

Humanism in Crisis: Re-Reading Taslima Nasrin's Lajja

Abstract

After Independence with partition, violence remains to be a major political tool for settling disputes in Indian society.. Communal ideologies still exercise their hold on the collective imagination, leading to unprecedented instances of violence. This makes us to feel that the lessons of partition are not over. The proposed paper tries to explore the literary responses to the traumatic experiences of partition violence with special reference to Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*. *Lajja* is the story of the choices that a Hindu family makes when being caught in the orgy of violence erupted after the demolition of Babri masjid in India. *Lajja* doesn't tell us why partition has happened, although it has several references to partition in its plot. But, it is very affirmative in its approach towards the forces that divide and rip up the society. Religious fanaticism, cruelty, the victory of the powerful one over the powerless – all over seen as the aspects of determining psyche of the nation moving towards division in *Lajja*. This in turn brings a real crisis in humanism

Keywords: Partition of India, Communal Violence, Bangladesh, Babri Masjid Demolition Riots, Social Concern, Humanistic Values.

Introduction

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* is a 'documentation'¹ of the violence inflicted upon the Hindus of Bangladesh, who are a minority there, by the Muslims as a reaction to the destruction of Babri Masjid in India. In the novel, Taslima Nasrin narrates the experiences of a Hindu family caught in this violence. The novel also points out and criticizes the failure of the Government to develop the economy and improve the lot of the people. According to Iqbal.A.Ansari, "Taslima's documentation in *Lajja* of the failure of the Government to protect the Hindus in Bangladesh when they were under attack after the demolition the Babri Masjid is commendable. The government of Bangladesh banned it not because of any hurt it caused to religious sentiments, but because of its criticism of the failure of the state" (p.15). Throughout the novel, the author's concern for peace and anguish over violence are remarkable.

A brief look at the History of Bangladesh is essential. Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan, was a part of Pakistan that was formed consequent to the Partition of India in 1947. People of East Pakistan were Bengalis by race and were culturally different from their Western counterparts. The presence of India's territory in between separated East Pakistan from West Pakistan. The Eastern wing constituted 55 percent of the population of Pakistan. However, it was under the complete political and economic dominance of West Pakistan. The major administrative headquarters was located in West Pakistan, and naturally the people of East Pakistan felt marginalized. Various methods were employed for exploiting the Eastern wing for the benefit of the Western wing. The people of East Pakistan were pained to see their overwhelming mandate to Sheikh Mujibur Rehman brutally reversed in March 1971 by Yahya Khan.

When the Pakistan Government decided to make Urdu as the national language in 1971, the call for freedom arose in East Pakistan under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. The military junta of Pakistan found it 'a threat to national integrity and Islam' and launched an offensive against its own civilians of East Pakistan². The problem of the arrival of refugees caused India's intervention to the issue and support for Bangladesh freedom movement. The *Mukti Bahini*³ forces defeated the Pakistan army on 16th December 1971 and Bangladesh was born. In the 1978 amendment to the constitution of Bangladesh, which had enshrined secularism as one of its main principles, Islam was made the state religion. Taslima locates this amendment as the root cause for religious extremism and violence in Bangladesh: "We gained our independence from Pakistan at the cost of three million lives. That sacrifice will be betrayed if we allow ourselves to be ruled by religious extremism" (*Lajja*,ix).

Lajja narrates the experiences of a Hindu family caught in post-



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Babri Masjid demolition violence in Bangladesh. The Duttas — Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee and their two children, Suranjan and Maya — have lived in Bangladesh all their lives. Despite being part of the country's small Hindu community, which is terrorized at every opportunity by Muslim fundamentalists, they refuse to leave their country, as most of their friends and relatives have done. Sudhamoy, an atheist, believes with a naïve mix of optimism and idealism that his motherland will not let him down. His son Suranjan also thinks in the same manner as his father. While the world condemns the demolition of Babri Masjid in India by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists, its fallout is felt most acutely in Bangladesh, where Muslim mobs begin to seek out and attack the Hindus. Maya, who is concerned most about their safety, asks Suranjan to make arrangements to shift the family from that place. Suranjan wondered, even if they moved whether they would be safe. They had been lucky in October 1990, for they were able to escape from the then communal carnage by taking shelter in a Muslim friend's house. Suranjan Dutta, sitting in his home, thinks about the recent riots⁴ in his country:

