



Taslima Nasreen

“Go Ahead I Must”

The Many-Faceted Struggle of Taslima Nasreen

Shamsul Islam

Poems of Taslima Nasreen translated from original Bengali by J.P. Das

TASLIMA NASREEN’S crime, for which she had to flee Bangladesh to Sweden, is that she has used essays, poetry and novels as weapons against social injustices. She has been deeply committed to Bangladesh, and has expressed this through her work as a poet, an essayist, a novelist and a doctor. Yet for Taslima, who has always been proud of being a Bengali, her motherland is now out of bounds. The circumstances and mental frame of mind in which she took the decision to flee Bangladesh are best expressed in her own words, written while she was warding off attacks on her by Muslim fundamentalists. “For a number of days now, the city of Sylhet has been on strike demanding my death by hanging. Other cities are also planning to call for strikes to stop work in the courts, offices, schools, colleges and shops. There will be no transactions in banks, no vehicles on the roads, no trains on the tracks. The government will be forced to decide the day and time of my hanging. What other fate do I deserve? I am surprised that my meagre writings have generated so many strikes, that people are calling for my blood, that they want to hang me. I have only just begun to write. If they demand an execution at the very beginning then what will they end with?”

Taslima Nasreen’s concerns are not limited to “women’s issues” and

Taslima Nasreen’s self-determined political, social and religious stance has arguably become almost entirely eclipsed by her notoriety either as a reviled or revered figure of resistance. The propaganda surrounding her novel Lajja — whether praising its courage or condemning it as profane — has for the most part done little to advance her views. Her position has been reduced to “anti-Muslim” and her arguments for equality and liberty have been misapprehended as sweeping indictments of a country she cherishes and a culture which she holds dear. The following article, written by Shamsul Islam, is an attempt to clarify and disseminate Taslima’s actual views, and highlights the humanist thrust of her political critique which transcends national boundaries.

“religious fundamentalism”, but encompass the multiple questions of identity and oppression in many sectors of society. She is extremely worried, for example, about the rigorous attempts being made for the Islamisation of the Bengali language in Bangladesh: “We have to be able to acknowledge openly that our Bengali language is essentially the language of West Bengal [in India]... Like serpents which emerge from their holes only after nightfall, fundamentalists surface in society when they see darkness around. They want to erase Bengali independence, and the Bengali language and culture completely from our social set-up. They are drooling at the prospect of creating another Pakistan. For me, the 19 crore people of Bangladesh constitute ‘Bengali’. I dislike the use of such words as ‘we’ and ‘you’. But today religion has created barriers between all of us. As the sun is a truth, so are

the facts that one day these religious barriers will be destroyed, religion will be exiled, and Bengalis will be able to reclaim their ancestral lands. Green rice fields and mango, blueberry and jackfruit gardens will extend as far as the eyes can see. The sinner and the guilty will not need to bend down at the mosque five times a day anymore. A time will certainly come when each Bengali will hold the other’s hand to walk from Bangaon to Benapole, from Rangpur to Kuchvihar, from Meghalaya to Haluaghat, from Shillong to Tambil. Boats will cross the waters of the Padma to touch the waters of the playful Ganga while the boatmen rend the air with their ‘Bhatiyali’ songs. I live with these dreams.”

Taslima Nasreen thus sees a direct relationship between religious fundamentalists and those desirous of destroying the Bengali identity. It is precisely because of this view that a

On the Edge

*Go ahead I must
though all my folk want me back;
My child pulls me by my sari,
My husband stops me by the door.
Go I must.*

*There is nothing before me,
only a river;
that I'll cross.
I know how to swim,
but they won't allow me
to swim and cross it.*

*There is nothing
beyond the river,
only an open field.
But then I want to touch
the void once.
I'll run against the wind.
I feel like dancing;
I must dance one day,
and then come back.*

*For a long time now,
I have not played
my childhood games.
I will play them one day
shouting to my heart's content,
and then I'll come back.*

*For a long time,
I have not cried
with my head in the lap
of loneliness;
I'll cry myself empty
and then I'll come back.*

*There is nothing before me;
only a river.
And I know how to swim.
Why shouldn't I go?
Go I must.*

Enjoying a Woman

*On the third day
of our acquaintance,
you questioned the way
we should address each other.
After seven days,
you wanted to take me
to Madras, Bangalore,
Kathmandu and Calcutta.*

