

A CRITIQUE OF SECULARISM IN TASLIMA NASREEN'S *LAJJA*

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Abstract

The present paper is a critique of secularism in Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, which is a heartrending narrative of remonstrance, infatuation, principle and maltreatment. It is a yarn of humanity's kick to claim its intrinsic and innate rights in a society torn by the powers of religious fundamentalism and unsighted fanaticism. Taslima senses that socio-culture and political distinctiveness would be obliterated if religious fundamentalism is permitted to have its control over the guiltless Hindus. Through the character of Surajan and Sudhamoy she expresses her innate resentment and antipathy towards a society that has misplaced all human and balanced values and disintegrated into sheer turmoil and bewilderment, a society wherein "fair is foul and foul is fair." She implores the nation to go back over and reevaluate the social strength of the religious deliberations apprehended by the people of Bangladesh from a compassionate viewpoint. The recently independent Bengali state throttled the basic human and democratic rights of its residents. The Hindus were dealt with very heartlessly. They were put down by the Muslims, thrashed and driven out of their habitat. No leniency was done to them. In such a state of affairs, the Hindus are pushed away from the mainstream of public life. Is Taslima an instrument of the conniver against Islam? Is she an agent provocateur? Certainly not. She seems to uphold the ideal of secularism.

Keywords: Critique, secularism, remonstrance, provocateur, heartrending, etc.

Secularism is a "doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state" (Oxford 849). It "is a system of social organization and education which believes that religion has no part to play in the problems and events of everyday life" (Collins 1306). N. Srivastava quotes Donald E. Smith's definition of secularism given in political context as "The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion" (18). Taslima Nasrin (b.1962), a Bangladeshi writer who raised herself to global repute in the last decade of 20th century, throws a flood of light on her secular mental make-up in her earth-breaking novel

entitled *Lajja* (1993). She hoists her voice against the draconian sovereigns of Bangladesh who are ideologically connected with Pakistan in dealing with the Hindus in their country as a slave race. Under the rubric of Islamic fundamentalism the mullahs and the unhinged so-called religious leaders of Bangladesh have been inflicting all sorts of corporeal and psychological torment on the Hindus. John Stuart Mill says, “If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the country opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, then he, if he had the power would be justified in silencing mankind” (142). *Lajja* is a heartrending narrative of remonstrance, infatuation, principle and maltreatment. It is a yarn of humanity’s kick to claim its intrinsic and innate rights in a society torn by the powers of religious fundamentalism and unsighted fanaticism. Taslima senses that socio-culture and political distinctiveness would be obliterated if religious fundamentalism is permitted to have its control over the guiltless Hindus. Written on the morrow of the devastation of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, *Lajja* portrays the vigour of humanism and secularism which are, by the same token, on test in soil where people have Balkansied the land of their birth. The novel conforms unquestionably that for Taslima Nasreen, in the right angle of her history and her culture, humanism in the subcontinent must embark on with a sworn devotion to secularism, a profound loyalty to the benefit of the throng and the upholding of their community and religious rights. The novelist deems that the religious fundamentalists are our enemies, their enemies and the enemies of the whole human race, the world community en bloc. Dedicated to the citizens of the Indian subcontinent, the tome communicates the point... “Let Another Name for Religion be Humanism?”. Is Taslima an instrument of the conniver against Islam? Is she an agent provocateur? No, certainly not. She is a human being championing the cause of humanity in a land where the loathsome Satanic law exists, where all human values are exploded and the structure of humanism is crumbling to bits.