Suranjan's mind ticked off one by one the places that had been ravaged in the 1990 carnage. Was this what was known as rioting? Was it possible to refer to the events of 1990 as riots? And did the word riot mean one community's victimization of another? No, such a phenomenon could not be dismissed as rioting. What had actually happened was that one community had invaded the sanctity and privacy of another community in a cold-blooded, remorseless way⁽⁶⁾.

Suranjan Dutta tries to understand the past by analyzing the two possible versions of it. He is a liberal humanist and a rational man who always thought beyond the ambits of religion. Therefore, though he remains calm to the queries of Maya about their migration to India, he tries to analyze violence in a rational way. He couldn't understand why he has to take refuge in a Muslim's house? Why should he run away from his own house? Suranjan wondered why the country deprives him of his rights and turns her back to him. He knew that the demolition of the Babri Masjid has struck a savage blow to the religious sentiments of the Muslims. But why should be the Hindus of Bangladesh targeted for that?

Maya's role is crucial in the novel. Her thinking is different from her brother's and father's. Though they hear of atrocities committed on the Hindus throughout the nation, they hardly think of migrating to India. However, from the beginning itself, Maya wants to shun violence. She wants her brother to shift the family elsewhere so that they will not be affected by the riot. Survival becomes Maya's concern:

Only twenty-one, she had not witnessed the division of the country in 1947, nor had she seen the riots of 1950 or 1964. She had not seen the country attain freedom in 1971. [...] all she had really faced was the trauma of the riots of 1990 and this had been enough for her to take the

decision that she did not want to throw away her life⁽¹³⁾.

One predominant point that can be observed here is the repetition of violence. Maya makes all possible efforts to cope with communal hatred. She tries to change herself to be acceptable. She learns Islamic slogans and chants, tries to take shelter in her Muslim friends' home and even adopts a Muslim name for herself. Maya finds nothing wrong in adopting the name. She is unmoved by the agony in her mother's eyes. Author's concern with the question of women's vulnerability — that women can become easy targets to any form of violence — is evident here.

Maya is subjected to violence twice in the novel. First, when she was six years old, she was kidnapped by thugs and returned home after two days. This abduction had a reason: Sudhamoy was having a land dispute with his neighbour, who was a Muslim. The abduction of Maya forces Sudhamoy to sell the land to his neighbour for a cheap rate and withdraw the case. Maya is kidnapped for the second time during the post-Babri Masjid riots. Before kidnapping Maya, the thugs destroy everything that they can find in the house:

Immobilized and silent the terror stricken family watched their house being reduced to a shambles. [...] and then the spell was broken, for one of the thugs grabbed hold of Maya. [...] They wrenched Kironmoyee off her daughter, broke Maya's grip on the bed and left as swiftly as they had come, carrying their prize with them⁽¹⁴⁷⁾.

This time, Maya never comes back. Her abduction, rape and killing bring about a crucial change in Suranjan's mind. That he wasn't at home during her abduction hurts him deeply. The humanist in him makes way for the communalist. So far he used to think in terms of what he has given to his country, now he tries to check whether he has received anything in return. His earlier vision for his country was secular, apolitical and progressive. He used to feel strongly that there should be no Mandir, Masjid, Church or Gurudwaras. They should be destroyed and in their places beautiful gardens should be built. For the people, the place of worships should be hospitals, orphanages, schools and universities. "Let the other name for religion be Humanity" (164). As a contrast, now in his discussions with his friends, the word 'Hindu' becomes central to Suranjan. Earlier he used to make no distinction between his Hindu and Muslim friends. Now he develops a strong attachment to Hindu friends, while he looks down upon Muslim friends with suspicion. This identification of 'us' (Hindus) as against 'they' (Muslims) marks the emergence of communalism in Suranjan's mind. Unable to cope with the trauma of his sister's loss, Suranjan involves himself in immoral activities — he gets drunk in broad daylight in his own room, declares himself to be communal and even abuses his father.