*On the eighteenth day,
you wanted to touch my fingers.
In two months
you demanded a kiss
and in three months and a half,
my body.*

*What all you'll get
in this beautiful body,
you will also get
in a full-time wife,
in half a dozen office girls
and in cheap harlots.
But then you go about
wearing down you reels,
talking nineteen to the dozen
trying to drag me
close to you, by deception.
All these translate into one thing:
Unless you enjoy a woman
after some tactical moves,
there is no satisfaction
in such enjoyment.*

*And since I know that,
before you can spit on my body,
I spit twice over
into your aberrant mind.*

fatwa has been declared against her. The Muslim fundamentalist organisation which has held the greatest number of rallies against Taslima is known as the Sahaba Sainik Parishad and has its headquarters in Sylhet. Notably, the most notorious Pakistani religious fundamentalist organisation also bears the same name and has its headquarters in Jhang, West Punjab. It is this organisation which condemned the Pakistani Christian humanist poet Nemat Ahmar for insulting the Prophet (which he never did), and beheaded him publicly.

Taslima draws another controversial parallel, between the status of women and that of animals in orthodox Muslim society. She recounts her own experiences: "There used to hang a signboard on the gate of a mosque. Looking from afar I was certain that it prohibited the entry of cows and goats but it wasn't that at all. When one day I took a closer look I read: 'Women are not allowed to enter'.... I was born in a small town along which flows the river Brahmaputra. I spent my beautiful childhood on the river bank. I was around nine or ten years old at the time. While cooking my mother would suddenly discover that there was no ginger, or maybe no salt, and I would have to run to the corner shop. Whenever we wanted to eat *moorhi* (puffed rice) in the morning, tamarind in the afternoon, or peanuts in the evening I would always have to run to the shop. Days passed and one day I was suddenly not allowed to run to the shop anymore. When I wanted to know the reason I was told that I was now a grown-up girl, and grown-up girls do not move out of their homes. Instead, they spend their leisure reading religious books or working around the house As I grew up, standing close to the window or standing on the terrace in the evening were prohibited. Once I happened to touch the holy Koran during my men-

struation. As a result my mother slapped me. She forbid me to touch the holy book in my impure state. My mother had also often told me that dogs are impure. From that day I realised that women were also impure, at least during certain periods."

Much of Taslima's writings and resistance are thus grounded in her own experience. In the anti-Pakistan war of 1971, for instance, her family was at the forefront of the revolution. "After robbing us of our money the Pakistani soldiers left, but not before setting our house on fire, kicking my father with their boots and striking him mercilessly with their rifle butts, shooting my two paternal uncles and leaving them by the roadside, and gouging my brother's right eye.... Of my three maternal uncles involved in the freedom struggle only two returned from the camp after sixteen days of captivity. Of our neighbours who were part of the struggle, some lost their arms while others lost their legs. Still, all relatives and near ones were thrilled to have these people back. However, nobody wanted my aunt to return, as if they would be happier in her absence. For a long time I spoke proudly about my father, my uncles, my brother, our losses, but I could never bring myself to talk about my aunt. Today I no longer care about the prohibitions imposed on me and am stating openly that for sixteen continuous days my aunt was locked up in a dark cell and repeatedly raped by ten lustful pro-Pakistani male animals. Our society is not proud of such aunts.... Each one of us has accepted the damages of war, the gruesome torture inflicted by boots and rifle butts, even the horrors of death. But we have not accepted the accidents called rape. While political leaders were busy screaming about the respect of the raped mothers and sisters, my aunt, to protect herself from further shame

and disrespect, hanged herself from the ceiling fan."

"There is perhaps only one shameless country in the entire world where women are disallowed from climbing buses because the ladies' seats are not free. The waiting women are left only with the dust of the departing buses in their eyes. Untouchables are also not allowed to board buses. They are all thus compelled to walk from Mahakhali to Raibazar, from Gulistan to Mohammadpur, from Kamlapur to Shyamali."

