

The Hegemonic Implications of Politics as Religion and Religion as Politics in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

Ritushmita Sharma
Ph.D Research Scholar
Department of English
Dibrugarh University

Abstract:

Bangladeshi novelist Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (meaning 'Shame') published in the year 1993 is a fictional representation of various bitter realities out of which religious fundamentalism remains supreme. Her work is a flag bearer in reflecting upon the conflictual violence that has not only steeped into the land of Bangladesh but also India and Pakistan. However, while underlining this narrative of extremely frightful pogrom, Nasrin makes one thing noticeable that how religion is instrumental in performing as a political ideology making human life disgusting. She represents as well as critiques about religion which being accompanied with politics is responsible for strangleholding several innocent lives over the years in Bangladesh. This is feasible in the narrative of *Lajja* as well which fictionally reiterates the actual event of Bangladeshi Muslim men raping Hindu women as retribution to the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. Therefore, this research paper is an attempt to put forth a discussion on ethics of politics and values of religion moulds and substantiate human ideology thereby penetrating its impactful hegemony in society and community. The research paper also aims to highlight the creative space and feat of Taslima Nasrin as a revolutionary writer for her powerful critique of nationalism of her own homeland.

Key Words: religious fundamentalism, pogrom, religion, politics, hegemony

Introduction:

Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the officials, politicians' version of truth.

--- Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

The above cited epigraph is analogous to Taslima Nasrin's writings who is often identified as 'female Salman Rushdie', one of the most widely known writers who gained notoriety at the hands of Iranian mullahs for his book *The Satanic Verses*, which is considered blasphemous. Nasrin's *Lajja* can be read as a discourse of gendered self-representation, or an attempt to define herself vis-a-vis her critique of both nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Her writing is an act of subversion and accordingly invited the consciousness of many religious groups immediately after the publication of this controversial masterpiece. Eventually it has also come to notice that the representatives of Council for Soldiers of Prophet's Companions released a *fatwa* against Nasrin accusing her writing a blasphemy and her book as a conspiracy against the belief of Islam. One of the most renowned critics S.M.Shamsul Alam brings out in this context:

At a rally in September 1993, the group (Council for Soldiers of Prophet's Companions) put a price of about US\$1,250 on Nasrin's head and demanded that the Khaleda Zia government arrest her and implement the verdict arrest her and implement the verdict within fifteen days. Initially the principal fundamentalist party, the Jamaat-e-Islam (JI) had remained silent on Nasrin's writings and their allegedly blasphemous content. But in early 1994, the *Sirat Majlish*, widely known in Bangladesh as a front organisation for the JI, declared that it would give US\$2500 to anyone who killed Nasrin . . . While the Islamic fundamentalist parties demanded Nasrin's execution, the secular, progressive, and modernist intellectuals and writers were equally dismissive of her writings. Without demanding her death, they variously described Nasrin as "immature," "rather impulsive," "politically naive," "obsessed with sex," and an "antimale extremist." ("Women in the Era of Modernity" 2)

However, irrespective of all the ill-treatment, many well-known writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Gunter Grass, John Irving, Norman Mailer, Amy Tan, Mario Vargas Llosa, Milan Kundera and of course, Salman Rushdie supported the case of Nasrin. And accordingly, in the year 1994, under pressure from Amnesty International, the Khaleda Zia government returned Nasrin's passport, which had been confiscated in early 1993 when *Lajja* was published. Infact Salman Rushdie once mentioned in a speech given at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., reiterating his support for Taslima Nasrin. He argued that the debate over whether Nasrin is a good or bad writer misses the real issue, which is that a *fatwa* against any writer is unacceptable.

