

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

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## Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*: A Critique

Varun Gulati, M.A., M. Phil. Ph.D. (Thesis Submitted)



Taslima Nasrin

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Men admire the tea a woman makes for them, not their poems or literary works  
[...] No man is good enough for me in this city.

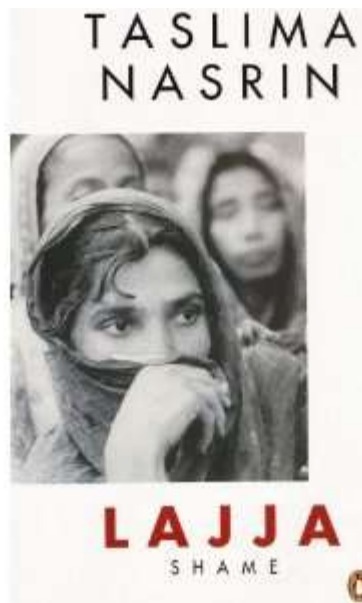
Taslima Nasrin

### **Taslima's Life Story**

A young, prolific but often labeled as a controversial writer of forty-nine, Taslima Nasrin a writer of Bangladesh, known around the world. Nasrin is readily known as a doctor by profession and an author and activist-writer. She portrays the persecution of rural women, their harassment and discrimination in Bangladesh. This trait is vividly seen in her novel *Lajja*.

Moving from Bangladesh to West and other countries, she presently stays in New Delhi (India). Published in 1993 and banned in the same year, the novel *Lajja* (Shame) is based on the repercussions of the demolition of Babri Masjid (Ayodhya) in 1992. Surprisingly, Nasrin finished the script of this novel in a week. The novel alienated her from a variety of sections of people. The novel depicts the plight of minority Hindu characters in Bangladesh.

### **The Dilemma of a Minority – To Flee Or Not To Flee**



The ethnic dilemma of Hindu community is centred on the four members of the family: father Sudhamoy, mother Kironmoyee, son Suranjan and daughter Maya. A slow and seething sensation grips the reader from the very outset. Suranjan's rebellious mood that he should not flee his home simply because his name was Suranjan Dutta marks the subterranean tension that lies beneath the hearts of the entire Hindu family at a time when communal passions were running high in Bangladesh. The writer brings out the tension vividly in the followings words:

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There had been no lack of hospitality in Kamal's house. They had had eggs and toast for breakfast, fish and rice for lunch and spent long, lazy evenings on the lawns. They had slept peacefully and comfortably on thick dunlopillo mattresses and had a glorious time! But no matter how pleasant [...] Why had it all been necessary to take refuge in Kamal's house. (*Lajja* 1)

### **Seeking Scapecoats to Inflict Harm**

Suranjan's insistence to stay put in his own residence shows that he still has some faith in the sanity of the system. He cannot conceive and calculate the potential gravity of the situation, when communal passions would burst forth over the entire land like volcanic fire. His thinking only betrays the innocence of a layman who always underestimates the impact and magnitude of the dangers that are created out of the horrible communal passions.

Moreover, it also reflects the helplessness of the minority, be they in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Myanmar. As the graph of tension rises high, so do the calculations of the Hindu minority. The writer seems to suggest that the demolition of Babri Masjid was the causative agent for the rising communal antagonism and for the strong reaction of the majority in Bangladesh. Nasrin observes:

Suranjan had never been to Ayodhya, nor had he seen the Babri Masjid. How could he have, when he had not even stepped out of Bangladesh? Whether the demolished structure was the birthplace of Rama or a sacred mosque was a matter of little significance to Suranjan. But it was evident to him that the demolition of the sixteenth-century edifice had struck a savage blow to the sentiments of the Muslims in India and elsewhere. (*Lajja* 3)

### **Destruction of the Social Fabric**

Suranjan was aware of the disruption of harmony between Hindus and Muslims. But he could not visualize the forthcoming destruction of the social fabric that was looming large over the horizon. He merely thought that a whirlwind had arrived and that it would just blow over without doing much harm to the lives of the minority. Suranjan had never learnt to differentiate among his friends on a communal basis. When he was a child he had known that he was a Hindu but had not quite known what it really meant. The writer depicts the psychology of this innocent person in the following words:

He would say to his friends and his family that Bengalis as a race must not subject themselves to any communal distinctions whatsoever, so that the term 'Bengali' would always be considered indivisible in character. Unfortunately, however, Suranjan's idealistic views did not find many takers in Bangladesh. (*Lajja* 25)

### **Idealism and Patriotic Feelings**

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Suranjan betrays both his idealism and patriotic feelings. His firm faith in the roots of his soil and nativity convinces that he believes in the higher ideals of Humanism. The chill of dread and fear raises high along with the ominous winter's chill. Life still goes on its normal pace and an unwary citizen would not sense much fear in the air. Despite the traumatic experiences and alienation, especially the loss of his beloved home on the bank of Brahmaputra, he had overcome his racial inferiority and keeps the flames of idealism and patriotic feelings alive.

### **Mayhem and Second Independence in Bangladesh**

As the events advance, one is shocked to learn that on the morning of 21st March, 1992, in the village of Bageshata, the daughter of Kalindra Haider, Putul Rani, was kidnapped by Mokhlesur Rahman and Chand Mia Talukdar. In another incident, a person named Brien, in the village of Raj Nagar, was imprisoned and deprived of his property. No body knew anything of the whereabouts of this victim. Sudhir was tortured and a plot of land was forcibly occupied. Sudhir left his place out of sheer fear. The situation intensifies. Suranjan notices that the Hindu shops, which were still intact, were closed. However, a feeling can be registered that not only the shops had been closed but the minds of the people had also been shut down.

He had been walking around aimlessly for something now but he did not really know where to go. Whom could he call his own in the city of Dakha? With whom he could talk for a while? (*Lajja* 132)

### **Erosion of Trust**

People have started losing trust in everything, even in their own government. The efforts of the government to create a harmony among different communities were only a hypocritical act, Suranjan feels. In fact, there was a gang rape of Hindu women. The police, the District Magistrate and the Deputy Commissioner turned their eyes away when temples in Bhola city were destroyed and the jewelry of the temple were openly looted. A Hindu colony of washermen caste was burnt to ashes. Suranjan's depression increases further. The writer expresses her concern through these words:

Suranjan had tossed and turned all night, his depression driving away sleep. Kironmoyee had come once to his room in the morning. Perhaps she had wanted to ask if he had any news of Maya. Would they live the rest of their lives without Maya? In the past few days, Kironmoyee had become more and more listless. There were dark circles under her eyes, her face was drawn, and she never seemed to speak or smile. Suranjan had pretended to be asleep. (*Lajja* 193)

### **Victory Day, Whose Victory?**

There is a note of irony. It was the day to celebrate the Victory Day, the day on which Bangladesh had finally attained independence. The feelings in the minds of the majority

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and in the minds of Hindu minority present a picture of sad contrast. The word *independence* itself seemed to sound and feel like a sting from a poisonous ant. The whole country was exuberant with excitement and a military parade passed through the streets, while the crowds cheered their march. Suranjan was unhappy at heart. He reflected that he had gained nothing from the independence of his country. Closer to the end, Suranjan's tension becomes substantial and the writer says:

Suranjan's grip stiffened on the toothbrush. A swift shudder passed through his body and he felt terribly, awfully alone. He could hear nothing from the other parts of the house, no crying, nothing. (204)

### **Strange Dreams in Midnight**

Suranjan has become the victim of insomnia. Even when he snatched a little sleep, he had a strange dream. He was walking all by himself beside a river. A wild wave came and swept him into the depths. Such a mental agony has shown how every individual has been cut off from the strings of society and how ghastly and terrified his loneliness has become. The writer has probed deep into the minds of her characters and she has made it explicitly clear that communal passions can rob a person belonging to the minority community of the sense of security, freedom and even the personal identity, which are so sacred to him in his humble existence.

### **Conclusion**

Through this Nasrin throws light on Bangladeshi fundamentalist politics and how this inequality in society influences the human mind – both on the individual and the universal level. Social difference also proves to be a reason for oppression and discrimination. His father's decision to migrate to India, now, after Partition, a foreign land, with his family might seem as a defeat of his religious community at the moment; yet it also suggests an attempt to re-assert their identity.

Nasrin's success lies in her faithful portrayal of her characters suffering from the pangs of religious-ethnic crisis. The demolition of Babri Masjid was not the prologue to this crisis.

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### **Reference**

Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja* (Shame), Translated from the Bengali original by Tatal Gupta. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994. Page numbers of the quotations given in parentheses.

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