Working as a doctor Taslima has observed her women patients closely and witnessed what they suffer. "This incident took place in the Agrabad area of Chattagram. The afternoon of the second week of January was getting into the evening I heard a horrifying scream." Taslima found that the woman's scream had come from a house belonging to a middle class family. On reaching the spot she found a young woman being cruelly beaten by her husband. The faces of the bystanders expressed clearly that such incidents took place often enough. "Introducing myself briefly I gathered a little information about the incident, which did not satisfy me. I desperately wanted to speak with the woman whose scream had pulled me to the spot but it was not a convenient moment or place. I turned back from the place promising myself to speak with the woman later. The next day I was able to do so What the girl Ratan told me goes like this: when she finished school and was about to go on to college her family got her married off to someone they had chosen. After her marriage her husband wanted to have sex at least five to six times each day but she disliked doing it so often. In the beginning she allowed her body to be used for her husband's satisfaction and bore the torture without a sound.

Autobiography

*I don't believe in God.
I look at nature
with my infatuated eyes,
I walk ahead holding
the hands of progress.
But the crooked ways
of the society
pull me back
holding me by my sleeves.
I wish I could
walk over the entire city
in the middle of the night,
sit down somewhere
all by myself,
and cry.*

*I don't believe in God.
Religionists secretly
divide houses into sects,*

*separate woman from humanity.
I too get divided,
I am deprived
of human rights.
The hard-boiled politician
gets his ovation
talking about class exploitation,
but he cleverly camouflages
words about exploitation of women.
I know all these characters.*

*The world over
religion has spread/its eighteen fingers.
How much can one, alone,
break one's bones
challenging all these?
How can the outspread
nets of inequality
be broken?*

Enquiry Commission Report

*It is learnt from a secret meeting
the armed forces had last night
that the soldiers do not want
to go back to the barracks.
They want to live,
forever, on rations
of butter at four annas a seer,
ghee at three annas a seer,
and oil at two annas a seer.*

*There is a cut
in the Education budget;
the teachers agitate.
There is a cut
in the Health budget;
the doctors agitate.
There is a cut
in the Industry's budget;
workers agitate.*

*There are cuts everywhere
and everywhere there are
processions, meetings, strikes, fasts.
The army has arms;
it has eighty percent of the budget.
In such happiness,
in such forced peace,
he who asks for a share
in the eighty percent
will be shot in the head
and his body thrown in the gutters.*

*From another secret report
it is learnt,
arms have been given to terrorists
with the blessing that
they should grow up
big and strong of body,
be treacherous,
rob banks,
buy cars and houses,
and kill men in Shahid Minar,
in the University
and in processions.*

*From another report of the Enquiry Commission
it is learnt that last week
two thousand patients died
for lack of treatment;
three hundred children died
without food and nourishment;
seven hundred unhappy souls
committed suicide;
five thousand five hundred
innocent people were butchered
and six thousand young girls
sold away their virginity
because of poverty.*

Now she feels considerable pain in her private parts and this compels her to resist her husband's advances. Her resistance invites severe abuses. Her husband uses an old electric wire as a whip and forces her to submit to his will. Still at times she becomes adamant, sobs, cries and screams. I asked, "Don't you ever desire him?"

The girl hid her embarrassed face in her "pallu" and replied,

"Why not? When he speaks to me lovingly then I want him. But I don't like it when he threatens or beats me."

"Why does he beat you?"

"Because I don't respond to his calls."

"I see. Don't you feel angry when he beats you? Don't you want to go away from here?"

"Why should I leave? The 'hadith' (sayings of the Prophet) mentions that women will be beaten up."

"Who told you about it?"

"My husband."

"Your husband has not told you the truth. No 'hadith' mentions that women should be beaten up."

Two days after my meeting with Ratan I prepared to leave the place. I very much wanted to meet her before I left. It was a government holiday and Ratan's husband opened the door when I knocked. He did not seem pleased when he heard my name. I heard raised voices when he went inside. I waited. They finally lowered their voices. A little later Ratan came out and stood before me; her husband followed. Ratan gave me a ghost of a smile. While walking up and down the room her husband said, "Whatever you told Ratan the other day is false. You should not misguide people."

"Misguide?"

"Yes, asking her not to follow the instructions of the 'hadith'."

The man sat down on the sofa and asked me to do the same. Rudely he said to me, "Perhaps you don't read



Women in rural Bangladesh

the 'hadith' or the Koran." Immediately he went inside and came out again with four or five thick books.

