

Interrogating Communalism and Parochial Nationalism in Taslima Nasrin's LAJJA

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Abstract: *The novel Lajja is an attempt to delve deep into the question of religious fanaticism and how it impacts the life of the minorities and the fair sex. The novelist has tried to unravel the nasty blend of fundamentalism with nationalism. It has made to sincere effort to highlight how extremism breeds parochial nationalism. The novel is an attempt to prick the consciousness of those who inflict pain on their brethren simply because of the fact that they belong to a different faith.*

Keywords: *Extremism, parochial nationalism, fundamentalism etc.*

Lajja is basically the horrible period of thirteen days in the life of the Dutta family of Bangladesh. It is a savage indictment of those who mix religion with nationalism to target those who do not belong to their religion. It captures the communal rage that sweeps the otherwise peaceful streets of Bangladesh in the wake of demolition of *Babri-Mosque* at *Ayodhya* in India on December 6, 1992. It presents how fanaticism triggers riots making the life of the Hindus miserable. The pogrom of the members of the minority community subverts the optimism, idealism and philosophy of the state of Bangladesh. The novel is an indictment of philosophy of fundamentalism. It presents that as a victim of poverty, colonial legacy, faith, communalism, violence, migration, exodus, riots, war etal, the state of Bangladesh is fragmented into pieces and is ridden with n-number of problems. Taslima Nasrin has well documented these pieces and has deftly marked the division between the two leading communities of Bangladesh – the Muslims and the Hindus. She explains in the 'preface' of the novel:

Bangladesh is my motherland. 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...The book which took me seven days to write, deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in majority. It is disgraceful that Hindus in my country were hunted by the Muslims after the destruction of the *Babri Masjid*... The riots that took place in Bangladesh are the responsibility of us all, and we are all to blame. *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat. (*Lajja*)

That religion is often used as a tool by fundamentalists to persecute a community which doesn't believe in their religion is the idea around which the plot of the story of this novel is woven. It describes how religion which preaches universal brotherhood becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of fanatics and wreaks havoc of unprecedented scale. The issue of the plight of women especially at times when the nation is over taken by a communal rage has also been touchingly taken up. At the peak of communal disharmony, women become the easiest targets. And if they belong to a minority community, it further makes their life tough. Religion has always been exploited to keep women under thumb. Maya who is attracted towards Jahangir fails to marry her. Religion stands in their way. Suranjan who is in love with Parveen fails to tie the nuptial knot with her, as her family

wants him to convert himself to Islam, first. He doesn't agree to their unjust demand; hence he is rejected as a suitable bridegroom for Parveen. Maya is kidnapped, probably raped and killed; as her only fault is that she is a Hindu. Kironmoyee's talent of singing songs is too trampled. To rape a woman is an act of morality, but singing a song by a Hindu woman in the company of the other men is immoral!?

A strong feeling of nationalism takes majority community into its vise like grip due to an event that has taken place in India. The nationalism faces a crisis: how can nationalism that throws the colonizers out itself facilitate and regimes which condone violence, political upheaval and communal riots? The liberal dilemma of nationalism resurfaces in the novel when Haider expatiates on the subject of Islam as the national religion and Suranjan says. "What rights does your country or your Parliament have to discriminate between people belonging to different religions?" (86)

The demolition of *Babri Mosque* in India by the Hindu fanatics casts its horrible shadow over the Hindus of Bangladesh. This changes the status of the Hindus to second class citizens. The nationalism of the Muslims of Bangladesh becomes complicit with religion. The feelings of aggressive nationalism and patriotism amongst the Muslims of Bangladesh assume dangerous proportion and this finally culminates into riots. This affects even the moderate Muslims and they start ignoring their Hindu brethren. When Sudhamoy goes to his Muslim friends like Sakur, Faisal and Majid, they ignore him and he is often met with the statements like; "Sudhamoy, please sit in the other room while I finish with my *namaaz* or 'you've come today! But we have *Milad* at home." When Sudhamoy suffers a stroke, nobody comes to his rescue. The communal harmony that binds both Hindus and Muslims suffers a big blow. Sudhamoy feels upset at the turn of the events and the fire of communalism that spreads in the fresh air of his motherland makes him shiver both with fear and pain. When he hears communally charged slogans as; 'Let us catch a Hindu or two, eat them in the mornings and evening to' (17) *Naraye Takbir, Allahu Akabar.....Hindus leave the country If you want to live* (67). Communalism has been dubbed as the worst monster that crushes all the reasoning and rationales that engulfs whatever comes into its way.

