

**NEGOTIATIONS OF THE FRACTURED PSYCHE AND  
METAMORPHOSIS OF THE SOCIO-COMMUNAL IDENTITY:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF TASLIMA NASRIN'S *LAJJA***

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Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* qualifies as an essential study within the collection of the trauma narratives recounting the horrid experiences of displacement and the disillusionment and anxiety that had befallen on the displaced victims. The novel's dynamic contours in portraying the diverse shades of the communal riots that happened in Bangladesh as a fallout to the Babri Masjid Demolition is worth reckoning and the strong characters who have negotiated their socio-communal identities in the face of the political crisis are worthy of appreciation. By doing so, it surpasses the domain of the fictionality of a novel but rather blurs the thin line of fact and fiction to incorporate the historical chronicle into the corpus of the said novel. The dynamicity of the novel and the vibrancy of the narrative voices are attributed to the blurring shades of reported historical events and the portrayal of realistic characters with varied responses. The most interesting part in the novel is the seamless entanglement of the twin threads of fact and fiction in the most articulate manner to metamorphose the idea to re-uniting the opposite poles to arrive at a focal point where it is almost a challenge for the reader to clinically separate the two. Nasrin just taking a week to write down the novel which narrates the experiences of the characters in the socio-historical context is worthy of appreciation. In the 'Preface' to the novel, Taslima Nasrin states the reason of writing the book:

"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 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 ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. ...*Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat." (Nasrin, 1994: ix).

The characterisation adds gravity to the horrid experiences that is contextualized "within a period of thirteen days in the year 1992, when India saw the demolition of the Babri Masjid by the Hindu fundamentalist and Bangladesh witnessed a massive massacre of her Hindu community by the Muslims. Unfortunately *Lajja* opens at this juncture when there was an immense amount of crisis in the lives of the Hindu families living in Bangladesh. During the Bangladeshi War of liberation, the people of Bangladesh, irrespective of the Hindus and the Muslims fought together against the oppressive rule of Pakistan. Independence was the fruit of their united efforts and the view of a new society was an egalitarian one, where narrow non-

secular outlook would not be encouraged. However, things were different than initially conceived and the gap between two communities widened leagues apart ignited by the powerful spark of the Babri Masjid demolition.” (Mukherjee, 2012)

The manner in which the novel opens lays the scope for the readers to directly delve into the psychological underpinnings of the characters amidst the political event emanating outside the geographic and political borders of Bangladesh. The turmoil which dissipated across the borders of different nations is symbolic of the defeat or non-fulfilment of the idea of containment of an individual identity within a geostrategic and geopolitical domain; thereby undermining the very notion of the nations and its borders.

The idea of oneself which we commonly perceive as our identity is not based on a fixity of meaning but an abstract idea which is not an absolute one but constantly shifts its positions based on temporality of time and space. Every individual has a dynamic identity and varied meanings that informs his/her existences vis-a-vis the shifting contours of time and space. The varying perception from which we are viewed at to identify the differences and multiplicities adds up to form an identity of ourselves which essentially defines our blurring shades of social, cultural, economic, gender, political, communal, regional identities. History is the testimony to the fact that identities constantly shift its contour with respect to the relative positioning of the context. The historic partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, witnessed the traumatic experiences of the displaced masses in the event of the politically driven exodus, which epistemologically uprooted the displaced subjects from their identities. They slept in India one night and woke up in Pakistan in the morning. Such political events metamorphosed their locatedness in a certain socio-cultural context, their political identity as citizens of a nation, and the rights and duties associated with the same.

Similar cases were witnessed in Bangladesh post the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid which ignited the communal flares to burn the nation from within. The flare and agitation which was driven by resentments and communally hurt sentiments had left no scope for it to be contained within India, and rather had a cosmopolitan and global appeal which travelled across the borders of your neighbouring nations. Even in Bangladesh, the Muslim radical fundamentalists with vested interests took it as a prospect to wipe out the Hindu community and hence started inflicting violence at the Hindu community which culminated into a situation where a Hindu family was given few choices of seeking refuge in a Muslim household or to board a train to leave Bangladesh or to face/resist/submit to the communal assault. It was not an easy decision to make overnight which is not just taking a new identity altogether but the real crisis is to disassociate from the erstwhile identity that one is born with and then accommodate your identity vis-a-vis a completely new spatio-temporal framework.

