

The Protagonist as a Fractured Self: A Study of Taslima Nasreen's novel Lajja

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Religion is an ancient set of practices for attainment of self-realization. It is a part and parcel of human life. Religion has always paved way for man's journey to harmony and integrity. In Amar Nath Prasad's view, "Religion is an organizing idea and it is the cohesive force in man's social structure" (Prasad 1437). At times the differences in religious rituals and practices instigate the religious beings to turn into religious fanatics. Due to multiplicities of religious faiths, the South-Asian region is torn apart with the presence and emergence of different identity groups. The Indian subcontinent in particular has been grappling with ethnic perplexity. The events like demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in India have further aggravated this crisis.

As far as the presentation of such religious complexities in present-day literature is concerned, the appearance of writers like Taslima Nasrin have made these anxieties and apprehensions evident and palpable. *Lajja*, the controversial novel by the Bangladeshi writer, has received both critical acclaim and disapprobation throughout the world, and it has established Taslima in the front rank of contemporary fiction writers in South-Asia. The book delineated how religious fundamentalism creates identity-crisis in the life of individuals and society. In particular, the novel records how the demolition of Babri Masjid in India affected the sensitivity and sensibility of the Hindus in Bangladesh shaking the very core of their existence.

Lajja is set in the year 1992 in the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition saga. The stage is set in Bangladesh and the tale revolves around an extremely patriotic Hindu family – the family of Duttas. The fall-out of this incident on minority Hindus of neighbouring Bangladesh has been presented through Dutta family: Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee and their two children – Suranjan and Maya. In the beginning, Suranjan, like his father Sudhamoy, was essentially an idealist, socialist, nationalist and secular human being. From the very childhood, when it came to making

friends, he saw no difference between Hindus and Muslims. Suranjan's classmates abused him by making him feel alien by calling him "Hindu", but he used to call himself a human being first and then a "Bengali". He had never been a conventional Hindu as he had never prayed and had never gone to temples. In fact, he had spent most of his time in espousing the cause of farmers and labourers that slowly but surely alienated him from his family. He was sharper than his fellow students, yet they scored better marks than him. After the incident of Babri Masjid demolition at a far off place, Suranjan who used to be known as an excellent speaker, had to steer clear of the discussions on the issue. He felt very lost and isolated among his acquaintances.

Suranjan started losing his sanity due to incessant encounters with the news of large-scale communal disturbances taking place in the country. At times, he felt voraciously hungry but before he ate something, his hunger collapsed. He felt dizzy all the time, yet was not able to sleep at nights. His pitiable condition was made worse by his sister Maya's abduction by a bunch of criminals. His failure in getting any trace of Maya resulted in a breakdown and he started drinking in the presence of his parents. In a state of inebriation, his mental agony took the shape of his desire to revenge on Muslims. The urge to retaliate was too powerful to be controlled and it went to the extent of feeling an urge to torch a mosque in the proximity:

'... I too want choppers, daggers and pistols in my hands. I want thick rods. Didn't they go and piss on the ruins of a mandir in old Dhaka? I also want to piss on their mosques!'

'God, Suranjan, you are becoming communal.'

'Yes, I am becoming communal, I am becoming communal... So what?' (Nasreen 164)

The annihilation of his original self and adaptation to something what he is not is evident from these dialogues. The point is that Suranjan felt himself a victim of the atrocities by the Muslim society and in this sheer helplessness, he found himself lonely and alien in his own motherland.

The religious fundamentalism proved detrimental not only in terms of material loss, but it also adversely affected the social relationships and the cordiality between Hindus and Muslims. In the riots of 1990, Muslim friends of Dutta family had lended a helping hand to them, the family had stayed at Kamal's house and had a great time there. But this time around, the animosity was more intense and Suranjan realized that ultimately his minority status made him different from his friends. When Belal asks Suranjan, "Why did you break our Babri Masjid," Suranjan wonders whether there was no difference between him and the Indian Hindus. "Was Suranjan to be identified with the Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya? Wasn't he like Belal, Kamal and Haider? Or was his only identity that of a Hindu? . . . Did religion supersede nation and nationality?" (176).

To get rid of his mental agony arising out of disappearance of his sister, Suranjan decided to fulfill his desire to take revenge on Muslims. The follower of Marx, Foucault, Gorky and Dostoevsky, the excellent university student, the communist party activist, the liberal humanist – Suranjan brought home a whore and raped her. It gave him a great satisfaction to prove that Hindus too are capable of raping. Shamsul Alam comments:

It was December 16, Victory Day, commemorating the day in 1971 when the Pakistani Army surrendered and ushered in the creation of the State of Bangladesh. Suranjan used to participate in these celebrations, but now Bangladesh was a foreign land to him and the act of raping a Bangladeshi Muslim woman indicated a rejection of all to which he had belonged. (Alam 254)

Suranjan used to think of himself as a modern man but now he began to feel like a communal person. He faced an identity-crisis as the circumstances wiped out his identity of a secular, socialist Bangladeshi citizen. He was not, however, able to transform himself wholly to even a communal Hindu identity. He could not feel himself a part of the country anymore. His anguish found release in burning down the idealism he had followed whole of his life. He had been hurt by his family, society and above all his country, and today he was burning himself in the flames of an inferiority complex.

In the course of the novel, despite their Bangladeshi origin, Dutta family is made to feel outsider in their own homeland. It is not only the tale of protagonist struggling with his identity-crisis due to religious fanaticism, but it is a valiant effort by the author to delineate the struggle of all those people who suffer in such circumstances and most of whom migrate to the neighbouring countries. As violence and religion compel nationality to go on back foot, it is the collective defeat, a cause of Lajja i.e. shame for human society. Taslima avers:

Lajja is not a product of my sudden emotions, but the story of defeat of all of us. Lajja is everyone's sadness.... Human Suranjan became "Hindu Suranjan", human Haider became "Muslim Haider", to me these two are equally sad. When religion becomes more important than humanity, then I feel responsibility to protest... Lajja is a protest, a protest of Suranjan's decadence, his failures and his rape.

(Alam 256)

The novel describes and proves how religion overpowers both – one's humanity and one's nationality and also as to what could be the disastrous consequences of such an unfortunate condition.

Thus we find that in Lajja the protagonist experiences a serious identity-crisis. His human and national identity is shrunk to only 'religious' or 'communal' identity. He is reduced to being only Hindu. For this Secularist and Marxist, the imposition of a religious identity is unbearably painful.

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