"You'll learn everything from these books. Don't misdirect people with your nonsense. From these books you will also learn that you have no hopes for 'Akhirat' (life after death)."

After saying this, he read out from these passages:

○ If your husband calls you for sex, you should immediately appear before him even if you have been cooking.

○ When a wife denies her husband his conjugal rights, especially when he has called her to bed, and he spends the entire night in anger, the angels curse the woman through the night till daybreak.

○ Deny a woman your bed when she has behaved shamefully and beat her up.

Since I could not believe what I had heard, I looked up the books. What Ratan's husband had read out was written clearly. Yet I could not believe that in our civilised age such disrespectful and indecent ideas about women were being circulated in print, that such injustice against women was

socially accepted, and that the respected people of our society obeyed such religious barbarity with complete devotion."

Despite her long history of activism and resistance, however, Taslima became a topic of debate in India only after her Bengali novel *Lajja* was banned by the Bangladesh government, and after it had been printed in large numbers in Bengali, Hindi and English, and widely discussed. *Lajja* is the story of atrocities committed against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh after Hindu fundamentalists demolished the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya on the 6th of December 1992. Taslima explains why she wrote the novel: "In *Lajja* I have written about an educated, progressive family of Bangladesh, a family which becomes a victim of communal terrorism, and about the atheist and rational son of the family who gradually turns "Hindu" - who in the process is destroyed bit by bit. The nation destroys him, the ever-increasing religious fundamentalism destroys him, rising communal feelings destroy him. The Hindus of this country are gradually becoming "Hindus" after

having been human beings all this while because they are losing out to the nation, to religion, and to the system. These people are being defeated by the religious differences hidden in the educational institutions, in places of work, in the fields of business. They have become second-class citizens in this country.”

The Hindu communal elements of India have also used *Lajja* as a weapon, against the Muslims residing in the country. They have tried to spread as much poison and hatred as possible against Muslims, using the novel as a pretext. They printed and distributed choice extracts which suited their partisan ends. The official organ of Hindu communal politics, a weekly magazine, printed *Lajja* in instalments and shamelessly deleted those parts of the novel which held the Hindu communal parties of India responsible for provoking the Muslim fundamentalists of Bangladesh: “An attack on this 16th century structure is not only an attack on the Indian Muslims but also one on the entire community of Hindus. It is in fact an attack on the whole of India, on the welfare of all people, on the powers of reasoning of a community....The BJP inspired kar sevaks have strengthened the fanatical fundamentalists of Bangladesh with their attack on the Babri Masjid. Do the VHP, the BJP and their supporters think that the impact of their frenzied behaviour will remain limited to the geographical boundaries of India? Communal tension has become widespread in India now. Don't the custodians of Hindu self-interest know about the two crore Hindus residing in Bangladesh? In fact, Hindus reside in almost all the West Asian countries today. Haven't Hindu fundamentalists ever thought of the predicament that these Hindus might have to face?” This and other passages in *Lajja* make obvious the

parallels between Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism, and so Hindu fundamentalists deleted them.

Critique of the novel as being anti-Muslim came from a variety of quarters, including certain so-called progressive and secular sections of people in India, who declared the publication and distribution of the novel a conspiracy to spread hatred against the Muslim minority in India. Taslima's reply to this accusation: “Why



shouldn't I speak the truth? If something goes wrong because somebody spoke a truth, the fault lies in the situation and not in the truth spoken. Those who blame the truth are actually supporting, in different ways, those people who create problems in the first place. Those who remain silent for selfish and convenient reasons are actually killing the courage and

power of human beings. Those who shy away from the problems which may arise pointing the truth are in fact cowards and opportunists. These are the very people who create the most problems for the minorities.”

Taslima Nasreen is attempting to chart a precarious territory, being not anti-religion but rather pro-humanism: “I don't believe in being clever. I witnessed the communal outrages in December. *Lajja* is not the fruit of a sudden emotional state of mind. It is the history of our defeat. It is our shame, our remorse. This defeat is extremely agonising for any healthy, intelligent mind. Suranjan, the human being, has turned “Hindu”, Haider, the human being, has turned ‘Muslim’. I repent for both their situations equally. The moment religion becomes more important than a human being, I feel compelled to stand up and counter the situation. *Lajja* is my refutation of a religious conspiracy and a biased communal situation... Those who say that I have given the Sangh Parivar a cause against Muslims are in reality trying to spread confusion among the masses by creating divisions in the existing peaceful communal atmosphere. I sometimes suspect whether these people have at all read my novel because instead of speaking out against the BJP and the Sangh Parivar they aim their accusations against an author whose book targets communalism.”