Suranjan's transformation is complete with his attempt to retaliate. He discusses with his friends about burning a mosque, urinating on a mosque and so on to show that the Hindus can retaliate. His sister's abduction, rape and murder strike him at a deeply personal level. As he imagines how Maya

might have suffered at the hands of the abductors, a strong desire for revenge starts to burn him. He decides to rape a Muslim girl. Wandering through the cities, Suranjan reaches Romona. Late at night, he finds a Muslim sex worker. He confirms her to be a Muslim by asking her name (Shamima Begum) and her father's name (Abdul Jalil) twice. After bringing her into his room, being unnoticed by his parents, he assaults her brutally:

To him, she was a girl who belonged to the majority community. He was longing to rape one of them, in return for what they had done to his sister. He turned off the lights in his room. He threw the girl on the floor and stripped her of all her clothes [...] Suranjan laughed with savage satisfaction. He continued to hurt her till he could do no more and then he raped her (200-01).

Actually, Suranjan wanted to throw away the girl out of his house, after raping her. So he orders her to get out of the house immediately. Shamima is neither aware of Maya's abduction, rape and murder nor she thinks Suranjan's brutality as 'revenge'. To her, Suranjan is "the worst, most savage customer she had ever encountered" (201). As she begins to get out of the house, she asks with a pitiful look: "Even if it's ten takas, please give it to me" (202). The look in her eyes somehow softens Suranjan: she is a poor girl who sells her body to feed herself. She is a victim of a callous social system that had ignored whatever talent she has. She could use his money to have a meal. Therefore Suranjan gives her ten takas. Thus, though he wanted to rape a Muslim girl, he is not able to do it in the way he wanted to do. He fails in his mission to take revenge. He is not capable of taking revenge. He doesn't sleep properly that night. All night, he is tortured by the vivid recollections of Shamima's face. And, for Shamima, "there was no difference between sexual intercourse and rape" (203). He also thinks that he should have wiped of the blood that oozed out of his brutality on her, from her cheeks. Lying on his bed, Suranjan finally decides that "if he ever saw her again he would ask her forgiveness" (203). He is a loser, for he had not succeeded in tricking Shamima. Thus, Suranjan's revenge is ironically twisted into an act of sex with a prostitute. That he thinks about the compulsions which might have forced the girl to sell her body and gives her money are an indication that the humanist in him still survives, despite the growth of communalism in his mind.

Violence, as shown in *Lajja*, flares up without notice. When it comes to the question of rioting, the frenzied mob requires only an excuse to do so. At the slightest provocation, the mob begins to rioting. When the T.V channels of Bangladesh report the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India, the frenzied Muslim mob is on the streets condemning the demolition. As the procession passes in front of Suranjan's house, the mob is abusive:

'Let us catch a Hindu or two, eat them in the mornings and evenings too....' Suranjan saw his father shiver. His mother stood with her back to the window that she had just shut. Suranjan

remembered that they had used the same slogan in 1990. Who were they? Ironically, they were boys from the neighbourhood [...] And it was the same people who wanted to make a snack of Suranjan⁽¹⁷⁾.

Shouting slogans of this kind can be seen from many perspectives. First, the slogan shows the cannibal savagery of the mob. Second, it can be seen as an outburst of contempt for the target. Third, the mob wants to provoke the Hindus so that it can later justify its atrocities in the guise of defense. Finally, it reflects the mob's sense of dominance over the Hindus. The truth is that the mob is bloodthirsty. Therefore all the processions that are organized to condemn the demolition of Babri Masjid let all hell loose – killing, looting, rape, burning and doing all kinds of violence.