Taslima’s writings are a sardonic note on the superfluous patriarchal values which ruthlessly throttle the rights of women by marginalizing and pushing them to the fringe of life. Though the novel has for its chronicle the tormenting experiences of the Dutta family, it is not as simple as that. It is more than this, just against the family net of the Duttas, Taslima documents the tribulation of a nation, its vicissitudes and dilemmas in the teeth of maniacal and frenzied religious fundamentalism. The novelist has made a meticulous reading of the riots. Actually, the novel seems to be a documentary fiction where a well-concocted plot is lacking. In spite of this demerit, it rouses the dormant human mind to inhuman, merciless nature of the violence, hostility and phobia engendered on the Hindus by the muslim fundamentalists. Nasreen says:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote *Lajja* soon after demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6th December, 1992... it is disgraceful that the Hindus in my country haunted by the Muslims after the Bangladesh should feel ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country... *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat. (IX)

Taslima Nasreen, who is in opposition to the religious fundamentalists, believes a malady not only confined to Bangladesh but also a virus following the human race and posing an intimidation to its society feeling –the feeling of “oneness”. It booms the strength of bullying and intolerance. Nasreen heaves her voice against such vicious forces which must, she believes, be fought at every turn. We must join hands and come together to throw away prejudice of any kind, even at the risk of our life. She herself is not afraid of the religious fundamentalists and thinks that she will never do a U-turn from such a social commitment: “I am convinced that the

only way the fundamentalist force can be stopped is if all of us who are secular and humanistic joint together and fight their malignant influence. I, for one, will not be silenced” (X). Nasreen’s dissent, fervor and code inevitably push her frightening trial. As facts against the colonial mind-set of the ruling class and the ‘mullahs,’ she escalates a gigantic portico of reality, reports, statistic, historical happenings and verified events. The accounts of rape, massacre and chaos are bound together by a insidious trepidation that haunts the country and it is this gargantuan credentials alleging almost a holocaust schedule of our time that makes *Lajja* a rare work of fiction. The quandary of the Hindus, as texted by Taslima, is tear-jerking and spine-chilling:

Almost 50,000 Hindus in no less than, 10,000 families have been finished off completely; mobs set fire to their homes, after looting and plundering everything they could find of any value. At least 500 million takas worth of property has been lost, two people have died and two hundred have been hurt. People don’t have clothes to wear and food to eat. Not a single house remains standing, and many hundreds of shops have been looted. At the Daasherahaat market, not a single Hindu shop has been spared. And the streets are full of homeless people who have to somehow cope with the cold and hunger. (71)

Secularism was supposed to be one of the brawny convictions of the Bengali Muslim throughout the warfare for liberty. But dryly it is these Muslims who, after independence, have defied the beliefs of secularism and given themselves up to all kinds of violence and killing on behalf of religion: “It was truly ironic that those who had joined hands to strengthen the fight for independence were now the same people who were allowing the perpetuation of communalism” (55). The atrocities and sadism committed by the Muslims is rather scary to note. They not only slay the Hindus callously but do not tolerate them to have their haven. Old houses are devastated and when new houses are built in their place, they too are bulldozed. These fogey communalists and fanatics are as cold as reptiles. They do not have a sense of humanity. They go on committing crime after crime because they are completely aware about the fact that the Hindu minorities of the country, frantic as they are, will have to endure wordlessly, and shall be flaccid bystanders to their brutality. In such circumstances, for a Hindu, to show anger and protest is merely an act of pointlessness. They only have to bite and dust. They have no choice but to resign to their wretched predicament:

The Muslims know very well that the Hindus of this country will achieve nothing by showing their anger. That is why they go about plundering without giving it a second thought. Has any Hindu been able to touch a single mosque...were Muslims alone entitled to the right of being angry and offended? (55-56)

Surajan’s wish to be one with the Muslims and to live with them in communal peace has been very skillfully articulated through the image of the cat which knows no communal feeling and which frequents the temple and the mosque, the house of the Hindus as well as the Muslims. Animals know no communal disparities:

Which community did the cat belong to? Was it Hindu? ...it was a black and white cat, and there was softness about its eyes. It seemed to pity him. If it had the ability to pity, the cat must be Muslims, must be a liberal Muslim. They normally looked at Hindus with a touch of pity. The cat got up and left. Perhaps it was going to the muslim kitchen next door... the cat had no communal identity. In fact only human beings had racial and

communal differences and only they had temples and mosques... and he longed to become a cat. (57)

