

Rise of Sectarianism and Identity Politics in Taslima Nasrin's 'Lajja'.

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Abstract

With publication of *Lajja* (1992); a Bengali novel later translated as *Shame* in English, Taslima Nasrin came directly into limelight. The novel was based on post Babri Masjid communal tensions and resultant riots in Bangladesh. Taslima herself had to face ire of extremist groups in Bangladesh eventually she sought asylum in India and other countries as she received death threats. The Indian Subcontinent along with neighbouring nation states has been symbiotically aligned to sectarian fault lines stoked with bitter experiences of partition. Her stay in India has also not been smooth and was often mired in controversies with political interests at play. Free speech is an integral part of any democracy which needs to be upheld under all circumstances and external pressures. Yet, exile of Nasreen and other artists opens up the larger question that is very much relevant for contemporary times i.e. how do we preserve the space for dissenting voices? This paper seeks to trace the political fragilities of contemporary times which often correspond to fault lines that mires sub continent.

Keywords – Political history, Sectarianism, Identity Politics, Dissent, Free Speech

Introduction

The geo-political landscape of South Asia has underwent radical transformation in the last century, where independence struggles led colonial subjects to decisively rise in deference of 'white oppressors', in unison, to be consequently and acutely fissured into self reflexive determinability of neo-political/sectarian alignments drawn out of centuries of anxiety and prejudices. Thus, the bourgeoisie power structure that formulated in the region opened space for fault lines being solidified as neo-national prejudices to socio-political and fictive imagination of variant nation state. Given, the diversity of the region, voices of dissent also varied as per socio-regional necessities. Propagandists had a daunting task to streamline divergent fragments of identities along communal lines which could bypass other forms of associative identification. This conscious rupture was used as a ploy to generate mass support by inciting age old anxieties and fears.

With partition of India and formation of West and East Pakistan the sectarian propaganda achieved its end but the region was mired by deeper conflict related to ethno-lingual identity that overlapped pan religious-consciousness superimposed in the region. Thus, started the language movement of 1952, in which East Pakistan demanded inclusion of Bengali as official language. Due to political exclusion, ethnic and linguistic discrimination,

as well as economic neglect by the politically dominant western-wing, popular agitation and civil disobedience led to the war of independence in 1971.

After independence, the new state framed a new constitution and declared itself as a secular democratic republic that came into effect in 16th December 1972, on the eve of first anniversary of Independence. Subsequent years saw political turmoil as well as military coups further aggravated by economic crisis, famine, natural disasters and widespread poverty. This angst also led to return of radical elements in political imaginary of the nascent state long betrothed to communal enterprise. The ethno-lingual consciousness formed during freedom struggle soon gave way to factional elements as fringe group activated their control in public and political space.

However, the military junta led by Zia ur Rahman removed secularist principles enshrined in the document through a martial law ordinance in 1977. In 1988, President H.M. Ershad another de facto military ruler, promoted a parliamentary amendment that made Islam the state religion. In 2010, the High Court ruled that Zia's changes under martial law were illegal and void, and upheld the secular principles of the 1972 constitution. But it allowed keeping Islam as the state religion. (Jillani)

Lajja

It was first published in Bengali, 1993. It depicts aftermath of post Babri masjid demolition, during which riots occurred in Bangladesh as well, in which minority community i.e. Hindus were targeted over there for the culpability of supposed Hindu brethren of India. Hindu Fundamentalist show of strength and enactment of violence on age old quite wasted structure drew furore nationally and globally as well, many termed it as a black day of Indian democracy. The ramifications of this notorious action were faced not only by people across north India but also neighbouring countries whose brunt were faced by scattered minority Hindu community spread thinly across South Asia.

