
Feminist Analysis of Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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The conventional perception of gender roles in a socio-cultural setup cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive beings thereby casting women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Nayar 83-85). Therefore, women are expected to fit themselves in this frame, where in every sense they are inferior to men and lose their personal identity. Thus, women remain as mere object or property to men. Taslima Nasrin, on account of her personal experience of childhood sexual abuse and the deteriorating status of women in Bangladesh, contributes considerably to the feminist thought. In most of her writings, Nasrin gives evidences of her feminist leanings as she delineates situations pertaining to subjugation and marginalization of women by men who have patriarchal mindset.

The female characters in *Lajja*: Kironmoyee, Maya, and Shammima Begum are all compelled to behave as per the patriarchal norms, wherein Nasrin aims at highlighting the situation of women belonging to minority community of Hindus in Bangladesh, who had to go through a tough phase during the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. The double marginalization of women on religious grounds on the one hand and their gender identity on the other is another crucial aspect in the novel.

Taslima Nasrin exemplifies the woman who breaches the patriarchal code, and is thus maltreated. To exemplify, "In 1993, a fundamentalist organization called Soldiers of Islam issued fatwa against her. Rather than supporting her, the government sided with the fundamentalists and confiscated her passport, asked her to cease writing and banned her book *Lajja* (*Shame*) in which she depicted atrocities committed by Muslim fundamentalists against Hindus" (Nasrin, "Dissident" 42). *Lajja* deals with several feminist issues. In fact, Nasrin demonstrates the ways how patriarchal mindset challenges individuality and self-respect of women. In one of her interviews, she states that "everything she has written is for the oppressed women of Bangladesh." She further stated that "she has wrung her heart out into her words" (Quigley 24). One of the most important feminist issues that has been dealt with in the novel is the treatment of women at the hands of various patriarchal institutions like family, society and state, headed by a patriarch who either looks down upon women or marginalizes them.

Kironmoyee as a mother is expected to be gentle, polite and understanding. Issues like her husband's infertility, physical ordeals, and extreme hunger, are supposed to be warmly accepted and humbly enacted by her in order to keep the family intact: "Kironmoyee did not eat herself, but kept Maya's share of food for her" (*Lajja* 100). A woman's desires carry no significance when it comes to her family; she is expected to make every sacrifice to keep the pot boiling. Likewise in case of Kironmoyee too "[h]er latest sacrifice involved selling a pair of her gold bangles to Dr. Haripada's wife. After all, gold was not so precious that it could not be sold if the need arose" (*Lajja* 113). Her desire to move to India to her relatives at the perilous hour (on account of the aftermath of Babri Masjid demolition) remained unattended. All she could do was secretly shed tears and behave submissively, which is refferential of the patriarchal setup, where the family is led by a male member, who is supposed to be all powerful and centralized. Such that, the female

member, however, is tyrannized and is expected to behave according to an established patriarchal norm. Furthermore, the assumption that a woman has no identity of her own and is dependent on the men around her, be it her father, brother, husband or son, has been amply exemplified in the novel, Sudhamoye, for instance, praises his wife Kironmoyee and daughter Maya by telling Maya: “You feed me, your mother massages my body, presses my temples....Will I get so much of love and care once I am well?” (*Lajja* 146).

The patriarchal norms do not let women fulfill their aspirations, as for Kironmoyee she had to repress her deep inner cravings which would eventually turn into virtual “deprivation” and thus become way of life. To quote from the text: “When Sudhamoy’s friends came to visit, and they sat around talking, their shadows would sometimes fall on Kironmoyee’s lap, and almost involuntarily she would wish that those shadows were real. . . . Kironmoyee’s physical cravings did not last very long. Her body soon became used to the deprivation” (*Lajja* 114). By and large, it is at the cost of the family that a woman is conditioned to subdue her desires and fit into the socio-cultural framework. Kironmoyee, therefore, spends her life as a “patriarchal woman,” “who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson 85). Thus, Nasrin portrays Kironmoyee as a polite, selfless and self-sacrificing wife/mother who is submissive to the demands of her husband and son, for her main concern is only the well being of her family and her personal choices are a non-issue in the environment she is born and brought up in. She takes her celibacy on account of her husband’s genital mutilation as an existential given and never mentions this handicap as an issue. She also submits to the demands made upon her by the communal atmosphere in Bangladesh as she quietly accepts a new identity with an assumed Muslim name San. At this juncture, it is important to note that both, family and society connive to marginalize women. Kironmoyee invests all her resources, monetary and mental, in keeping her family together. She gives a tough fight to her daughter’s abductors. Despite her reluctance, she cooks beef to make her husband happy and is even willing to accept her son’s Muslim girlfriend Parveen as her daughter-in-law. Her second act of assertion manifests in her refusal to accept the financial help offered by her son after her husband has a paralytic attack, which apparently depicts her as a victim of patriarchy.

