

**ASSERTION OF A MARGINALISED VOICE: THE CASE OF TASLIMA NASRIN**

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***Abstract:***

*Taslima Nasrin has emerged as one of the most daring writers committed to raise her voice against the ills prevailing in the society so as to awaken the conscience of the society which has fallen into the rut of orthodox religious patriarchal discourse. Women are the biggest sufferers as they are denied rights and are forced to lead the lives of second rate citizens. Through her writing Nasrin challenges the stereotype of a self sacrificing women and in a radical feminist way advocates absolute freedom for women. The article traces how owing to her outspoken style she courted trouble with the religious hardliners and a fatwa was issued against her in Bangladesh. The article highlights how the Nasrin controversy stood for the failure of the dream of secularism in Bangladesh.*

***Key words:*** religious, patriarchal, stereotype, feminist

**INTRODUCTION**

Taslima Nasrin's emergence on the literary scene stirred a violent storm in the otherwise calm waters of South Asian Fiction. For the first time the world encountered a fearless women who did not hesitate to take up the ills prevailing in the society head on. Nasrin's forte is the realistic portrayal of life through which she aims to rouse the conscience of society and rid it from the oppressive menace of religious fundamentalism and patriarchy. Her belief in secularism and equal rights for women is gaining more supporters with each passing day and she has

become a cult figure for the oppressed minorities and the downtrodden women who want to be assimilated in the mainstream discourse. Over the years, Nasrin has established herself as “the voice of humanism” (Kurtz 1998) who has shown “unusual courage...[for] upliftment of her fellow men and women”. (Kurtz 1998). As a lone warrior in the face of adversity she has kept the flag of resistance fluttering high against the oppressive discourses of religious intolerance and patriarchy with the support of liberal minded thinkers. Anandshankar Roy, advised her to , “keep writing about women emancipation ; [as] that’s not against Islam”. (Singh 2012)

## **DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN IDEA**

Till Nasrin’s emergence on the literary scene, Bangladeshi writers were writing in the conventional mode, highlighting self sacrifices of women and glorification of religion. Nasrin, in radical feminist fashion questioned the patriarchal norms and exposed the hidden agenda of religious fundamentalists. It is evident that Nasrin does not write just to provide aesthetic pleasure to the reader. She aims to jolt the people out of the deep slumber that they have fallen into, through internalization of the dominating ideology so as to bring about a positive change in society. The realisation of this aims requires breaking of stereotypes which bind a women writer in a conventional, orthodox Bangladeshi society. Nasrin unhesitatingly does the same and declares herself a ‘fallen women’ because it is from this vantage point that she can render the inhumane working of the orthodox patriarchal setup.

In spite of the many controversies into which Nasrin has been embroiled, her contribution to Bengali society and literature is unparalleled. Shohini Ghosh while commenting on Nasrin’s contribution praises her as a writer of prominence who moved, “away from ornate and euphemistic rhetoric,... deploy[ed] language that is direct, even ruthless” . (Ghosh 2001) Nasrin’s literary contribution has been acknowledged at the international level and she has won the Ananda Award in 1992 which is believed to be one of the preeminent literary awards in Bengali Literature in addition to it she also won “the Natyosabha Award ( Bangladesh 1993), the Kurt Tuchlosky Award( Swedon, 1994) , the Human Rights Prize( France, 1994), the Sakharov Prize( European Community, 1994) and the Edit de Nantes( France, 1994)” (Nasrin 1995).

Nasrin gained immediate international attention in the year 1993 after the publication of her much written about novel *Lajja* was published. It was banned by the then BNP government

but only after it had, “sold over 60,000 copies in Bangladesh and brought the issue of minority oppression in Bangladesh to the forefront of the national debate” (Zafar 2005). Consequently, a fatwa was issued against her by an unknown fundamentalist group *Sahaba Sainik Parishad* on charges of blasphemy. The group put a prize money of 50,000 *takas* on her head and “demanded that Khalida Zia government [should] arrest her and implement the verdict within fifteen days” (Alam 1998). What is noteworthy is that initially Jamaat-e- Islam maintained its distance from the Taslima Nasrin controversy “but in early 1994, the Sirat Majlish, ...the front organization for JI, declared that it would give US\$ 2,500 to anyone who killed Nasrin”. (Alam 1998) Things got further complicated for Nasrin when a reporter, Sujata Sen, from *The Statesman*, reported Nasrin as saying that, “the Quran was written by a human being” and “it should be revised thoroughly” (Qtd in Zaman 1999). Nasrin was quick to give an explanation and clarified that she had meant only Sharia to be revised. She gave the following clarification:

I hold the Koran, the Vedas, and the Bible and all such religious texts determining the lives of their followers as out of place and out of time. We have crossed the social-historical contexts in which these were written and therefore, we should not be guided by their precepts; the question of revising thoroughly or otherwise is irrelevant. We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we want to progress”. (Zaman 1999)

Her justification of her stance instead of clearing the misunderstanding added fuel to fire and fundamentalists constituted a Taslima Nasrin Peshan Committee. The fundamentalist groups were persistent in their demand to prosecute Nasrin and under their mounting pressure, the Bangladesh government laid charges against Nasrin and issued a non bailable warrant. The Western world and human rights organizations came to Nasrin’s rescue and after a lot of negotiations Bangladesh government allowed Nasrin to be exiled to Stockholm, Sweden in 1994. Habiba Zaman while analyzing the entire controversy states, “The Nasrin affair was used by the BNP government to divert public attention from national politics and to create divisions between and among political parties.” (Zaman 1999) It is evident from the way the things were handled that the politicians of subcontinent have inherited the policy of divide and rule from the British. In case of Taslima Nasrin, the same ploy was deployed to maintain the status to further their vested interests.

The Taslima Nasrin controversy stands as a testimony to the failure of the dream of secularism in Bangladesh. It highlights, “the attendant rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a competing ideology” (Zafar 2005) and the resultant intolerance for any secular voice pleading for equal rights. In addition to it, the intertwining of state atrocities along with censorship of literary production resulted in an environment which did not allow artistic genius and liberty to any one. Consequently, Nasrin was portrayed as an individual who a threat to the societal structure and was , “ a traitor to the state and religion, rashtradrohi and dharmadhrohi”. (Murshid 2007) The state of Bangladesh indulged in , “ psychological manipulation of the popular psyche” (Murshid 2007) and started a propaganda against Nasrin wherein extracts from her works were published out of context to prove that she was anti national and anti male.

In the face of growing problems for Nasrin, international community was disturbed over human rights violations in Bangladesh. Professor Paul Kurtz, President International Academy of Humanism in a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed his concerns on the case file against Nasrin, “under Section 295 A of Bangladesh Penal Code for having , ‘ deliberately and maliciously outraged the religious sentiments of a class of citizens”. (Kurtz 1998) He urged the government, “ to ensure respect for freedom of belief guaranteed by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and political Rights”. (Kurtz 1998)

It was owing to the issuance of fatwa and the resultant exile that Taslima Nasrin has often been called a female Salman Rushdie. The comparison is unjust because apart from the huge difference in writing style, unlike Rushdie, Nasrin did not recant. Much more importantly Nasrin, “dared to speak out against oppressiveness of the patriarchal system while living in that society itself, and without State or institutional sympathy” (Barat 2003) Taslima Nasrin herself never liked the comparison and in a true radical feminist fashion states, “ Sometimes I wonder that no one calls him the male Taslima Nasrin”. (Davis 2002)

Nasrin has courted many a controversy and has her detractors and supporters. Her critics like Nabneeta does not consider Nasrin as a feminist and maintains that, “she is a misandrist”. (Nasrin 2013) Taking the argument further Weaver states that, “ She frequently professes to hate men, yet she has always surrounded herself with them”. (Zaman 1999)Nasrin clarifies that she is an “ advocate of humanity, and of equal rights for both men and women” (Zaman 1999). Further,

Nasrin's open discussion about "women's sexuality, desire and what she called the 'freedom of uterus'... which openly challenged the Islamic discourse... constituted the religious affront detrimental to public morality, as per the vocabulary of the state censor" (Zafar 2005). Enayetullah Khan, the editor of *Holiday*, described Nasrin, a person who favoured vulgarity to garner cheap publicity. Continuing in the same vein, Chowdhary and Chowdhary state that, "Nasrin's work comes close to that of some Western feminists like Erica Jong ( *Fear of Flying*) and Naomi Wolfe ( *The Beauty Myth*) both of whom have been attacked in the West as pornographers" ( Qtd in Zaman 1999). Her resolve to talk about women's rights even when it comes to their physical desires has lead Nasrin's critics to label her as an advocate of free sex.

she advocates free sex and open marriage. A woman should be allowed to have as many as four husbands... religion is a great oppressor and should be abolished (Singh 2012)

The entire body of criticism of Nasrin is problematic because no where does Nasrin indulge in propaganda. What she has tried to do is to attract attention towards the failures of Bangladeshi society which has been met with stiff resistance from the moral contractors of society.