Surajan, a heathen, is a person with a multi-ethnic viewpoint. He has never folded his hands and bowed before any god and goddess. Nor had he ever visited a temple. He was devoid of any parochialism. He had vowed to transport socialism to his state and, in search of this decent ideal, he had come out into the boulevards, delivered speeches, and attended conferences. Not only this, he is a realistic human being, fairly matter-of-fact in his approach to the quandaries of existence. He had not only responded the cause of peasants and labourers but also “lobbied for the socio-economic uplift of the country” (59). As a right social hand, he was all the time after the concerns of others and never had the time to worry for his family or for himself. In spite of his being a correct and earnest aficionado of humanity, he befalls a victim to all brutal forces, mainly sectarian aggression. He is sardonically labeled as a ‘Hindu’ and being followed by the Muslim lads with cries of ‘Catch him, catch him...’ as if he was a pickpocket or a thug. Such is the social environment that Nasreen depicts in *Lajja*. Through the disposition of Surajan and Sudhamoy she expresses her innate resentment and antipathy towards a society that has misplaced all human and balanced values and disintegrated into sheer turmoil and bewilderment, a society wherein “fair is foul and foul is fair.” In spite of all the mortification meted out to them, do the Duttas, Surajan and Sudhamoy run away from the nation as Taslima herself did? No. They are ready to sacrifice their lives on earth of their birth, to which they truthfully belong – Bangladesh. This will prove them martyrs for a righteous cause. But had they run away from their motherland, they would have been hailed as throngs. Sudhamoy observed a fascinating fact that the populace of Hindus had decreased by 1.4 per cent of the total population in 1981. He cogitates, “where had the rest gone? Was leaving the country the only solution? Shouldn’t they have stayed back and fought for their right in their own country?” (68). Sudhamoy criticizes the Hindus who are migrating from the land in whose soil they have played and grown.

A novelist with a bigger shared bearing than that of Rushdie, Taslima has all regards for the liberty of a human being in particular in his competence to articulate his preference, his likes and dislikes in the teeth of a socio-economically and socio-ethically hot milieu. She becomes a breathing evidence of the de-humanizing distortion of the belief that had hunted her to deportation and a life in disguise. But is banishment for Taslima, like lots of the unsurpassed intellects of the Islamic people, an eternal situation of brain? In expressing her choice of expression against the Muslim fundamentalists and mullahs, is Taslima Nasreen promulgating atheism? No, she is merely waking up the masses to their wonderful unawareness of religion? The mullahs have no right to be in opposition to liberty of idea that Taslima records in her work of fiction *Lajja*, because her thoughts will on no account let the society fall to pieces and go down into egocentricity and decadence. In contrast, they will lend a hand in constructing a hale and hearty and anabolic humanity. Her arguments depend not on the fact of the received view, but on its efficacy, its significance to society. Why then the fundamentalists are all avid to stifle her beliefs? Perhaps these opinionated mullahs fondly think that observations are not favorable to social harmony and opulence. Nasreen has every right, particularly as a novelist, to put across her observations and belief on the present-day socio-political scene. She senses that if such circumstances go on happening, it will escort the society into termination. John Stuart Mill believes, “The usefulness of an opinion is itself a matter of opinion: as disputable, as open to discussion, and requiring discussion as much as the opinion itself (148).

