. *Phera* reflects some of *Taslima Nasrin's* personal experiences in exile.

In all four novels, *Nasrin* raises questions relevant to our times. All the four protagonists in these novels: *Nila*, *Jhumur*, *Kalyani* and *Suranjan*, try to evolve their own identity in the backdrop of contemporary issues. In the process of evolving an identity there is a direct confrontation with authority in the form of rebellion against established norms and practices .

Human beings seem to possess an innate abhorrence for subservience to authority figures. Even when someone is subjugated by authority through the laws of the nation or the customs therein, that person will uncover ways to subvert the authority of the person set above him or her. Most often, these ways may be expressed through passive resistance as direct confrontation may be difficult and radical. However, one can uncover evidence from history of how oppressive limitations imposed upon women by laws and social expectations lead to direct confrontational engagement against male authority.

b. The word "Rape" as a metaphor in Taslima Nasrin's novels

The construct of exploitation of women and the use of the word "rape" as a metaphor.

Emancipated women want to free themselves from the control of patriarchy. The subordination of women under patriarchy was all pervasive in the world. The first wave of feminism, the second wave of feminism and the third world feminism needs to be elaborated.

The character in the novel, *French Lover*, Danielle had a bitter childhood to recall. Her father had raped her. The sexual vulgarity the character is made to face in a liberal country like France is what must provoke sensitive reflection on the perception of male domination. *Taslima* weaves some reality and fantasy into the escapades the oppressed undergo. In this case ultimately, Danielle turns to become a lesbian. The author pursues the male-female encounter with rare depth and validity. Lesbianism and Danielle represent the liberated and emancipated woman of the west but in a negative way because it runs the risk of moral corruption. Such a liberal society is unaware of such gruesome assaults on women, but Danielle tries to transform herself into a lesbian in the quest of a female identity.



Mostly all the women characters in *Taslima*'s novels suffer sexual abuse. It may not be necessarily from known men always. It is pathetic that sex does not distinguish a daughter, sister or a friend or a wife. The attempt to rape on Kalyani by her cousin are some examples where *Taslima Nasrin* generalizes and places her characters in a parallel situation wherein the experience of one woman happens to be that of the other. Ultimately the culmination becomes the liberation of women or emancipation of women from men.

The rape of Maya in *Lajja* is again a case of the majority trying to assert their power over the weak. The weak in this case for a conservative society are women and children who are the gullible targets for religious fanatics in times of trouble. The rape of the whore by *Suranjan* so as to avenge his sisters' rape by the tyrants and his resulting guilt is an insight into the minds of the oppressed class retaliating against the authority.

Perhaps, the reason why rape is a recurring issue in all her novels seems to be that it is an inevitable fact of human nature, but a product and expression of patriarchal power.

Rape according to Susan Brownmiller,

is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.

Conclusion

Taslima's novels reveal that religion and socio-cultural mechanisms control or restrict the movement of individuals in a particular society. She exposes how the fundamentalists of a majority religion can overpower a minority community. To prove their right, might and power, religious fundamentalists can resort to outrageous acts of cruelty and inhumanity. By re-locating the minority characters in the construction of the nation's history and attributing to them their due space, the author has very successfully projected the identity crisis confronting them.

The feeling of alienation and the identity crisis that confronts the characters portrayed in the novels by *Nasrin* uproot them from their own birthplace. They feel lost in their quest for identity. Gender discrimination is not bound to geographical locations or cultures. Multiculturalism promotes assimilation and recognition of other cultures and groups. It essentially is a movement towards tolerance of the other/others. In other words, multiculturalism provides the climate for non-differentiation between the sexes where



gender equality is fostered and promoted. *Taslima*'s focus has always been on the exploitation of the weaker by the powerful.

An in-depth study of *Nasrin*'s novels reveals her anger and anguish against conservative patriarchal society which regards women as creepers who cannot stand without support and shelter. In an appraisal of *Taslima Nasrin*'s world as portrayed in her works, it is obvious that she advocates a religion-free society with equality of gender and a non-communal outlook. Her love for cultural heritage and her deep identification with the afflictions of the masses on this sub-continent endears her to her readers. But her radical feminist views have always provoked the fundamentalists and other detractors. To give her due credit, in her own way she has created another wave of feminism—one ostensibly even away from third-world feminism.

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