Furthermore, in *Lajja*, Nasrin shows how women are doubly jeopardized—on the basis of sex and on the basis of nationality which is identical with religion. In Bangladesh, only Islam is synonymous with humaneness as only Muslims are considered as human beings. They are free to pray in the mosque, do what they want for their religion, wear Burkha, have a beard, wear a skull cap on their head, and to follow the rituals of their religion. Hindus are like their slaves and have to hide their identity more often than not. They cannot observe any religious rituals of their own and cannot practice anything signifying their religion. As an instance, Sudhamoy asked his wife to hide their identity as Hindu because they are scared of Muslims. To quote from the text: “Kiranmoyee had stopped using *sindur* in the parting in her hair and *loha* and *sankha* on her wrist as was expected of every married Hindu woman” (*Lajja* 97). At every step, Kironmoyee had to sacrifice and behave according to the imposed authority of the ruling class in Bangladesh. It highlights male version of the female world which is based on marginalization of women. It is ironical that the so-called People’s Republic of Bangladesh which accords nationality to its people, eventually deprives the same countrymen of the basic fundamental rights due to orthodox religious considerations. The demolition of Babri Masjid in India led to the brutality and torture of Hindu families in Bangladesh, and particularly the women who were not only demeaned but also inhumanly brutalized, tortured and raped. Even the cruel treatment of Hindu men folks

eventually affected the lives of Hindu women more adversely as they were left to fend for themselves in the face of vindictive Muslim fanatics.

A feminist writer denounces treatment of women as objects of lust, physical and psychological violence. Nasrin does the same with tremendous vehemence as she depicts in *Lajja* how women are sexually harassed, abducted and subjected to varied kinds of torture that may even result in their deaths. The novelist demonstrates how the abduction of Hindu girls has been common in Bangladesh and how the hooligans do not have any kind of fear. Whenever they wished, they would abduct a woman and rape her brutally. That was the reason that most of the Hindus sent their daughters to India for their education and security. To quote an instance from the novel:

“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. A case was registered the next day at the Laksam police station by her distraught family. There is no trace of Manju Rani. Her abductors threatened Premanand Seal and his family but the police took no action when informed. Hindu families in the area are now terrified of sending their daughters to school. . . . In Parkumira village of Tala subdistrict in Satkhira, Rabindranath Ghosh’s young daughter, Chhanda, a third standard student. . . . her School teacher 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...no one was arrested.” (*Lajja* 48-49)

Thus, the females as portrayed in the novel are nothing more than objects to be used by the male predators to satiate their lust. In an attempt to retaliate the Babri Masjid demolition in India, women’s bodies are defiled and desecrated as they become extensions of the geo-political entity called India for religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh. *Lajja*, depicts certain men ravishing young Hindu girls for their pleasure and vilifying concerned Hindu families. The abduction of Maya as a child of six illustrates the same. This incident terribly traumatizes the girl and has such a negative effect on the psyche of the girl child that she is not able to behave normally for two months. She would sleep fitfully and would wake up abruptly in the middle of the night. The family is never safe thereafter as they keep receiving threatening through anonymous extortion letters that aimed at kidnapping Maya again. However, when Maya grew up as a young girl of 19, the ominous day of 11th December 1992 came. A group of seven hooligans entered the house of Sudhamoy who had recently suffered paralysis, and began to break the goods of the house. They were all about twenty-one years old. Two of them wore caps, *pajamas* and *Kurtas*. Sudhamoy and Kiranmoye tried their best but they could do nothing against seven hooligans who very quickly took Maya away. Maya was crying for help but nobody came forward to help her because she was a Hindu girl and the abductors were Muslims. She only screamed to her mother for help saying: “‘Ma . . . please help me, Ma . . .’ She fought with her captors as she was dragged away, looking back in pain and terror, hoping against hope that her mother would be able to save her” (*Lajja* 148). This inhuman incident shattered all the hopes and dreams of Sudhamoy’s family. Being communists, the family did not believe in any religion whether Hindu or Muslim and humanity was the only religion for them. As a result of it, they decide to leave for India.