What mistake, then, has Taslima made in scripting *Lajja*? In the course of this novel, she implores the nation to go back over and reevaluate the social strength of the religious

deliberations apprehended by the people of Bangladesh from a compassionate viewpoint. The recently independent Bengali state throttled the basic human and democratic rights of its residents. The Hindus were dealt with very heartlessly. They were put down by the Muslims, thrashed and driven out of their habitat. No leniency was done to them. In such a state of affairs, the Hindus are pushed away from the mainstream of public life. Taslima reveals, “The failure to award equal rights, under the cover of a cleverly planned and renamed act, devastated almost twenty million Hindus. They were practically uprooted from their homes and pushed out into the cold...under such provocation the Hindus felt unsafe...the seed of communalism was rooted deep in their soil” (124). Such a cold-blooded and step-motherly conduct towards the Hindus was certainly an abuse of and impertinence to the prerequisites done in the Constitution of Bangladesh, with regard to the fundamental rights.

It is not disadvantageous to the name and fame of the Hindus and a coarse prejudice against them when all the Hindu names related to the places are knowingly altered into Muslim names. In this milieu, Surajan’s remarks on his way to Mymensingh are meaningful: “...he saw that the station called Ramlakshmanpur had been renamed Ahmed Bari. Soon after that he noticed that kali Bazaar had been renamed Fatema Nagar, and Krishnanagar was now called Aolianagar. The whole country was being Islamized” (130-131). Such ethnic inequity is in opposition to the spirit of secularism because it does not show the way to the growth of an undivided attitude towards all religion. In a state like Bangladesh, which had unquestionably been secular, should not give any space to partiality. Religion and politics should have been thrown to the winds but contrary to it, we discover the reverse tendency prevailing in the country, which contravenes the very secular character of the constitution. Hindus in Bangladesh are not on executive post. Even in the security forces they are very rarely seen. Taslima posits, “There is no Hindu in the administration. Since Pakistani times no Hindu has been appointed to the post of secretary. There is only handful of Hindus in the Army, and they never got promoted beyond a point. I don’t suppose there are any Hindus at all in the Air Force and the Navy” (137). Hence Taslima is right when she points out, “Democracy was clearly not strong enough to arrest the spread of communalism. On the other hand, the communal groups had much more strength and working towards the fulfillment of their goals...” (178).

In 1978, the commencement of the constitution of 1972, was changed to ‘Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim’ and in due course of time the word ‘secularism’ was done away with and clause 25 (2) was now read, “The State shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen the fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity”(183). This is how Taslima has pictured the phony character of the politicians who on behalf of religion have damaged the naive Hindus. She scrutinizes, “What is happening in this country is nothing short of communal terrorism. You could even call it torture, oppression and persecution. One group arbitrarily thrashing another”(188). The Hindus are the nastiest butt of communal bloodshed in Bangladesh. In this nation state, much discussion about the practice of secularism and democracy was just a coating of idealism, a fascia. If it was not so, why are the Hindus maltreated as ‘low caste’? Taslima believes that the Hindus are falling so quickly in Bangladesh that a time may come when they clubbed with the Muslims, rather than being regarded as a separate body. Being treated as foreigners on their motherland, the Hindus dare not to touch the Muslims. Such is their alienated predicament, their itinerant way of life.

The novel condemns the system of belief of synthetic religion in which no individual decency exists except what the rectors and holy men set down for mankind’s proper strength. Taslima challenges the subsistence of the rigid chap who breathes in fear of religious counselors

and unenthusiastically acts upon them out of trepidation of shared ostracism. In such a social state of affairs, one's individual issues, qualms, the cerebral longings were repressed and asphyxiated and one's personality was razed by continuous and ceaseless questionings and enquiry. The up-to-the-minute humanism Taslima implores is based on probity and decency. She supports a life of emotional and psychological hygiene as opposed to the dogmatic religiosity of the extremists in Bangladesh who "have no sense of values" and who had wholly shunned "the spirit of the past" (123). In scripting *Lajja*, Taslima makes a constructive authorial intercession in the existing religious feel in Bangladesh, to create an understanding between the two warring groups- the Muslims and the Hindus – of Bangladesh. Thus, we see through the texture of *Lajja* that there are some narrow-minded forces that try to shake and demolish the very foundations of secularism from earth but there are voices like Nasreen who will certainly not let these enemies of humanity succeed.

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