

Study of Various Personality Traits of Individuals as Reflected in Talima Nasreen's *Lajja*: Study of Mankind with Different Disguise

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ABSTRACT

Taslima Nasrin is hailed as one of the most powerful voices in the literary canon of Bangladeshi English Literature and her epoch making work *Lajja* is rightly regarded as a perfect example of 'gendered subaltern narrative'. In the novel, she presents a cross-section of Bangladeshi society after twenty years of its separation from Indian sub-continent, caught up in the trauma of post colonial nation building and identity consciousness. The complex sense of Bangladeshi nationalism, which is inextricably linked to its religious identity, is the pivot on which *Lajja* turns. The immediate backdrop of the novel is the demolition of Babri Masjid, the sixteenth century religious edifice situated in India that inflicted a series of barbaric tyranny in Bangladesh against the minority Hindus who were soon labelled as the "Other". This paper is revolving around different aspects of individual behaviour as influenced by their personality traits, reflected in this wonderful novel *Lajja*.

1. Introduction

Lajja is the magnum opus of Taslima Nasrin in which she addresses a large spectrum of threats faced by Bangladeshi nationalism today. The bond formed between national identity and religious identity has led to the formulation of the postulate that anyone who is not a Muslim is an enemy, outsider and non-Bangladeshi. This has led to the rapid exclusion of the minority Hindu population from the cultural scene, striking them off from enjoying any privilege as a Bangladeshi citizen. The shock of being excluded from an ethnical group on the basis of religion is devastating for the Hindu population as portrayed by the Dutta family in *Lajja*.

2. Problematic Traits of Individuals

The concept of identity is main fold, hard to define and evades many ordinary methods of measurement. The twentieth century leading scholar of Identity, Erik Erikson, termed the concept of "all-pervasive" but also "vague" and "unfathomable" identity. The infuriating inescapability of identity is well demonstrated in the work of the distinguished social theorist Leon Wieseltier. In 1996, he published the book, *Against Identity*, denouncing and ridiculing the fascination of individuals with that concept. In the book *Who are we?* written by Samuel P. Huntington, identity is defined as an individual's or group's sense of self. It is a product of self-consciousness that I or We possess distinct qualities as an entity that differentiates me from you and us from them. Identity is thus the images of individuality and distinctiveness held and projected by a person and formed through relations with significant 'others'.

Identities are important because they shape the behaviour of people. Both individual and group have identities. Individuals, however, modify their identities in groups. As social identity theory has shown, the need for identity leads them even to seek identity in an arbitrarily and randomly constructed group. An individual may be a member of many groups and hence is able to shift identities. These multiple identities may be descriptive, territorial, economic, cultural, political, social and national. Identities are, overwhelmingly constructed.

People make their identity, under varying degrees of pressure, inducements and freedom. In an often-quoted phrase, Benedict Anderson described nations as "imagined communities" (38). Identities are imagined selves; they are what we think we are and what we want to be. Apart from ancestry, gender (and people occasionally change that) and age, people are relatively free to define their identity as they wish, although they may not be able to implement those identities in practice. They may inherit their ethnicity and race but these can be redefined or rejected, and the meaning and applicability of the term "Identity Politics" comes into play.

The term identity politics has been used in political and academic discourses since the 1970s. Identity becomes problematic when people are unable to achieve an identity because they are not welcomed by those who already have that identity. The crucial post-Cold War issue for East European peoples was whether the West would accept their identification of themselves as a part of the West. Westerners have accepted Poles, Czechs and Hungarians. They are less likely to do that with some other Eastern European peoples who also want a Western identity. They have been quite reluctant to do so with the Turks, whose bureaucratic elites desperately want Turkey to be Western.