Despite his best efforts, Suranjan could not find Maya. He felt helpless as he could not find any assistance to locate his sister. The legal system also turned a blind eye on the family as they were Hindus. The wails and shrieks of the young girl Maya went in vain as there was none who could come forward and help the family in finding her and taking action against the male predators who abducted her. At this juncture, the cause of Maya’s abduction is worth analyzing as

it is a Muslim nation retaliating against the Babri Masjid demolition via raping vulnerable woman of Hindu origin, who is being perceived as an extension of India, or those who demolished Babri mosque. There have been instances of such sexual/ physical violence against women in the history of the world—the partition of 1947 being one of them as women had to bear the brunt of the political blunder as they were abducted, tortured, raped and killed brutally. In fact, Nasrin too, as a feminist writer condemns violence against women. Out of sheer pain of helplessness, misery and frustration, Suranjan began to drink wine and abuse Muslims. Time and again he was haunted by the pain of losing his innocent sister, Maya. Certain questions like what the abductors must be doing with Maya; whether they may have tied up her legs and then raped her one by one; how she must be tolerating the pain; whether she would be living or dead etc. kept haunting and traumatizing him. He felt a strong desire to avenge the honor of his sister and was filled with anger and hatred for the Muslims. He, like the hooligans, wanted to kill the Muslims and abduct their daughters for taking revenge. It was the eleventh day of riot in Bangladesh, i.e. 16th December, and people were celebrating the victory. Suranjan kept abusing the system and his own incapability to retaliate. He even thought of committing suicide but thought that it would be so cowardly an act. He eventually came up with a remedy as he thought something else. He took a rickshaw and went to Bar council where he met a whore named Shamima, the daughter of Abdul Jalil. For Suranjan, however, Shamima was not a whore but a girl belonging to majority community. The rape was what occupied his mind as a vengeance against the loss of his sister's honor. He only longed to rape one of the Muslim women out of sheer revenge for what they had done to his sister. As he got the opportunity he too behaves brutally like Maya's rapists. To quote from the text:

“He turned off the lights in the room. He threw the girl on the floor and stripped her of all her clothes. Suranjan took quick, deep breaths, as he dug his nails into the girl's flesh. He bit her breasts, one part of his mind understanding that what he was doing was certainly not love. Relentlessly he pulled her hair; bit her on the cheek, neck and breasts. He scratched her waist, her stomach, her buttocks and her thighs with his sharp nails . . . the girl moaned with pain, screaming occasionally, ‘O my God! I am dying of pain. . . .’ Suranjan laughed with savage satisfaction.” (*Lajja* 200-01)

Thus, one may observe how revengefulness virtually annihilates humaneness which affects women most adversely. Suranjan reduces the Muslim girl to mere object of sexual desire with a view to avenge his sister's rape by the Muslims.

When societal institutions like religion, state, family and society that should provide conducive and safe environment for people in general and women in particular irrespective of their religious backgrounds turn against them, the situation becomes rather abysmal. What Suranjan did is as much condemnable from a feminist perspective as Maya's abduction as in both the cases, it is the woman who is demeaned and abused physically as well as psychologically. Whether it is the persecution of the Hindus by Muslims, abduction of Maya or Suranjan's sexual violence with the Muslim girl, all of them fall in the category of inhumanity and violence. Viewing woman as good or bad is another instance of patriarchal mindset. Using words such as 'slut' to reduce her being is a common practice if she has multiple sexual partners but in case of man the term that is used if he has sexual relations with more female partners is 'stud.' Moreover, “good girl” and “bad girl” syndrome subsists even today which reduces women and thus denies them human space: “According to a patriarchal ideology in full force through the 1950s, versions of which are still with us today, ‘bad girls’ violate patriarchal sexual norms in some way. The good girl is rewarded for her behavior by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture” (Tyson 90).