Another event which attracted much attention of a larger audience was while Nasrin being accused of stating that Quran should be revised thoroughly. But denying such accusation on her part, she argued that *Sharia* but not Quran which need to be revised. In an article titled "Taslima Nasrin: Breaking the Structural Silence" by Riaz Ali, it has been pointed out to us that

I described the Quran, the Vedas, and the Bible and all such religious texts determining the lives of their followers as 'out of place and out of time.' We crossed that social historical context in which these were written and therefore, we should not be guided by their precepts; the question of raising

thoroughly or otherwise is irrelevant. We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we want to progress. In order to respond to our spiritual needs let humanism be our faith. (23)

Nasrin's deliberations quite often have been projected as her malicious intention of outraging the feelings of Muslim. Her case was represented and covered by Western media as remarkable because Bangladesh usually known to be popular in Western media when there is flood, a tornado, or mass starvation. But this sudden change with main preoccupation lying in Bangladesh is the root cause of Islamic fundamentalism. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism is seen as a conflict between democracy and totalitarianism. In this context, Nasrin's writing can be seen as a resistance to the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism. Defying the orthodoxies of religious ideologies, "She advocates free sex and open marriage. A woman should be allowed to have as many as four husbands . . . Religion is a great oppressor and should be abolished" (Anderson 3). Keeping in view Nasrin's critique of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh, the research study aims to undertake *Lajja*, a fictionalised narrative of an actual rape and the torment and humiliation of a Hindu minority family in Bangladesh after the destruction of Babri mosque.

Aims and Objectives:

The primary aim of this research is to theorise the religious fanaticism of the Muslim majority in the context of Taslima Nasrin's novel *Lajja* which is an eye opener to the harsh social realities of Bangladesh. The research also aims to highlight how the wedlock between religion and politics poses a greater challenge penetrating its influences both in the personal as well as in political front.

Research Methodology:

The research paper follows both descriptive and analytical method, and is based on both primary and secondary sources. Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* served as the primary source while many articles and essays constituted the secondary sources.

Analysis:

In the *Preface* to the novel *Lajja*, Nasrin writes, "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" (ix). She further wrote,

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 the Hindus in my country were haunted by the Muslims after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. All of us, who love Bangladesh, should feel that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of us all . . . *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat. (ix)

Lajja's story revolves around a Hindu family whose father Sudhamoy Dutta, was by profession a distinguished professor and physician. He and his family is quite proud of their motherland—the only home they knew or acknowledged. But however, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992, many of Dutta family's relatives and neighbours had left Bangladesh as they could not cope up with the day to day failing of human values of the country. Sudhamoy Dutta's ancestral home was in Mymensingh but had to part away with his land by giving them to a Muslim family and accordingly seeking shelter in a small flat in Dhaka. Being a Hindu, Sudhamoy in the land of Bangladesh had to witness many difficult situations such as he was denied promotion even after his years of services as a doctor in government sector. Again, on many occasions such as partition of India from Pakistan in 1947, Freedom movement of 1971 in Bangladesh, demolition of Babri Masjid in India at the end of 1992, Sudhamoy Dutta was tortured and inhumanely treated. But Sudhamoy never supported the idea of leaving his motherland despite all the violence inflicted upon him. So here it can be said that the Dutta family ended up being *probashi*-or an alien. Sudhamoy always held the belief that he was a Bengali first and a Hindu later. But unfortunately, the system of which he was a part repeatedly reminded him of his minority status. He introspects about his participation in the freedom movement when he was caught in the prison including other Hindus who were treated in most sub-human condition.

Moreover, through the story of Dutta family we get to realise that the minority in Bangladesh suffered not only deprivation but also oppression and subjugation. Hindu students were forced to attend the Islamic classes and to chant prayers of Islam. Sudhamoy's son Suranjan remembered something that had happened many years ago when Nilanjana, Sudhamoy's daughter and Suranjan's sister was teased by some girls of her class. They addressed her as: "Hindu, Hindu . . . Hindus eats cow's head . . . I don't want to be a Hindu anymore. They tease me for being one." (122)

Considering the events followed in the life of Sudhamoy, it is clear that the Hindus were discriminated in their every phase of life. They were in fact denied every social rights such as to vote. They were allowed to vote if and only when they prefer to make the Muslims their masters. It was also gruesome that the biased amendment of the constitution provided secret agency or authority to catch the Hindus either to kill them or forced them to convert themselves into Islam. What this implies is the corrupt system of administration that favours the Islamic communalism.