Suranjan finds his identity in flux. His attempt to define his identity doesn't take a perfect shape. He is insensitive to the plight of his family and their fears. He couldn't find a reason why he should fear his friends and others just because they belong to a different religious community. Suranjan of *Lajja* in a rebellious mood argues:

"Why should he flee his home simply because his name was Suranjan Dutta? Was it necessary for his family - Sudhamoy, his father, Kiranmoyee, his mother and Nilanjana, his sister - to run away like fugitives just because of their names? Would they have to take refuge in the homes of Kamal, Belal or Haider just as they had done two years back". (1)

Suranjan is an atheist. He has no emotional contacts with any temple or the idols installed in them, but the systematic and selective destruction of Hindu places of worship and the killing of Hindus forces him to re-interpret reality. He finds it

flabbergasting when he is held responsible for the demolition of a mosque in another country he has never visited. His bitterness increases as he witnesses the unmistakable polarization of the country into the binaries of us and them. Finally, he understands that the cost of staying on in his home country is too much to bear. He has to become not only a Hindu but a militant one to confront the militants of the other side. Suranjan's predicament is not different from that of any other intelligent and progressive youngster anywhere. What hurts him most is not the religious persecution but the forced identity thrust upon him by an unrelenting system and his total inability to offer resistance. He prefers to migrate to a liberal and tolerant India which does not force him to practise the religion he is born into. The binary logic of his home country has no such offers to make.

Nasrin narrates an incident to show how Suranjan gets to understand his forced identity as a Hindu. As a child, he had known that he was a Hindu, but hadn't quite known what it meant. While Suranjan was at his lower primary class, he had a massive argument with a Muslim boy named Khaled. When this argument reached its peak, the boys had abused each other with the worst obscenities they could sum up. It was then the Muslim boy angrily referred to him as a Hindu. Suranjan was sure that the word Hindu was derogatory as swine or dog. It was only after he had grown up somewhat that he learnt that Hindu was a noun describing the religious community to which he belonged. When he was old enough to make up his mind on the matter he declared that he was above all, first, a human being and then Bengali by race. No religion had created this race and he wanted his people to know no communal barriers and live together in perfect harmony.

The identity of family of Duttas as Hindus is highlighted by the Bangladesh society. Narrower and broader identities in a single hierarchy may either reinforce or conflict with each other.

But as we see in *Lajja*, religious identity becomes the sole, distinguishing people into various social groups and the identity over powers all other identities including the national identity, which leads to the downfall of Dutta family. Despite the acceptance of plurality, people try to search for commonality in a manner that it distinguishes them from various others and also co-relates the ones who are 'similarly distinguished'. Thus these identities celebrate distinction as well as homogeneity. Identity construction, therefore, uses the twin principle of exclusion as well as inclusion. Last century has witnessed intensified efforts at consolidation of both individual as well as categorical identities. Taslima Nasrin's life and writings reflect this trend conclusively.

3. The Gender Divide

Subordination of women is a visible feature of most stages of recorded history, and is prevalent in large parts of the world. The extent and form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social, economic and cultural environment in which women have been placed. Through her book, Taslima Nasrin beautifully portrays the double disability imposed on women of minority communities. She has sharply exposed the differential impact of social exigencies on men and women. Minu Mehta, in her study *Looking through Identity Lens: A Cross Cultural Perspective with Special Reference to Taslima Nasrin's Lajja* remarks: "The gender identity is so powerful and overriding that it canopies and hides everything else" (1).

Kiranmoyee, wife of Sukumar Dutta, suffers as much as any other women during the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. In addition, she has to endure the ignominy of deleting her Hindu identity as the family goes on exile to escape from Pakistani persecutors. Maya, Sudhamoy's daughter, however pays the highest price of being a minority woman. Her double abduction, as a child and as a young woman of twenty one is testimony to this fact. Nasrin's device of Maya's ambiguous fate makes her vulnerability all the more fragile. She suffers more than the Muslim prostitute her brother rapes. That women suffer in times of crisis is a foregone conclusion.

Kiranmoyee, the wife of Sudhamoy Dutta, is a quintessential, sacrificing wife-mother who has never learnt to assert herself. Her primary concern is the well being of her family and she is willing to sacrifice anything to keep her family together. She keenly observes everyone at home but she has no voice to raise an argument. She is willing to accept her son's girl friend though she is a Muslim. She also happily cooks meat in her house when she is asked to do it by her husband. During the time of violence, Kiranmoyee is forced to take up Muslim pseudo names. Kiranmoyee had stopped using sindur in the parting of her hair and loha and sankha on her wrists as was expected of every married Hindu women. But she found it quite difficult to give up her bridal bangles and vermilion.