Taslina Nasrin traces miserable plight of minority community through Datta family comprising of four members, the father is a doctor, a self proclaimed atheist named Sudhamoy Dutta, his strong willed yet docile wife Kironmoyee, an educated but unemployed son Suranjan and a vivacious girl Maya. The narrative is fast paced although marred with frequent newspaper reports, infiltrating into the story which involves the Dutta household who faces tumultuous upheaval post Babri masjid riots, they become alienated in their own country as neighbours turn hostile and communal riots engulfs the bonhomie of their surroundings and other places in Bangladesh as a result of Muslim reaction in the wake of the demolition of Babri masjid in India. The younger members of the family born well after partition believed that they were integrated in Bangladeshi society. The rude and painful shattering of their belief by communal assault is narrated here with statistical facts incorporated in it representing social and political discrimination against minorities. The protagonist, Suranjan Dutta, is a young, idealistic liberal who refuses to acknowledge the threat that the theocratic tendencies of the government pose to Hindus in Bangladesh. His family has a rich ancestral history in Bangladesh, and his father refuses to flee to India. By the end of the novel, however, his sister Maya is kidnapped by terrorist thugs, and the rest of

the family is forced to leave Bangladesh. Nasrin talks about inhuman nature of riots through the words of Sudhamoy where he says:

“Riots are not like floods that you can simply 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. Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply a perversion of humanity...” (Nasreen165)

Nasrin artistically chooses to culminate the story with the advent of Bangladeshi Independence Day on 16th December. The title ‘Lajja’ represents the national shame of nation-state Bangladesh that failed to protect the minority rights and forgoes the ethno-lingual and cultural bond shared by the native inhabitants along the lines of which it was carved out of the then Pakistan. The basis of assimilating Banglabhashi’s into cultural homogeneity fails drastically as sectarian forces and ideologues wreak havoc among the masses. Bangladesh flirtation with parliamentary form of democracy was inconsistently interrupted by military coups where radical elements gained strength.

Further Nasrin also sees changes in constitutional amendment as direct threat to secular ideals enshrined earlier in the initial constitution –

“ In 1978, the commencement of the constitution of 1972 was changed to ‘Bismillahir Rahmanair Rahim’ ... the 12th clause read as follow: Secularism and freedom of religion....the word ‘Secularism’ was removed and clause 25(2) now read, ‘the state shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity.’” (Nasreen183).

Further, after the 8th Amendment in 1988, the constitution of Bangladesh acquired the following insertion: ‘The State religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in Republic.’ Why were the words ‘may be’ used? Why not ‘shall be’?” (Nasreen181)

Nasrin also pontificates that identities are seldom about self determination, association or even assertion it’s rather played out as per hegemonic dictates’ prevalent in the society, it’s how the dominant ‘other’ views the self, their scrutiny and gaze is psychologically and normatively internalised as one’s being. The social modalities of regulation are heavily influenced by dominant factions that didactically imply and suggest changes in lives of the subject, at times sub-consciously and at times violently. The subtle acceptance of various normative practices of the majority and de-lineation from own milieu of belief and religious practices is seen in Dutta family, especially Sudhamoy who rationalises all of it as small prices to pay, than being up-rooted from one’s own homeland. Nasreen implies here that human will to sustain and survive is greater than all other basic needs, existential realities pushes people to extreme and they either adapt to circumstances or seek an escape route.

As Suranjan in the final breakdown admonishes his Father's idealism which he finally perceives as foolhardiness and states, "However much we call ourselves atheists, however much we call ourselves humanists, those people out there will call us Hindus,...The more we love the people of this country, the more they will isolate us. We cannot trust them, Baba." (Nasreen 213)

The final statement gradually debunks the idea of Bangladeshi nationality that supersedes religion. The protagonist after multiple persecution forcibly has to accept his religious identity that makes him pariah in own native country. His only hope lies in the alien neighbouring country which is considered as safe haven for likes of him. The complete disenchantment follow through with disgruntled sense of up-rootedness, the Dutta family accepts their fate and march forward towards adoptive Hindu home i.e. in an unfamiliar country, in uncertain future.

