

Interrogating the Stereotypical Images of Women in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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Abstract:

The present paper is a modest attempt to unveil the deeply rooted patriarchal structure in the religiously traditional society through the critically acclaimed novel of the Bangladeshi writer, Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*. The novel urges the entire humanity to think critically about the existing cultural practices that are oppressive and cause female subjugation. *Lajja* serves as a significant commentary on the multifaceted aspects of female oppression, raising critical questions about identity, autonomy, and societal structure. Violence against women, to some extent, is the result of gender relations which assume that men are better than women. Women are expected to conform to traditional expectations of subservience and obedience, often sacrificing their desires and ambitions for the sake of family honour and societal acceptance. The writer has used her works as a medium of revolt against the patriarchal system and demands for women's freedom, equality and dignity.

Keywords: Stereotypical image, Patriarchal dominance, Subjugation, Discrimination, Societal pressure

Taslima Nasrin, a contemporary Bengali Muslim writer, does not support the idea of taking the traditional views regarding the marginalized, oppressed and suppressed status of women in her society for granted. Despite living in the male-dominated, orthodox society of Bangladesh, she has dared enough to become a voice for these women. Nasrin was born in a middle-class Muslim family in Mymensingh, Bangladesh on August 25th 1962. She is a famous writer from Bangladesh, a feminist, human rights activist, long-term exiled, and a foremost defender of women's rights from the maltreatment of religious fundamentalism. Her writings have questioned the system of patriarchy. She has produced eleven collections of essays which include *Selected Columns* (1990), *I Will Go; Why Won't I?* (1991), *Fallen Prose of a Fallen Girl* (1992), *Tale of Trivial Sorrows* (1994), *No Country for Women* (2007), *Forbidden* (2014), *Taslima Nasrin's Prose and Poetry* (2015), *Language of My Protest* (2016), *A Poet Who Lost Everything* (2017), *My thoughts* (2018) *Different Opinions* (2019). Her nine novels are *Shodh* (1993), *Return* (1993), *Lajja* (1994), *Tell Him the Secret* (1994), *French Lover* (2002), *Homecoming* (2005), *Shameless* (2009), *Nimantran* (2010) and *Brahmaputrer Pare* (2013). Her autobiographies are divided into seven volumes: *My Girlhood* (1997), *Wild Wind* (2002), *Speak Up* (2003), *Those Dark Days* (2004), *I Am Not Okay, But You Stay Well My Beloved Homeland* (2006), *Nothing is There* (2010) and *Exile* (2012). She has also written a collection of poems, *All About Women* (2005). her books are banned in Bangladesh. She faced legal action in 1994 when the government of Bangladesh issued a warrant for her arrest on the charge of blasphemy because she had exposed violence perpetrated by Muslim society against Hindus in her book, *Shame (Lajja)* published in 1993 which deals with several themes including the atrocities of men towards women. She has been working hard for women's rights and freedom of expression which has made her the first woman novelist from Bangladesh to take up these issues in her writings. She represents in her works 'new women' who are literate, employed and have equal rights in society. She has demonstrated in her work how the patriarchal mindset challenges the individuality and self-esteem of women.

Taslima Nasreen gives a new identity to women in her works by rupturing the disreputable images of women. She has created images of women who are radically different from those who are bound by the shackles of the patriarchal rules of society. R. Kothaikani and G. Sathurappasamy in their research

article "Portrayal of Women in Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*" have rightly stated that "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 a patriarchal attitude." (100)

A common stereotypical belief is that women are the caretakers and homemakers and they deserve to stay at home and perform their household duties only. Over the years, femininity has been cognate with domesticity. Restricted Gender roles have become a social tool used by men to exploit women so that they can never know their identity. sexual oppression is prevalent everywhere in a male-dominated society in which males are considered sovereign and females are dubbed as useless.

In her poem 'Women' Taslima Nasrin writes:

Women are oppressed in the east, in the west, in the
south, in the north.

Women are oppressed inside, and outside home.

... she is always oppressed. (*All About Women*, 60)

Lajja (translated as "Shame") by Taslima Nasrin is a poignant and powerful novel that tells the story of the tumultuous impacts of religious and communal strife on individuals, particularly focusing on the plight of women. Set against the backdrop of the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in India, which led to widespread riots and violence. The narrative begins with the growing communal tensions in Bangladesh and the impact it has on the lives of Hindus, particularly women. It depicts the dilemma of a Hindu family in Dhaka after the demolition of the Babri Masjid as they are engulfed with terror and chaos of ethnic conflict. The Dutta family consists of four members, Sudhamoy, his wife Kironmoyee, Suranjan and Maya their son and daughter. Kironmoyee and her daughter, Maya want to migrate from Bangladesh for safety from the very beginning, but male members of the family ignore their requests. It mainly deals with the problems of female characters and Hindu people who are marginalised, living under the domination of male characters and religion. Maya, the protagonist represents the modern woman who aspires for freedom, education, and individuality while grappling with the oppressive societal norms that dictate her life. As violence erupts in response to the Babri Masjid's destruction, Maya's family faces increasing hostility and threats. The fear of religious persecution forces them to confront their identity as Hindus in a predominantly Muslim nation. The

plot thickens as Maya becomes a symbol of resistance, yet she finds herself increasingly vulnerable to societal and familial pressures. It underscores Taslima Nasreen's critique of gender and societal norms, advocating for the rights and dignity of women. Ultimately, the novel serves as a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggles against oppression, urging readers to confront the harsh realities of female oppression and communal violence while calling for compassion and reform. Nasrin's novel *Lajja* (translated as "Shame") is a powerful exploration of female oppression within the social and religious contexts of Bangladesh. The narrative vividly portrays the struggles faced by women, grappling with societal norms, patriarchal constraints, and the repercussions of communal violence.