Like Sudhamoy, his son Suranjan Dutta was an idealist who too refused to accept the religious-based foundation of a nation-state. He was a Master's Degree holder in Physics and very talented but faced the same discriminations on the grounds of being a Hindu. For instance, his Muslim friends who scored quite less marks than him got selected as teachers while in his case, he could not even succeeded in securing the job of a clerk. This discrimination is clearly highlighted in the painful outbursts of Suranjan. He said:

It was a fact that those who said Assalaam Aleikum incessantly and made a great show of respect towards their examiners were the first to abuse them the moment they were out of hearing. Yet, it was these boys who were thought to be well mannered and it was those who passed the interviews

. . . It was because he was a Hindu, but there were no jobs forthcoming with the government. (52-53)

Again when Suranjan fell in love with a Muslim woman, she to avoid the social complications of marrying a Hindu rejected him and then married a Muslim. After this, Suranjan desired to marry Ratna, a Hindu woman who too fearing her future securities married a man from Muslim community. This is followed by the most horrendous event when Suranjan's sister Nilanjana was raped by Muslim fanatics. He shouted:

“Baba, last night I wanted to tell you something. But I do not have the courage to say it. I know you will not keep it. But I am begging you. Leave, let us leave.”

“Where?” Sudhamoy inquired.

“India.”

“India?” (147)

These variety of events occurred in the life of Suranjan made him extremely revengeful which later on led to his act of bringing home a Muslim woman, incidentally a prostitute, whom he raped. Thus it can be said that it is the disastrous consequences of Islamic fundamentalism that compelled Suranjan to believe in the notion of revenge as justice. This can be conceded as the hegemonic implications of the intersection of politics and religion which has penetrating influences both in the personal and public sphere of the individual subject positions.

Moreover, the novelist in this novel reflects in about the honour of Hindus which was not safe, and how abduction and brutal rape of Hindu girls was a common thing in Bangladesh. In such circumstances, most of the Hindus sent their daughters to India for their education and security. Nasrin has mentioned the inhuman torture on women in the text: Manju Rani Seal, a student in the ninth standard . . . was abducted at 8 p.m., on the evening of 4 December 1988 by Abdur Rahim and his goons . . . there is still no trace of Manju Rani . . . In Parkumira village of Tala sub district in Satkhira, Rabindranath Ghosh's young daughter, Chhanda, a third standard student was raped by her schoolteacher . . . In the middle of the night, her schoolteacher abducted her with the help of some young hooligans. They took the terrified little girl to garden nearby and raped her . . . a case was filed but no one was arrested. (48-49)

Thus the novel poses an important question: What is the ‘Lajja’ that Nasrin here is dealing with? Of course, it is not the ‘Lajja’ of Nilanjana who was abducted and then raped, nor of Sudhamoy Dutta who had to sell his ancestral house, nor of Suranjan who decided that Bangladesh was no longer his homeland. But it is the ‘Lajja’ of those who raped Nilanjana; it is the ‘Lajja’ of those who robbed off many helpless Hindus from their homes.

Conclusion:

Thus the novel brings out succinctly the bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and violence of her time. Nasrin here delineates how the communion between religion and politics pervasively shaped the characteristics of her country. She has given a litany of destruction at various stages of her novel *Lajja*. Her account of Dutta family makes us realise about what had happened over years in Bangladesh was nothing less than the destruction of a beautiful culture and heritage built over thousands of years. Moreover, it is due to the continuous hemorrhage of Bengali Hindu population from Bangladesh that forced them to migrate to India leaving their lands and home behind as we witness in this novel.

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