Violence provides fertile ground for growing opportunistic politics. When Maya is kidnapped, Suranjan seeks his friend Haider's help. Haider, although a close friend of Suranjan, seemed to be unsympathetic towards Suranjan. Suranjan's experience at Haider's house next morning reveals that Haider is a thorough going opportunistic politician: "Suranjan had been to Haider's house. He was not in and Suranjan was told that he had gone to Bhola to survey the damage suffered by Hindus there. Suranjan could see it in his mind's eye: Haider being compassionate towards the victims, Haider making speeches at various places and people complementing him. They would praise him for his compassion and non-communal attitude and the Awami League would be assured of Hindu votes" (167). Opportunistic/vote bank politics has the same ideology. The political parties of Bangladesh instigate violence to acquire votes. Therefore, the places from which the Awami League normally wins are terrorized by the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party). In like fashion, the Awami League destroys BNP strongholds (112). In all instances, it is the common, innocent people who suffer.

The victims of violence, in most of the cases, are totally unaware of the upcoming trouble. In other words, most of the victims of violence are common, ignorant and innocent people, who have neither interest nor an active role in any kind of violent activity. Suranjan's friend Goutam is a victim of this kind. He kept himself busy with his medical course, and had no interest in politics. Moreover, he had no enemies in the locality. But, during the post-Babri Masjid demolition riots, a mob beats him up. He narrates his experience to his friends:

Even when they threw me on the ground and thrashed me, I did not say anything at all. They kept abusing me all the while: "Bloody low caste Hindu...." They called me. "We'll kill you, you bastard. You think you'll get away with breaking our Masjid? We'll see to it that the whole lot of you are chucked out of this country" (74).

Lajja shows us how violence is based upon a binary— identifying 'us' as against 'them'. According to Rajgopal, "As long as this dichotomy in our persecution of violence as applied to 'us' and 'them' persists, violence will continue to be the ultimate

solution for deciding conflicting interests between unequal segments in a largely exploitable society”(6). The persecutors of violence would not like the ‘other’ person to protest. They do not hesitate to use violence in one or other form and see nothing immoral about their deeds. The victims, however, will not be able to cope with the shock of violence. *Lajja* is a manifestation of this violence, the violation of humanity in an absolutely cold-blooded manner.

Suranjan’s father Sudhamoy becomes a victim to violence on many occasions, from a long period. He had seen the Indian subcontinent being divided into India and Pakistan in 1947, followed by an orgy of violence, rape, looting and large scale massacre. In 1952 the movement in Bangladesh for the declaration of Bengali as the national language witnessed a large scale of bloodshed as the Pakistani forces tried to suppress the movement through military action. The Bangladesh freedom movement of 1971 cost 3 million lives. Sudhamoy, a practicing young physician then, joined the freedom movement. But he was captured by the Pakistani troops. They torture him, mutilate his genital organ, make him to eat beef and break his bones — as a result of which he had to suffer from paralysis in his old age. Ever since the declaration of Islam as the state religion, Sudhamoy has noticed a rise in violence. Now he describes and tries to give a definition of it to Kironmoyee:

Riots are not like floods that you can simply be rescued and given some muri to survive temporarily. Nor are they like fires that can be quenched to bring about relief. When a riot is in progress, human beings keep their humanity in check. The worst and the most poisonous aspect of man surfaces during a riot. Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply a perversion of humanity.... (165)

To be able to see violence as a perversion of humanity, instead of religious bigotry, Sudhamoy has been a rational thinker. Unfortunately, as the novel depicts, there is a dearth of such people in Bangladesh. The abduction, rape and the murder of his daughter is too much for Sudhamoy. The psychological degradation of Suranjan also moves him deeply. Was this what he wanted from a country for which he had fought? He had lost his bounteous land, his home in the earlier incidence of violence and now — his daughter Maya. His beliefs and idealistic views — that his country will not let him down and nothing will happen to his family — are shattered into pieces and washed away in the flood of violence. Like Suranjan, Sudhamoy too begins to change.