The novel highlights various forms of violence against women, including domestic abuse, honour killings, and sexual violence. These acts are often justified by societal norms and religious doctrines, revealing the deep-seated misogyny in society. Nasreen critiques the patriarchal interpretations of religion that contribute to the oppression of women. The novel reflects the tortures faced by women both by religion and male superiority. *Lajja* depicts the traumatic situation of women, who are constantly suffering from the impending terror caused by religious conflict. The impact of communal tensions and religious fanaticism is depicted through the characters' experiences, showing how women often bear the brunt* of societal conflicts. The expectations placed on women to conform to traditional roles often limit their freedom and autonomy. The female characters in *Lajja* struggle against these societal pressures.

Lajja is a controversial novel of Nasrin which gained international recognition after its publication in 1993. Although it was written in seven days concerning the events. The focus of the novel is on the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India by Hindu fanatics on December 1, 1992. It talks not only about male domination but also about the slaughter and rape of women as serious issues due to male chauvinism and religious anarchy. Hindu people in Bangladesh are oppressed and suppressed due to their different cultures, religions, languages, or groups. Similarly, Hindu women are suffering from domestic violence and religious fanaticism. The novel's focus is to reflect different kinds of discrimination in Bangladesh. By showing the problems faced by women in each society mainly in Muslim culture and the use of religion for subjecting others, the novel urges the entire humanity to think critically about the existing cultural practices.

Pathan and Jasrai opine, “Lajja-Shame– the most controversial novel by Taslima Nasrin is a bold attempt to redefine religion and humanism in the most dreadful manner. The spectre of communalism haunts the Duttas -Sudhamoy and Kironmoyee – the couple and their son, Suranjan and daughter, Maya” (62). Nasrin projects the theme of male supremacy in which female characters are passive, nurturing and the tools of taking vengeance for fulfilling the interests of men. In such circumstances, religion proves to be a framework to dominate the people in the minority in which their voices remain unnoticed. The novel portrays the discrimination of female characters and shows how religion has become the law and created division between people in majority and minority. It mainly deals with the theme of the slaughter of men towards women by the projection of the inferior condition of women. It depicts how the supremacy of males has challenged the self-respect of women segregating them in many ways. Regarding the status of women, the novel shows the pathetic situation of Hindu women in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The Dutta family which belongs to the Hindu minority in Bangladesh consisting of four members becomes the victim of the incident. Females are horrified by the growing unrest but males are unaware. The novel, begins with the expression of fear of females which is reflected by frequent remarks of Maya urging her brother to do something before getting late as, “Dada, aren’t you going to wake up and do something before it is too late” (1)? If the male had decided on the right time analyzing the situation, Maya would have been saved. Here the domination of males is reflected. Due to male supremacy in the family, their daughter became the victim. She was abducted by Muslims and perhaps she was raped and killed. As Datta writes, “The plot narrates the victimisation of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, focusing on the persecuted family of Suranjan Dutta, which is finally compelled to migrate to India” (48). In the novel, Kironmoyee, the mother and their daughter, Maya want to leave Bangladesh immediately after the demolition of the masjid but Sudhamoy, the father and their son, Suranjan do not want and make them live there. As Nasrin writes in the novel, “Suranjan knew that Maya wanted him to look for a place where they could go for temporary hiding from the danger that threatened them” (1). They had already faced such challenges and had hidden in the house of a Muslim friend, Kamal. Only after losing Maya, they move to India which is a matter of shame for males.

Maya became the victim of religious fanaticism. In the name of taking revenge, innocent women become victims. Similarly, towards the end of the novel, Suranjan rapes a Muslim girl, Shamima in the name of revenge, but the girl is a prostitute. She reports the scene, “As Suranjan attacked her

naked body, the girl moaned with pain, screaming occasionally, ‘O my God! I am dying of pain....’ Suranjan laughed with savage satisfaction. He continued to hurt her till he could do no more and then he raped her” (201). This is also the subjugation of women. The two girls Maya and Shamima do not have any connection to the conflict between Hindus and Muslims and the demolition of masjids and temples but they have to face two sides of male domination. At the same time, male characters do not face such torture as females face. They have to follow the order of males at home and outside they become the victim of kidnap, rape and even murder. The male-dominated interpretations of religion often promote ideas of shame and honour that restrict women's freedom. This creates an environment where women's bodies and choices are controlled by male relatives and societal expectations.

Despite the oppression, the novel also portrays moments of resistance. Maya and other female characters strive to reclaim their identity and assert their rights, showcasing their resilience amidst adversity. This theme of resistance is a key element in the narrative, undermining the notion that women are merely victims of their circumstances. *Lajja* is not just a tale of despair; it is also a call to awareness and change. By depicting the multifaceted nature of women's oppression, Nasrin shines a light on the urgent need for social reform and gender equality. The novel serves as both a personal story and a collective narrative, inviting readers to reflect on the broader implications of female oppression in society and advocating for the empowerment and rights of women. The focus is on how the religious and social confinements for women and people from marginalized groups made their voices unheard. This situation makes women rebel against male chauvinism and religious fanatics. Women are made to sacrifice their desires, identities, and very existence at the altar of tradition. But the writer seems to imply that even if the world is against you, you must remain strong. No one can take away your dignity without your consent.

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| 188 | ISSN2277-3630(online),Published by International journal of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Research., under Volume: 12Issue:1in JAN-2023 https://www.gejournal.net/index.php/IJSSIR |
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