It is absurd to argue that *Lajja*, a novel written in defence of the Hindus of Bangladesh can promote anti-Muslim sentiment in India, because Taslima's focus is on the problems a minority faces when a society yields to the aggression promoted by religious fundamentalists or majoritarian forces. To try and understand Taslima solely in the context of *Lajja*, therefore, misses the complexity and the scope of the fight she is carrying on.

She has been both praised and condemned for the same inaccurate perception of her being an anti-Muslim, radical feminist. Taslima has made an important issue of the oppressed existence of women (a problem not peculiar to Bangladesh) in male-dominated societies. The distinctive quality of Taslima's fight for women, however, lies in the fact that she does not discriminate between the situations of Hindu or Muslim women or of women belonging to other religions.

Nor does she limit her critique to conservative politicians and religious fundamentalists. She says, "I can give many examples of progressive communists who go blue in the face speaking continuously about women's independence but do not think twice about beating their wives because the curry is not sufficiently salty.... Many people quote Engels and Lenin to show that women's freedom is impossible without a socialistic system of society, that unless our country converts to socialism there is no use of shouting and screaming about independence for women. This is probably why these supporters of women's movements are now resting in peace. Only when socialism knocks on their doors will they rouse themselves. I do not know if such people know that Lenin had said that unless women are given complete independence no proletariat will ever be completely independent either."

All Muslim houses of Bangladesh possess at least one book, the *Maqsoodul Momenin*. Most Muslims believe that the proof of being a Muslim is to undergo *Khatna* (circumci-

sion), and that it is their bounden duty to keep the *Maqsoodul Momenin* at home. On the first page of the *Maqsoodul Momenin*, also known as the *Key to Paradise*, is written: "If you desire Paradise, Happiness, and Peace buy a copy of the *Maqsoodul Momenin* immediately for your wives. If you desire Paradise through devotion to your husbands ask them to buy you a *Maqsoodul Momenin*." This book contains thirty-five instructions for women between pages 343 and 356, with some following examples:

"Never let your husband be dissatisfied with you. Always obey and follow his wishes. If your husband orders you to spend the entire night standing before him with both your hands tied behind your back, and you comply, then God and Rasool will be satisfied with you (Instruction 7).

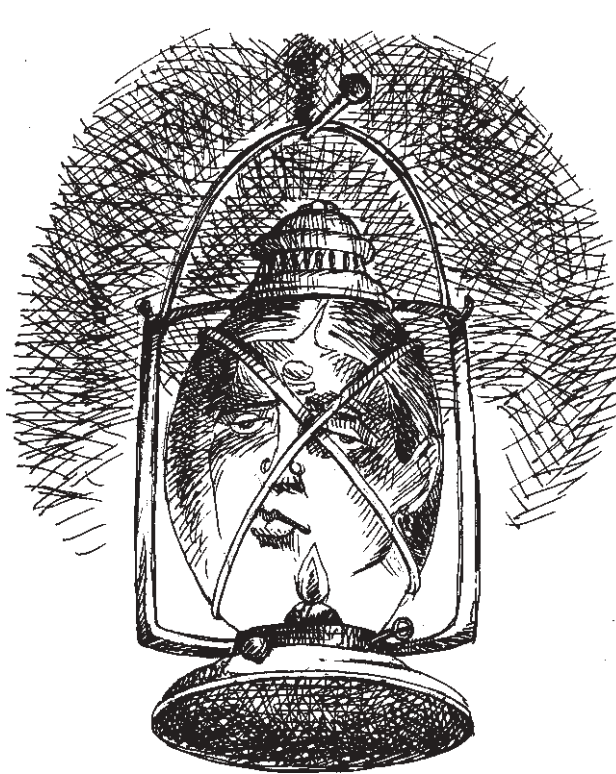
If ever your husband beats you or abuses you verbally because he feels a lack in your efforts, you should nei-

ther be angry with him nor stay away from him. Instead, you should fall down at his feet and plead for his forgiveness in every possible manner (Instruction 19).