According to Khushwant Singh, “the root cause of spreading endemic violence is economic: religious, linguistic and ethnic differences provide the excuse and motivation to indulge in it” (Preface to *Riot after Riot*.11). One of the motivations behind the violence depicted in *Lajja* is economic: Before setting fire on the Hindu shops, the mob loots them. Sudhamoy’s analysis of the motive behind violence is worth quoting here:

Those who are causing these riots are

not doing so for the love of any particular religion. Their main aim is to loot and plunder. Do you know why they loot the sweetmeat shops? Simply in order to satisfy their greed for sweets. Likewise, jewellery shops have been broken into because of a love for gold (61).

Temples are destroyed and razed to the ground. The newly created space is used to raise commercial buildings. Whatever may be the objectives behind the attacks, the violence that is involved makes a wide gash in the hearts of the victims. They could rebuild their homes and reorganize their shops. “At least it was possible to rebuild all this by using sand, brick and mortar, but what could they use to join their broken hearts?”(131)

Those who cannot rebuild their lost properties or those who have lost hopes resort to migration. Here migration comes as an offshoot of violence. *Lajja* poignantly notices the increasing phenomenon of migration of Hindus of Bangladesh to India, violence being prime cause behind it:

Ever since India had been divided into two Pakistans and one India, many Hindus had deserted their homes in East Pakistan for India [...] In 1901, 33.1 per cent of the population of East Bengal was Hindu [...] By 1981, Hindus constituted 12.1 percent of the country... (10-11).

The Duttas are also migrating continuously in the novel. Initially they move from Mymensingh, their ancestral place, to Dhaka. Then they move to Tantibazaar, Armanitola and Tikatuli before deciding to migrate to India. There are other alternatives for the Hindus of Bangladesh to survive: Hindu girls marry Muslims and convert to Islam. Men either flee to India or left to be hunted down.

The novel opens with Maya’s proposal for the migration of the family and ends with Sudhamoy’s decision to migrate to India. But the price that is paid for taking that decision is Maya’s life. The Duttas have to go to India without Maya, but with their memories of her, their inability to protect her during the riot. What is surprising is though they hear that the dead body of a girl found under the bridge had the resemblance of Maya, they don’t go to look for. It seems as if Maya is completely away from their mind. As Sudhamoy announces his decision to go to India to his son, a kind of shame sweeps over him (216). Is it the realization that it is too late — for he could have saved Maya had the decision been taken at the beginning — which he is ashamed of? Or is it because of his decision to leave his motherland he held dear for so long? Perhaps, all of these have together brought shame unto him. In her turn, Taslima considers the Bangladesh government’s inability to stop violence and protect the Hindus a shame (*Lajja*).

The violence depicted in *Lajja* is one-sided. It is one-sided in the sense that the victims never retaliate, nor do they make any attempt to do so (except for Suranjan’s paid raping of Shamima). It is not a conflict of the rich and the poor as well. It is an exploitation of the submissive weak by the dominant strong:

Many in the intelligentsia believed that communal riots in Bangladesh were far

fewer than those in India and Pakistan. What they didn't realize was that *in Bangladesh the whole thing was one-sided*. In India, the Muslims retaliated, but in Bangladesh Hindus did not (178-9. Emphasis added).

The destruction of the Babri Masjid gives an excuse to hunt the Hindus in Bangladesh. What we hear in Lajja is rhetoric of violence, a tale of the troubled and the marginalized, an account of atrocities committed in the name of religion. The state fails to exercise its authority when the people go insane. The media, the intelligentsia and political parties watch the turmoil as if they have nothing to do with this violation of humanity.

In the novel, violence is also presented as a recurring phenomenon. "Starting from 1947 and stretching up to 1971, the Bengalis witnessed wave upon wave of bloodshed and trouble, all of which were culminated in the freedom movement of 1971" (8). The Bangladesh freedom movement had cost three million lives. After independence, Bangladesh gradually entered into the phase of communalism. From 1978 up to the current wave of post-Babri Masjid demolition of riots, there were series of riots. The economy of the country is at a snail's pace and the government is neither interested to develop it nor to protect the rights of the minorities. While the per capita income of the country is on the lowest ebb, instances of violence soar up.