Maya shows the impact of gender disability in a more pronounced way. She pays the highest price for being a minority woman. Her double abduction, as a child and as a young woman of twenty one adds to this fact. Where the case of kidnapping was concerned, there dint appear to be any distinction in the choice of victims, for both Hindu and Muslim women were kidnapped. The emotional trauma that victims like Maya felt were same as that of the pathetic plight of their families, like that of the Duttas, no matter what their religion was.

If one closely observes the women in Bangladesh as portrayed in the novel, they have become complicit in a system which subordinates them. Their life is located at the intersection of class, religion and patriarchy. These structures can all work to oppress them, as in the case of Hindu minority women in Bangladesh. But women belonging to Muslim majority enjoy few privileges and also wield a degree of power. These benefits are available to them only if they conform to the patriarchal codes of their family and communities.

4. Conclusions

The merit of *Lajja* lies in its sublime power to disturb even its best reader. *Lajja* is richly ornamented with activities that took place during the riots and is certainly a good source for those who want to know how the Babri Masjid demolition changed the lives of millions of Hindus and Muslims residing in the Indian sub-continent. Bangladesh has a secular democracy, but the state religion is Islam. "It has been very rare for a person from a majority community to write about the treatment of a minority" says Zaman Habiba, a London based critic and lecturer on post-colonial literature.

Nasrin identifies the root cause of violence in Bangladesh as religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalists use religion, along with culture, caste, ethnicity and nationalism to further their political goals. It includes spread of an ideology of hatred and intolerance towards those from other religions or who do not agree with their specific religious interpretations.

They also employ coercive methods to control people and they use direct violence to silence opponents from outside as well as within the community.

Through *Lajja*, Taslima Nasrin was ranged against a host of enemies; Islamic tribalism, fossils of patriarchy, the privileged establishment, the traitorous razakars, the illiterate maulvis and cynical elite. She, perhaps unwittingly, took on all these monsters singlehandedly. She bore a hole in their medieval egos and pathological ignorance, as she tore to shreds their age old immoralities and traditional hypocrisies.

There arouse a dichotomy between where an individual wants to place himself and where the society places him forcefully. So the identity politics emerges. Sudhamoy and Suranjan consider their primary identities as Bangladeshi citizens. But their only identity that acquires meaning during the time of the crisis is their religious identity. They become second class citizens in a country that they thought was their homeland.

Identity construction uses the twin principles of exclusion as well as inclusion thus differentiating between individual and categorical identities. Taslima Nasrin's life and writings relict this trend of identity conclusively. The success of the novel *Lajja* lies in Nasrin's ability to capture the trauma of the minority community, despite belonging to the majority community. *Lajja* literally means shame and true to this title, every human being, after reading the book, would be ashamed of the religious fanaticism that exist today in various forms in various parts of the world.

The merit of *Lajja* is not in its literary quality or the solution opted for the protagonists. Obviously migration is not a

practical solution to the problem of relentless religious persecution. Neither is the book the best literary work on the subject. However the book is important on the account of the clarity and sincerity with which it raises the question of identity construction and identity politics. The unending lists and names of minority temples and individuals vandalised, killed and dishonoured shows the huge strength of the identity constructors.

Identities sustain themselves by feeding on the inertia. Therefore once constructed, they offer stiff resistance to any attempt of change. Science, rationality, and utopian intellectual constructs often form basis of forging new identities. To what extent these new constructs sustain themselves depends on how successful they are holding to the emotional appeal of people. Attempts of enforced identities are also seen in Russia, Iran and Turkey. The ascendance radical fundamentalism and complete intolerance of dissent indicates that the architects of this form of identity construct have succeeded in capturing public attention, even in the present era. The length of their life span is inversely dependent of the strength of voices of dissent like Taslima Nasrin.

In the recent past, there have been several cases of brutal killings of prominent members of minority communities in the strategic Chittagong and its Hill Tracts, by armed gang of Islamic fanatics. Taslima Nasrin's book intends to erase the element of fundamentalism and communalism from contemporary society. Hence the relevance and universal appeal of *Lajja*.

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