The stench of communalism changes the dynamics of politics in Bangladesh. The state of Bangladesh enacts Enemy Property act and under this law the property of the Hindus who had left the country is declared Enemy property. This act does a great harm to those Hindus who choose to stay back. This act stifles the fundamental, human and democratic rights of its citizens besides devastating twenty million Hindus. They are practically uprooted from their homes. This act is clearly a violation of constitution, and is also a sign of disrespect to the independent character of the country; but the property of the Muslims who are either staying in India or abroad are not attached. The rules of the Hindu Joint family system are too blatantly ignored: After 1966, The East Pakistan government had carried out an official survey which revealed that the property of Hindus who had left the country for India during the mass exodus of 1947 and after the riots of 1950 and 1954 was listed as Enemy property. They had left with the assurance that their homes, orchards, ponds, family crematoriums, temples, agricultural lands would be duly returned to them. (129). The seminaries of knowledge too fail to escape from the communal frenzy. The names of the colleges that bear Hindu signatures are rechristened to get rid of the Hindu identity. Suranjan fancies: the reason Brahman Baria is now known as B.Baria, Barisal Brojo Mohan College is called B.M. College, and Murari Chand College is referred to as M.C. College. It is because people do not, want to say a Hindu name and therefore,

resort to abbreviations. Suranjan was worried that in no time these abbreviations themselves would give way to names like Muhammad Ali College and Sirajuddaula College!

The declaration of Islam as a national religion of Bangladesh clearly reflects the triumph of reactionary and fundamentalists over the secular-credentials of the state of Bangladesh. The declaration of Islam as national-religion is indirectly an act of discrimination against the members of the other religious communities. It creates a sense of fear and alienation which in turn converts the nationalism of other religious communities to communalism. The stench of communalism pervades the city of Dhaka when Kajal Debnath, a member of the association of the minorities, questions the very rationale behind reciting extracts from the *Quran* from state. T.V. and radio and reserving only two days as holidays for the Hindus. This is how novel takes up the issue of the complicity of the state in perpetuating communal violence.

The pulling down of the *Babri*- Mousque at *Ayodhya* in India, communalizes the non-communal air of Bangladesh. Riots engulf the state of Bangladesh. The Muslims go after the Hindus. The communal slogans spoil the atmosphere of the country. The liberal Muslims too desert their Hindu friends. Police, administration and the political parties too support the mindless violence that triggers in the streets of Dhaka and unabashedly term it as a natural-reaction to the demolition of the *Babri* Mosque. In the mindless violence that sparks off as a natural-reaction to the demolition of *Babri* Mosque takes a heavy toll on the Hindus. To uproot Hindus, villages after villages are burnt to ashes. Their paddy fields are set on fire. Little boys are stripped off their lungis, girls and women are picked up at random and raped. The fanatics threaten to slice up the Hindus to little bits and feed the pieces to crows, if they don't leave their country immediately. They are forced to drink water out of coconut shells and eating food on banana leaves. What is more, they depend on charity or rice. Once a day, they somehow manage to cook some wild plants or roots for themselves. Wives are raped in from of husbands, daughters in from fathers and sisters in front of brothers. There have been cases where mother and daughters are jointly raped. The Hindus openly declared, "We'll beg for a living if we have to, but we donot stay here,"(169). The communal frenzy shows the seeds of fanaticism and the friends of Suranjan-Kamal and Rabul stop bothering about Suranjan, his family and Belal starts looking at the Hindus of Bangladesh with the tinted glasses of fundamentalism.

The ripples of demolition of *Babri* Mosque are felt at Suranjan's home. A band of seven rowdy young men barges into his house, breaks whatever comes into their way, and takes away Maya along with them leaving behind a trail of abuse. They threaten the family by pulling out a chopper and saying "you bastards"! He said, "Did you think you could get away after destroying the *Babri* Mosque?" (147). The Muslims youth who have taken upon themselves the responsibility to avenge the demolition of *Babri* Mosque and have adopted the human ways to protest against the demolition of the Mosque. Suranjan knows a well so he prefers to sit back at home to avoid listening to obscenities like; 'Here comes one of those bastards responsible for breaking the *Babri Masjid*! These Beggars should be kicked out of the country to India!' (184)

The novel probes into the reasons that give birth to the monster of communalism and how it devours human values and finally leaves behind a trail of untold miseries and sufferings. Religion, as per the novelist is an easy tool in the hands of power hungry politicians and extremists to foment communal trouble. Religion is deliberately mixed with nationalism to give it a colour of idealism. The constitution of Bangladesh stands for secularism but its spirit is changed to Islam. In 1978, the

commencement of the constitution of 1972, It changed to *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim* ' (In the name of God, the compassionate the Merciful) and the word secularism is removed and clause 25 (2), is now read" The state shall Endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity" (183). The complicity of the state with undemocratic principles reminds of Fanon's observations in which he has warned the masses of dangerous consequences, if the power that has been got from the 'colonizers' passes on to a 'group' that privileges its interest over the interests of masses.

To conclude, *Lajja* is a savage indictment of religious extremism and man's inhumanity to man. It shows how religion is misused to suppress the spirit and psyche of minorities and subaltern. The novel tears apart the nexus between the politicians and fundamentalists. It graphically but horribly described how this complicity subverts the ideals of humanity and turns friends into foes besides creating permanent ill will amongst human beings. The novel exposes the madness of violence in Bangladesh and Indian sub-continent.

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