India is seen as a place of hope from the victims' point of view in the novel. Many relatives and friends of the Duttas go to India. In fact the migration to India, like violence, is a continuous process. The migration of Hindus to India from Bangladesh began with the Partition riots in 1947 and continues with the decision of the Duttas to go to India in 1992. The image of India as a peaceful, secular and better place to live in than Bangladesh can also reflect the author's own choice to settle in India⁵. The novel exposes the mindless bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and watches with awe, the insanity of violence. Violence is depicted in all its dark colours — looting, arson, killing and violence against women — in the novel. Yet the feeble hope of the victims that the dawn of peace will come as an antidote to violence is heartening — "Let another name for Religion be Humanism".

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Notes

1. Subrahmanya Sharma.V, Assistant Professor of English, University College of Arts, Tumkur, Karnataka 572103,
2. I am using the term used by the author in the Preface to the novel. Lajja was published in 1993 and sold over 600000 copies before it was banned by the Bangladesh government in the same year. It is the defeat of the state to uphold the secular democratic values and maintain peace that the author considers a shame: "The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of us all, and we are all to blame. Lajja is a documentation of our collective defeat" (Preface, p.ix. Italics are mine).
3. By the end of April 1971, the Pakistan army had „cleansed“ the urban areas of „rebels“ throughout the whole of the eastern wing. The human cost had been high. Many of the atrocities the army committed on its own people population were the unspeakable outpouring of racial hatred and stereotyping.— Ian Talbot .p.208
4. Mukti Bahini is the name given to the Liberation Forces of Bangladesh which included guerillas trained by the Indian Army and the soldiers of the Indian Army as well. The use of tanks, automatic weapons, speed boats and planes by the Mukti Bahini forces confirmed India's role in the liberation war. Ibid. pp.214-5.
5. In the novel Taslima Nasrin gives statistical data regarding the violence inflicted on the Hindus in Bangladesh- the number of women being tortured, the number of shops and temples destroyed etc. In the Preface she says that though the novel is a work of imagination, she has "included in the text numerous incidents, actual historical events, facts and statistics". (p.x)— a claim that can blur the gap between history and fiction.
6. Taslima Nasrin left Bangladesh in 1994 and lived in Europe for about 10 years. After a decade, when she was granted a visa, she visited India, her second home. When she was granted residence permit, she moved here. But only after 3 years of living in West Bengal, because some Muslim extremists wanted her to leave India, she had to leave India. Within hours she was forced by law enforcing agencies to move to Jaipur. She was then thrown out of the state of Maharashtra towards Delhi, where she was put in an

undisclosed safe house under the supervision of the central government. The cabinet ministers of the central government allegedly pressured her to make a public apology. The Foreign Minister commented that India would continue to provide her „shelter“ as a guest but she would have to show restraint. Pranab Mukherjee told the Indian Parliament on 28th November 2007, that „It is also expected that the guests will refrain from activities and expressions that may hurt the sentiments of our people“. She went to Paris and came back to India in June 2009. In her blog Taslima writes the reasons why she has chosen India as her second home: “ As a writer, I need India for many reasons. In Europe and the US, I may find asylum but I will always stand apart as an outsider, either because of my colour or culture. Here in India, no matter which city or state I travel in, I don't ever feel like a foreigner, I merge easily into the crowd. I need that melting down in order to be able to write. India is a vast country. From the beginning of history, innumerable people ended up in this cul de sac. Some have visited and then left, others have stayed, sending their roots firmly down. India has always warmly embraced every stranger, people of different colours, languages, religions, ethnicity and opinions. The door was ever open to an outsider. With hundreds of languages and cultures, India is unique in its generosity to the stranger. So why is there no place for me? All I want is to be able to live here. I might breathe in a distant land somewhere, but my heart is in Bengal“. Now that she has formally requested the government to grant her permanent citizenship confirms her trust in India's secular values. See her official website — <http://taslimanasrin.com//.html>.