If Nasrin has her detractors, she for sure has the support of many who vouchsafe by her commitment to change the society by highlighting its failures. Supporting her writing style, Amitav Ghosh states that, " she has invented a new 'form' suitable for our age—the controversial oral narration". (Nasrin, Selected Columns 2004) It is not that world over Nasrin is the only one raising her voice against atrocities. Dr. Jamie Glazoc, author and managing Editor of *Frontpage* magazine writes

there is a struggle taking place in the soul of Islam at this very moment, and many Muslims who oppose extremism and fanaticism are courageously fighting to bring their religion into the modern world. Individuals such as Canada's Irshad Manji and Italy's Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi, and groups such as Muslims against Sharia and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy, are all part of this effort" ( Qtd Benkin 2012)

While discussing the ban imposed on her books, Shamsur Rehman states that Nasrin should not be persecuted for her writing. Riaz believes that detailed description of female bodies is a ploy to break “the structured silence” (Riaz 1995) prevailing in Bangladeshi society. Siddiqui describes Nasrin “as a relentless campaigner of the cause and compares her with the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam” (Siddiqui 1999). Sympathizers of Nasrin believe that the pain and angst in her writing are unique in the history of Bangladeshi Literature. Her writing though autobiographical yet representative of a large section of women. Meer Nurul Islam is of the view that anger of Nasrin is useful for transformation of society.

Within the bounds of our closed society, darkness reigns so strongly, that there is no fissure to let in light or air. If one cannot make a chink through a needle or a nail on that wall of darkness, one can only use a spade, or an axe, or a hammer and a chisel to bore holes for light (1993)

Ali Riaz aptly sums up the Nasrin issue by stating that she picks up issues which are too ‘explosive by Bangladeshi society’. (Riaz 1995)

Nasrin brought about changes in the conventional writing style by using the first person pronoun to depict the every day trials and tribulations of minorities and women. The use of first person pronoun does not make her writing autobiographical. Through the autobiographical mode she tries to , ‘ show how young girls are maltreated in... society.’ (Nasrin, Selected Columns 2004) Siayeda Khatun, establishes that Nasrin’s use of first person was a refreshing change from the conventional mode of writing. She writes, “ Stylistically, Taslima’s deliberate and bold use of first person narrative against the embarrassing micro practices of Bangladeshi patriarchy sets her apart as a writer” (Khatun 1999). Ali Riaz echoes the same point,

“Nasreen feels comfortable in writing in first person... most of the times she deals with the issues pertaining to oppression, harassment, and the like. To say that ‘I’ has been subjected to harassment is to expose the self. In Bangladeshi society, the common wisdom is to distance oneself from the unpleasant events... by reconstructing and rearticulating her own and other women’s experiences of humiliation, abuse and discrimination...

Nasreen connects her personal identity to the larger context of social relations.” (1995)

Nasrin has explained clearly the reason for her preference of first person narrative to talk about the plight of women. She states,

“ Time and again I come back to my stories ; and I intend to because I am a woman. I speak to every woman through my experience , my awareness and my vision. (Selected Columns 2004)

Nasrin’s writing style is harsh because plain speaking is the need of the hour to bring about the desired change. She became popular because she raised the pertinent issues and treated them honestly. She tried to carve a distinct space for women in the mainstream Bangladeshi discourse by using, “ bold language of self- expression, stringent critique of patriarchy, religion and fundamentalism.” (Zafar 2005)

## CONCLUSION

It becomes apparent that Nasrin has taken upon herself to raise her voice as a marginalized female in a male dominated patriarchal society. Her assertion of a unique identity and a desire to make her opinion heard is a rare phenomenon in an orthodox Bangladesh society. It is because of the work of secularists like Nasrin that there is some semblance of hope for humanism to prevail world over

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