

Portrayal of Women in Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*

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Abstract

Women have been playing multiple roles, in all societies, as mothers, wives and sisters, governed by patriarchal society. In Indian society, the father or eldest male is head of the family. This head is reckoned through the male line and as such become vibrant with domestic issues especially in joint families. The objective of this paper is to explore the portrayal of women in the novel *Lajja* by Taslima Nasreen. The entire novel portrays the sufferings of female characters either because of religious fanaticism or by domestic supremacy of the males.

Introduction

A socio-cultural setup with the conventional perception on gender roles 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 in a way pushed to fit themselves in this frame, where in every sense they are inferior to men and lose their personal characteristics. Thus, women remain as mere object or property to men. Taslima Nasrin, because of her personal experience of childhood sexual abuse and the deteriorating status of women in Bangladesh, contributes significantly to the feminist deliberation. In all her writings, Nasrin gives evidences to feminist leanings as she delineates situations pertaining to subjugation and marginalization of women by men who have patriarchal attitude.

The female characters in the novel *Lajja*: Kironmoyee, Maya, and Shammima Begum are all constrained to conduct themselves as per the patriarchal norms, wherein Nasrin aims at highlighting the situation of women belonging to minority community of Hindus in Bangladesh, who had gone through a traumatic phase during the destruction 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 an additional crucial aspect of this novel.

Taslina 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 more than a few feminist issues. In fact, Nasrin delineated the ways how patriarchal mindset challenges individuality and self-respect of women. In one of her interviews, she states, “everything she has written is for the oppressed women of Bangladesh.” She further stated, “She has wrung her heart out into her words” (Quigley, 24). One of the most important feminist issues that have been dealt 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 considerate. Issues like her husband’s infertility, physical ordeals, and extreme hunger, are supposed to be accepted 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 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 valuable 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 (because of the aftermath of Babri Masjid demolition) remained unattended. All that she could do was secretly shed tears and behave submissively, which is referential of the patriarchal setup, where the family leader is a male, who is all-powerful and centralized. Such that, the female member, however, is tyrannized and is expected to behave according to an established patriarchal norm.

The assumption is that a woman has no identity of her own. She is dependent on the men of her family, be it her father, brother, husband or son, has been adequately exemplified in the novel. Sudhamoyee, 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 fulfil 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).

Mostly, 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 and mother. As also she is submissive to the demands of her husband, son, for her main concern is only the well-being of her family, and her personal choices do not carry any significance. She takes her celibacy because of her husband’s genital mutilation as an existential given and never mentions this handicap as a major issue. She also submits to the demands made upon her by the collective atmosphere in Bangladesh as she quietly accepts a new identity with an assumed Muslim name San. Now, it is important to note that both, family and society conspire to marginalize women. Kironmoyee invests all her resources, monetary and mental, in keeping her family connected with no disputes. She gives a tough fight to her daughter’s abductors. Against her wish, she cooks beef to make her husband pleased and is even willing to accept her son’s Muslim girlfriend Parveen as her daughter-in-law. Her second act of contention 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—based on sex and based on 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 skullcap on their head, and to observe 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 that 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 fellow citizens 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 ultimately affected the lives of Hindu women more adversely as they were left to fend for themselves in the face of vindictive Muslim fanatics.

Any feminist writer would denounce 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 many kinds of torture that may even end with their death. The novelist demonstrates how the abduction of Hindu girls has been common in Bangladesh and how the thugs 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. Her distraught family registered a case the next day at the Laksam police station. 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 sub district 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 political entity called India for religious fundamentalists in Bangladesh. *Lajja*, depicts certain men ravishing young Hindu girls for their pleasure and insulting 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 unidentified 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 level 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. Because of it, they decide to leave for India.

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 extremely bad. The conduct of Suranjan is as much condemnable from a feminist perspective as Maya’s abduction as in both the cases, it is the woman who is demeaned, abused physically and 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 inhumanness and violence. Viewing woman as good or bad is another instance of patriarchal mindset.

In the novel *Lajja* too, this characteristic becomes known, 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 branded as 'good' as in case of Kironmoyee. At every stage in the novel, she is portrayed as an ideal wife who serves the family and makes all possible sacrifices to keep the family going.

Through the abovementioned 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. 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.

Thus, the anti-fundamentalism stance of the novel also encircles anti-patriarchal resistance wherein gender identity is privileged over religion particularly when Nasrin delineates the 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.

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