It is our duty to accept our fates as decided by the divine writ. Even if a woman's husband is mad, foolish or ignorant, she should consider him as worthy as a star in the firmament. Only when she is ready to live her life with her head bent at his feet will she be assured of the bliss of heaven in her next birth (Instruction 34)."

In this way Muslim males ensure the promise of paradise for their wives with the help of the *Maqsoodul Momenin*, and Muslim wives acquiesce to all the instructions set for them by their men.

In Taslima's view, "women's independence is impossible without their breaking away from the shackles of religion. ... If the structures of religion destroy one person's love for another, then I desire the destruction of all temples, mosques, churches and pagodas. A human being is more important than bricks and stones, love is more important than bricks and stones." The influence of orthodox religion necessarily affects not only how a woman is understood by a male-dominated society, but more insidiously, how she understands herself. "All religions declare that motherhood is what makes a woman's existence meaningful — even women believe so. A woman lives her entire life believing in this falsehood. A woman's uterus is her property, therefore, only she has the right to decide whether she



wants to have a child or not. No one has a right over a woman's womb other than she herself."

Because Taslima has spoken against religious and social conventions she has been forced to flee her motherland. She has been condemned to death as a means of imposing silence on her. The questions which Taslima has raised about our society are not ones which would end with her death, however. She has simply evoked the simmering struggles for power and self-determination which exist in any society which is not free. "At any point of time they can behead me and announce the victory of Islam. What have I done to throw the entire nation into chaos? Have I really committed a crime?"

Is Allah's religion so weak as to be wounded by Taslima's pen, to lose its identity? That religion is a weak force is a fact I know and so do those who make the most noise about it. But has not the time come for us to discard this weak thing? Or, do we still have to carry its burden for thousands of years? When will we all become one? How much more blood do we need to shed to become one? How many more homes will be burnt? How many more hearts?"

Before Taslima's exile, it never occurred to me that because of being a Muslim activist in a country with a Hindu majority, I might suffer the same fate in India. My identity lies in my work as a journalist, in my being a part of the street-theatre movement, in my cultural activities, and in my being a Muslim. In my fights against Hindu communalism, religious fundamentalism, fascist imperialism, and injustice done to women, my Muslim name has never prohibited my involvement. It is true that I have been singled out for injury, accusations, and



threats, but the level of support I have also received from my Hindu allies has been my victory, and encouraged me to continue my work undaunted.

I have also experienced, however, the intense puzzlement of people

Ramblings

*I wish, some day,
to go to the sea shore
and build a house.
At times I wish
I would go
to the mountains.*

*When mists of void
descend from the skies
of lonesome exile,
I wish to drench myself
in cascading waters
and me into
a shivering fever.*

*Even if you do not
want to see me,
come you must;
people do come
to see illness.*

living in rigid religious societies, at my involvement. Two years ago, I went to Lahore for street theatre performances with my group Nishant. The people there found it difficult to grasp that more than half the members of Nishant should be Muslim; that despite being Shamsul Islam I was the team leader; and that Muslims also had a role to play in people's movements in India. One woman even tried to tie an "Imame-Zamin" (a lucky charm) on my arm so that a Muslim like me should not meet an untimely death in a Hindu country. Such experiences have strengthened my faith in my work, my countrymen, and our fights for various causes.

If India ever becomes a Hindu Rashtra, however, my position will be very precarious. My very name may create problems. Fundamentalists in India, declaring themselves the enemies of Islam, are nonetheless desirous of using the same fundamentalist models of prejudice and oppression as are being preached in Bangladesh. These are the warnings that we must understand from what has happened to Taslima Nasreen. If Hindu fundamentalists are to be countered in India, then the fight against fundamentalism in Bangladesh and Pakistan must be strengthened. The conditions which forced Taslima to flee must be prevented from spreading, and must be recognised as products of fundamentalism in general.

References:

1. *Lajja* (Vani Prakashan, New Delhi)
2. *In Favour of the Woman* (Vani Prakashan, New Delhi)
3. *The Slave That I Am* (Courtesy: The Bengali Daily, The Ananda Bazar Patrika)
4. Taslima's Interview with Bahruddin (Courtesy: The Bengali Daily: *Aaj Kaal*) □

Translated from the Hindi by
Chandana Dutta