Lajja is best described as a documentary novel, blatant and unapologetic about its political agenda. Firmly ensconced in the tradition of propaganda literature, it is a stark expose of the persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh by Islamic fundamentalists in reaction to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Thus, while documenting the horrors that swept through Bangladesh for thirteen days following the Ayodhya riots, Nasrin also investigates the formation of fundamentalist allegiances that divide relationships and friends according to religion. It focuses on overall socio-political disillusionment of minority community further aggravated by inactivity of state administration and the judiciary as well. In effect, Lajja is a dark novel, providing no facile solutions, no automatic redemption. Through her unflinching look into the horrors of religious extremism she forces the reader to confront the grim realities that looms in sub-continent.

Although the context revolving around the novels deepens the construct of minority and majority divide its vital to avoid narrow reading of the text. India as a democratic country also faces the same challenges of communal divisions. In fact it's her lapses as a secular nation that triggers events in neighbouring country. With rise of Hindu right and fundamentalist forces does she has a moral stand of protecting minorities and safeguarding at all times? Her neighbours have been theocratic state with flailing parliamentary democracy and flirtation with military dictatorship, has democracy helped in creation of egalitarian society? Is minority better off in this country? Or there have been internal fissures denting the notion of secularism? After independence there have been numerous incidents of communal rifts and riots. Has the Indian state been able to bring justice fairly to the perpetrators of such heinous acts? India, at times comes no better in this area due to delay in serving justice to the riot victims. Moreover state perpetrated violence as in case of Hashimpura massacre or even Godhra riots posits grave question for her as well.

Political Asylum and Freedom of Speech

Ironically, enough even Taslima Nasrin had to go into exile like her characters in the novel by 1994 due to huge public uproar against her and looming threat she faced by fundamentalist factions in Bangladesh and around the globe. She has had an uneasy relation with Indian state as well, where despite seeking asylum and even permanent citizenship, the Government has remained notoriously non-committal to her cause, given her reputation of

tempestuous outbursts and brazenly outspoken nature all successive Government has left the issue of her citizenship hanging. In the recent interview to the newspaper “Hindu” published on 21st March 2015, when asked about fundamentalism she said, “Governments are strengthening fundamentalism, not me. When religious fanatics set a price on my head, instead of taking action against them, the government targeted me. The Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party joined hands with these forces and so did the caretaker government. Even in West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led government expelled me; the Imam Barkati of the Tipu Sultan Mosque, who set a price on my head, was adored by the Marxists. Interestingly, Mamata Banerjee befriended the Imam as soon as she came to power.”

When questioned about allegation regarding her works, critiquing Islam, strengthens Hindu right in India she replied,

“I criticise all religions, including Hinduism. I opposed Hindu Godmen, rituals such as Karva chauth and Shivaratri, and condemned the oppression of Muslims in Gujarat. I donated Rs.10,000 to poet Shankha Ghosh, who was collecting funds for rehabilitating Gujarat riot victims. I objected to the oppression of Hindus in Bangladesh, Jews in Nazi Germany, Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine and Christians in Pakistan. I also wrote in favour of films such as PK, Water and The Last Temptation of Christ. Please don’t call me a Muslim, I am an atheist”. (Bagchi)

Conclusion

“I do not agree with what you have to say, but I’ll defend to death your right to say it”, this often stated quote was once famously said by Voltaire. Freedom of speech and expression is a crucial part of any democracy and a healthy satirical approach helps to deepen such foundation vital for democratic institutions to curb inherent flaws and weakness. Yet, India has a difficult history when it comes to artists and freedoms of expression; lot of things have been banned in India amidst allegation of hurt of one community or other. Works of M.F Hussain, Salman Rushdie, A.K Ramanujan and Wendy Doniger has drawn flake in recent times. The state has failed to protect artistic freedom several times to safeguard parochial views or indulged in vote bank politics. The secular space for free-thinkers has dwindled with radical factions regulating the degree of freedom to be acceptable for masses. Nasreen’s ban from entering Kolkata shows scepticism of state to be seen as an intermediary of particular agenda or propaganda, yet this type of neutrality also strengthens the very factions intolerant to freethinking and liberal outlook.

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