

# Death Does Not Frighten Her

## Taslima's Crusade for Human Rights

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Though I am now an Indian citizen, I originally belonged to Bangladesh. I therefore, have a great interest in the women's movement in that country. In particular, I have been keeping abreast of the controversy over Taslima Nasreen's writings and her latest novel, *Lajja*.

Taslima's writings span a variety of forms—poetry, novels, short stories, and translations of verses. Through her work she gives expression to her anger at the high-handedness of males and the unbearable condition of women in a society where religious fundamentalism is slowly making in-roads. To quote from Taslima's writings, "Like egg, milk and fish, women can be destroyed."

This does not happen to men, she believes, because only women are treated as "things". She speaks out against patriarchal religious traditions also because, in her view, it makes women secondary and dependent on men.

It is not surprising that Taslima has aroused the ire of Islamic fundamentalists time and again. Her latest novel, *Lajja*, the story of a Hindu family 'compelled to flee Bangladesh, has demonstrated that religious bigotry has no borders. The Jammata-e-Islami strongly opposed it and her books were burnt during a book exhibition in Dacca recently. On September 8, 1993 the



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Jammata-e-Islami organised a protest meeting at Sylhet where they called for a ban on her book and her death by hanging. If this was not done, they said, they would organise protest meetings everywhere. A week after, in another meeting they announced a 50,000 taka award for her killing. A death sentence has now been pronounced against Taslima in the form of *afatwa* (decree) by Islamic fundamentalists.

In addition, two cases have recently been filed against Taslima's book, *Nirbachit Kalam* (Selected Columns) on charges that the book has caused social discord between men and women in Bangladesh by its

"dis-torted" interpretation of the Holy Quran, Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM) and the Hadish laws.

Taslima, 31, is a divorcee and lives alone. Though she is a doctor by profession, she has now taken to writing full time. Her writings have earned her considerable acclaim. Two years ago she was awarded the Ananda Puraskar by the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* group.

The threat to her life notwithstanding, Taslima remains undaunted. She says that at no cost will she ask for a pardon or apologise for her writings. Women's groups in India have now joined hands to express their solidarity with Taslima. Five women's organisations—the All India Janwadi Mahila Samithi, the YWCA, the Joint

Women's Programme, the National Federation of Indian Women and the Working Women's Coordination Council—have sent a memorandum to Khaleda Zia, the prime minister of Bangladesh, expressing their concern at Nasreen's plight. They have also met the Bangladesh high commissioner to demonstrate their support for Taslima.

In her darkest hour, Taslima's evocative words haunt her readers: "Learn to live, women! This sky is yours; all its stars are yours. This river, this forest, this mountain—everything is yours... Rise up, women. Begin to move. The entire world is yours."

## Extracts from *Nirbachit Kalam* \*

Translated by J.P. Das

On March 28, the daily newspapers carried an urgent notification of the Bangladesh government. The notification said: "To safeguard the social and religious values of women, all sarees (meant for adult women) manufactured in Bangladesh will have width and length of 1.22 metres (48 inches) and 5.54 metres (6 yards) respectively. All manufacturers have to ensure this size of the sarees within seven days. Violations of this order will be dealt with according to law".

One has to presume that the social and religious values of women were not safe until now and that is why it was felt necessary to safeguard them by increasing the width and length of sarees. What size, what colour saree a woman would wear depends on her personal needs, taste and finances. For the government to go about measuring-tape in hand to measure the size of sarees is not only vulgar, it is also illegal. Manufacturers produce sarees of different sizes depending on market demand. I myself wear a 12 cubit saree, but that is not because of any religious value system; it is for my own convenience. Similarly, for the women from poor families in villages and towns who have to work outside the house, a 12 cubit saree will neither be convenient, nor acceptable. They will feel more comfortable in a 10 cubit saree.

In this poor country, many women cut a saree into three pieces to make three sarees. Some have to dry the wet saree on their body, having no other to wear. Some beg from house to house for rags to cover their shame. For them, is there any difference between 45 inches and 48 inches or between 5 metres and 5.5 metres?

The government has finally brought religion down to the width

and length of sarees. And it is the government which has brought religion to such humiliation, (p. 41)

This is the second time the Muslim political leaders and intellectuals have decreed my death. The first time, it was for having given a statement supporting the freedom of writers in the context of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Now they have said in a national daily that I deserve to be murdered for speaking out against women's purdah.

I can well believe that some day they might kill me, shouting '*Allahu Akbar*'. No, that does not frighten me. Do I not walk on the road when I know that there is possibility of an accident? Do I not use electrical gadgets when I know that there is a chance of getting electrocuted? I do. I have to live in society knowing fully well that society might keep on striking me with its venomous fangs.

I do not know if there are men whose voice has not rusted and whose pen has not learnt the language of compromise. Perhaps they are there, in good number, but it is just that they feel embarrassed to stand by the side of a 'woman', though she be on the side of truth.

Perhaps I will have to expiate for the sin of having been born a woman by allowing myself to be quietly killed, (pp. 80-81)

"A lucky man's wife dies, an unlucky man's cattle die" is an old proverb. It remains as common on the threshold of the twenty-first century. If your wife dies, you can get another wife. But if you lose cattle, you do not get free cattle. For new cattle you have to pay hard cash, whereas a new wife brings some cash. In such a situation, you can neglect your wife,

but you should never neglect your cattle. No wonder, cattle are more valuable than a wife. These days, a Bangladeshi girl is bartered off for six heads of cattle smuggled in from India. Many are shocked at such news. I am merely surprised. I cannot but rejoice at the rare good fortune of getting six heads of cattle in exchange for a single girl. It is welcome news since whoever gets the six head of cattle is making a bigger profit.