Nasin has done a commendable job in attempting to raise the voice against the violence; which is not against a particular community but against the idea of communal harmony and the humanity in general. In the words of Sudhamoy, Nasrin defines riots as, “Riots are not like floods that you can simple 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” (Nasrin, 1994)

“Starting from 1947 and stretching upto 1971, the Bengalis witnessed wave upon wave of bloodshed and trouble, all of which culminated in the Freedom Movement of 1971. An independence that was earned at the cost of three million Bengali lives, proved that religion

could not be the basis of a national identity. Language, culture, and history on the other hand were able to create the foundation on which to build a sense of nationality.” (Nasrin, 1994 )

In such politico-historical context *Lajja* is definitely not just a political novel as it seems apparently but is also a psychological one as it delves deep into the psyche of the characters to portray the fear, trauma and hysteria from within. The plot of the novel generally revolves around four characters of the Dutta family; the protagonist Suranjan Dutta, his father Sudhamoy Dutta, his mother Kironmoyee Dutta, and his sister Nilanjana Dutta. Suranjan who has grown up, got his education from Bangladesh does not want to get dislocated in the face of turmoil as the dislocation will alter or disturb his sense of seamless harmony between his perceived identity of himself and his locatedness in socio-historical context of space and time. In spite millions of Hindus migrating out of Bangladesh to save their lives against the brazen mindless assault of the radical communal fundamentalists, the Dutta family has shown nerve in not being thwarted down in the face of crisis. His father Sudhamoy Dutta thinks that one should live or die in their own motherland rather than abandoning the innate native identity, accept displacement and dislocation and end up being a refugee in some railway platform. Kironmoyee and Nilanjana rather have a varying perspective about the displacement. They feel that one should get along with the situation with a practical outlook rather than an emotional one. Nilanjana is of the view that rather than being sentimental over the nostalgia that have seemingly flooded the mind of Sudhamoy, one needs to address the situation as it is comes as address it with utmost veracity. The situation that they are facing needs either an immediate refuge into some other households who are essentially Muslims or by leaving the country and being part of the exodus. For Nilanjana, being trapped in the quagmire of the nostalgic belongingness to the past is nothing but suicidal in the face to the grave existential crisis that the family is going through. Kironmoyee being the mother tries to negotiate the varying standpoints of the members to arrive at a consensus. Despite the differences the common thread that links their thought is that of resentment of the loss of identity and the hovering fear of being killed.

One can also find a line of argument based on gender perspective, which is the increased level of resentment and sense of insecurity in the women characters, and when the same is read in the backdrop of newspaper reportage of increased violence on women, it opens up the justification of the title- *Lajja*, shame. A critic mentioned, “One of the main thematic orientation of the novel is around the concept of women – their position, their integrity, the moral responsibility of the society towards them, and their victimization at the hand of men who treat women similarly as they treat their lands, reducing them to mere objects and properties.

Nasrin takes the pain to keep a record of numerous newspaper articles, incorporate 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 can 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.” (Mukherjee, 2014)

The novel discussed the fractured psyche of the characters that had to shed off the identity that defined his/her very existence to take on a new one to survive and submit to the existential angst vis-a-vis the dispossession of the individuality. The novel shows the discord between the family and lack of consensus to arrive at a point to choose between heart and mind, and here the narrative celebrates the ambiguity and hybridity of thought which pushes the realms

beyond the domain of normativity, where the individual subjectivity in thought is given an objective corpus in an attempt to draw a trajectory of psychological operations in the characters.

“Although the message that Nasrin wants to convey lies open as a gaping wound, it does not lead us to get a glimpse of a possible way out of the situations. Or, perhaps there is no way out possible as violence operates in a cyclic way, oppressing the other and then getting oppressed as a part of the process. Is submission to fate, to the will of the irrational fury and chaos, the only path left to tread when times like the year 1992 comes for people like Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee, Suranjan, and Maya? Are daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers to be raped, molested, abducted and treated as objects during these times? Nasrin seems to question the limits of liberty that come along in moments of crisis. *Lajja* stands out as a defiant soldier, who has seen the ugly face of mockery, but is resistant to accepting injustice and suppression silently.” (Mukherjee, 2012)

The identities gets reconfigured and reconsidered and the identities get informed based on the temporalities rather than the fixity associated with our identities. The continuous blurring of the characters’ strategic narrative positions, close intermingling of fact and fiction all come together to add vigour to dynamic narrative potency of the novel.

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