In *Lajja* too, this aspect comes to light as there are women framed as good or bad by the patriarchal setup. One who happily accepts patriarchal norms and adapts in accordance with its demands is labeled as 'good' as in case of Kironmoyee. At every step in the novel, she is portrayed as an ideal wife who serves the family and makes all possible sacrifices to keep the family going. As discussed above, another female character namely Shamima Begum is termed as a 'slut' and looked down upon as she sleeps with several men thereby violating/ transgressing the patriarchal code. She is, in fact, viewed as a bad or fallen girl. Islam mandates purity and virginity as virtues. Likewise in certain folk cultures too obsession with purity/ virginity is romanticized:

"In folk culture, tales, stories, and fables, mostly in the oral tradition, always romanticize the physical purity of the female body. Numerous tales of heroic women killing themselves rather than succumbing to sexual assault are very much a part of Bangladeshi folk culture. Thus, when a girl attains puberty, her parents immediately begin to suffer from a social anxiety about how to save their daughter's purity so that she can be regarded as a marriageable 'good girl.' This can be ensured by marrying daughters off as soon as possible." (Alam 436)

The vindictive attitude of men, where they tend to ravish women on the basis of the latter's religious background, and then reducing them by terming them as 'good' or 'bad' according to their suitability gets reflected in the novel. The society depicted in *Lajja*, is deeply patriarchal. Here, discrimination on the basis of sex or one's gender identity is a norm. To discriminate, it is necessary to first 'otherise' women (as Simon De Beauvoir observes in *The second Sex*). There are innumerable examples of gender discrimination in the novel. For, Nasrin's own life narrative stands as an evidence to prove how woman is discriminated against and how attempts are made to gag her voice by those who cannot see women articulating their thoughts and resisting injustice done to them by those who are stuck with patriarchal mindset. Nasrin powerfully makes her point in one of her interviews challenging fundamentalists with closed mindset:

"They issue fatwas to try to stop people speaking against them? They can kill anyone in the name of God. They want to kill me, they demand my death only for the reason that I am alone, I am afraid, so I must be afraid of them and stop my writing. If I stop my writing, women will lose conscience because the fundamentalists like to oppress women to show their power. So they are not used to seeing that women can protest and are surprised if they do. They want to keep them down. So I think for women, protesting is more dangerous." (Quigley 25)

Thus, it is not easy to protest in a country like Bangladesh simply because it may provoke the ire of the mullahs representing a closed, patriarchal mindset. At one point in time, even Taslima Nasrin was proud of her beautiful country Bangladesh and felt privileged on account of its rich heritage and culture. However, she eventually became victim of the vindictiveness of the Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh who deprived her of nationality by issuing fatwa against her and banished her from her own country simply because she exposed the "Islamic republic of Bangladesh" which Bangladesh actually has become on account of religion-centricity, rather than its pseudo-official counterpart "People's Republic of Bangladesh" (*Lajja* 207) recorded in the national annals as a camouflage. Towards the end of the novel, however, Maya is killed and the Hindu Dutta family eventually decides to move to India—a decision that has the narrative of pain, humiliation, insecurity, fear, and mindless killings embedded in it.

Through the foregoing discussion, an attempt has been made to analyze marginalization of women along with that of the religious minority as depicted in *Lajja*. Evidently a protest novel,

Nasrin situates it in the context of religious fanaticism that reared its ugly head in Bangladesh in the wake of the demolition of Babri Masjid in India in 1992. Nevertheless, the novel also exhibits immense potential to be studied from a feminist perspective. The representation of the female characters, their treatment at the hands of Muslim male fundamentalists as well as Hindu males at the level of family, society or religion/ nation, and the fate they eventually meet are some points of discussion which make the text worth feminist analyses. The feminist thrust of Nasrin in view of the issues pertaining to women, the problems faced by the marginalized Hindus in Bangladesh, and the notions of nation and religion have been intricately woven together in *Lajja*. As nation is a geo-political entity, so is the body of the woman which is marauded, tortured and abused simply because the narrow nationalistic and fanatic mindset views it as an extension of the former thereby causing what has been discussed above as double marginalization of the women. Further, the boundaries of feminism are not limited to the cause of women as they can be extended to the cause of underprivileged ones. Thus, the anti-fundamentalism stance of the novel also envelops anti-patriarchal resistance wherein gender identity is privileged over religion particularly when Nasrin delineates atrocities against women in the same way as religion (Islam) supersedes nationalism when it comes to the abuse of the religious minority (Hindus). Thus, the gender extremism and religious fundamentalism go hand in hand throughout the text subjecting the female characters like Maya to inhuman torture until she dies. Hers is not only the death of a woman but also of that inner assurance of survival on the part of the Hindus in their 'very own' country as Sudhamoy would believe at one point in the text prior to when his daughter breathes her last.

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