Six hefty cattle from India are certainly more attractive, more productive and more valuable than an undersized Bangladeshi girl. I think they are rather getting cheated taking a girl in exchange. Where women are not worth two bits, they have given women honour by giving six heads of cattle in exchange. I express my gratitude to these cattle-runners.

Our gentlemanly society does not pay any price for women. It kills the girl-child in the womb. On the other hand, the smuggler is giving six whole animals in exchange for one—that, too, a poor hapless girl! They will put her in the flesh trade. So what? Are not respectable women being used at the pleasure of respectable men? This is not a new deceit in a different world. Our respectable women are given away free, whereas the outcast woman fetches half a dozen cattle. It would indeed be nice if this could raise the price of women a little, (p. 119)

Taslima Nasreen had died. Yes, she was dead. Now she is living again. Now she can breathe fresh air into her lungs. Now she can smell the greenery; now she can soak in sunshine, rain and moonlight. She has seen how horrible and ugly death is. She has seen how vulgar and repulsive death is. One who has come out of death knows how glorious it is to be alive and how wonderfully happy one is to live.

I am alive. I also tell the half naked woman cooking her rice on a makeshift

fire on the footpath, keep ah've. I tell the anxious woman with a heavily made-up face sitting on the park bench, keep alive. I tell the sad woman arrayed in her fineries in the air-conditioned mansion, keep alive. I tell the innocent bride of the drunkard who returns home late at night, keep alive. Keep alive, woman; woman, live. Live abundantly.

Do not think of them. They are not humans, they are men. They will, on the sly, put poison in your after-noon cup of tea. On a dark night, they will tie a rope around your neck and hang you from the branch of a tree, from the ceiling fan; they will come in a pack and rape you repeatedly; they will stab you on the Kachpur bridge, they will push you under a running train, they will run a sharp blade across your windpipe, they will pour kero-sene on you and set you on fire. They are not humans, they are men.

They have written up their religion sitting in Jerusalem, the Himalayas and the Hera mountains. They have declared this religion sacred. They have tied you up in knots in the name of this sacredness. They have placed you under their feet, they are sending you to the kitchen, they are decking you out, taking you to the bed, and pushing you down from the bed at their sweet will. They are covering you up, and whenever they wish, dis-robing you. They are kicking you and throwing you out. They are not humans, they are men.

Woman, live. Breathe in fresh air. The sky is yours, all its stars yours. These casuarina leaves are yours; this river, this forest yours; these clouds, these waters, these winds yours. This earth, this grass, these flowers, the birds, the sea are all yours. They are nothing to you, these men. They will devour you, tear you to pieces. They will grind you down to dust. They will, for they are not humans, they are men.

When you are lying prone, woman, with man's bite marks all over



your body, even a dog smelling you will feel sad, crows and vultures seeing you will feel remorse. If some-thing bites you again, it would not be a pig or a snake, it would be a man. Stand up, woman. Stand up with your back erect. Walk. This road is yours. The fields are yours. This harvest is yours. Whatever your eyes can see till the end of the horizons are all yours.

I have seen death. I have seen fire. I have seen the snake's fangs. I have seen the dark. I have seen ditches, I have seen snares. I see things and move towards an enriched life. I see and cross railway bridges, the Kachpur bridge, Amtala and I cross the intimi-dating dark. Today I feel proud that I am woman. Because I am woman, I consider each drop of my blood pure. Because I am woman I hold each pore of my body sacred. Because I am woman I believe my nerves to be straight and honest.

If you are a woman, overtake death and live thus. They will tell you about chastity, they will put you on the funeral pyre; they will tell you what womanhood is and how glorious motherhood. Once you fall into such false lessons, such snares, they will kiss you, they will take you for a Dance, they will build walls around

you, put golden fetters on your feet, and they will feed you as they would a pet parrot in a cage. If you are human, tear off the fetters and stand free. Tear off the shackles with your two hands, the hands are yours. Run on your two feet, the feet are yours. See life with your two eyes, the eyes are yours. Laugh aloud, the lips, the eyes, the face are yours. You own the whole of you. You own yourself.

Look, they come to bite you, taste you, tear you: they are another name for Death. They are another name for Savagery and they come drink you up, lick you up, smash you up. They are men. They are not human.

Beware, woman. The men who come to you come basically with passion unbridled and anger uncontrolled. But they world is yours, woman, live in this world the way you would like to. If this world is a river, swim over its length and breadth. If this world is a sky, fly across it end to end. If it is your life, really your own, live it as you will. Take over your own ownership, woman.

I have seen death. I have encountered sin. I have been through mire. Let no other women have to crawl through barbed wires and be torn to bits. Let no woman have to pass through wild forests to reach her destination. Let no woman have to come out bloodied from a man's cave.

I tell the woman suffering from malnutrition, live. I tell the anaemic woman, live. I tell the woman suffering barrenness, the woman suffering birth pangs, live. I tell the rag-picking girl, live; live, woman.

Having shaken off my sorrows, here I stand. Here I am without compromising with vulgarity and sickness. Woman, hold on to beauty; woman, hold on to your dreams, (pp. 103-104)

\* from *Nirbachit Kalam: A collection from Taslima Nasreen's newspaper columns*. Gyankosh Prakashan, 1993, Dhaka.