

Bonding *Sans* Bondage: Feminist Perspective of Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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Abstract: Indian mythology, religion and society have always held women in high esteem. Due to the working of narrow-minded and selfish interests of forces tempered by male power, women have lost their place in the outer world and in their own family where they are assigned restricted duties. The silenced women always tend to show their mettle whenever socio-political situations warrant. This paper seeks to highlight how Taslima Nasrin in her novel *Lajja* describes women are sexually harassed, abducted and subjected to varied kinds of physical and mental torture that may result even in their deaths. The insecure condition of women and the change of identity in order to escape from the rioters have been described openly in Nasrin's novel.

Key words: Women, Patriarchy, Customs, Violence, Domination

Introduction

In the Indian society, the position of women is always perceived in relation to man. From birth onwards, at every stage of life she is dependent on him. Patriarchy justifies the inferior treatment of women in such societies. As Adrienne Rich says, patriarchy is “a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (57). This has led to the struggles and suffering of women and caused damages to their psyche besides

impacting their economic, political, religious, social or domestic life. When atrocities pounce on them, women are expected to be passive and accept everything without protest.

Women see themselves as the traditional victims of male instinct for domination and of male lust, and therefore the power and the powerlessness of women have depended on the ability of individual woman to handle this part of the male drive. Taslima Nasrin wants to break these shackles and open the eyes of women to see the need for liberation. Even when they write about the incredible sufferings women undergo, they seem to tell the world that women constitute half of humanity and for humanity to move upward and onward, there should be a change – a change that understands the power of women and accepts them as an integral part of humanity.

Lajja belongs to the last part of twentieth century and picturises the sufferings of Hindu women of Bangladesh in the post Babri Masjid demolition of 1992. Five decades have elapsed since the brutalities and massacres meted out to women in India in the communal riots after the Partition when the novelist presents the cruelty and sufferings the Hindu women experienced in Bangladesh. Here, ire and revenge were turned against the Hindus by the Muslim community.

To the novelist, when it comes to the criminal outbreak of violence against women, the wicked animal instinct of revenge is the same, irrespective of nationality, time and religious affinity. The novel opens with the helpless condition of Maya and her cry for protection. This can be taken as the helpless cry of the girl child without any protection living under perpetual threat of insecurity.

Maya continued to ask shelter from her father and her brother but no one cared for her. She says, ‘If none of you have any intensions of moving out, I may as well leave on my own. I’ll go to Parul’s house and stay there till the situation improves...This last despairing outburst seemed to indicate that Maya had finally realized that her brother wasn’t going to do anything to find them shelter and that if she wanted to find a temporary refuge she would have to do it herself. (*Lajja* 1)

The abduction of Maya as a child of six terribly traumatizes the girl and she is not able to behave normally for the next two months. The traumatic experience of this child, impacting her psyche is powerfully portrayed by the novelist. In the middle of the night she wakes up and her sleep is disturbed. The family is never secure thereafter as they

keep receiving threats through anonymous extortion letters that threaten them about kidnapping Maya again. The women are kidnapped and are subjected to diverse cruel treatments according to the whims and fancies of men. This compels most of the Hindus to send their daughters to India for their education and security.

Maya's father Sudhamoy is a doctor by profession, and he is rich too but because of his community he finds difficulty in protecting his girl child Maya. He has to sell his own house and other properties in order to ensure her safety. He still remembers the words of the other parents who are troubled and worried about their daughters' safety. "We had to send our daughter Utpala away to Calcutta because she could not even attend college without being teased or threatened. The local boys would often bully her and say they would abduct her. Now she is staying with her maternal uncle at Tiljala" (*Lajja* 17). If women are safe only within their community, that too only in the place of their own, the possibility of families moving to other countries or mingling with different communities becomes remote.

Women as portrayed in *Lajja* are nothing more than objects to be used by the male predators to satiate their lust. *Lajja* depicts certain men waiting to prey on young Hindu girls for satisfying their carnal desires. Rape is a crime done against women just because they are women. Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* talks of rape,

Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear... A world without rapists would be a world in which women moved freely without fear of men. That some men rape provides a sufficient threat to keep all women in a constant state of intimidation... Men who commit rape have served in effect as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerrillas in the longest sustained battle the world has ever known. (qtd. in Schneur, 272,282)

Indian writers while talking about the burden thrust on women by domestic chores present how women are expected to take care of men as their normal routine and duty. This is seen as part of the curse on Indian women down the decades with Independence or the Partition playing no role. This is seen even among women in Bangladesh in spite of seeing two waves of political independence.

Kironmoyee is one of the major characters in *Lajja* who was suppressed being a woman and could not fulfil her desires but keep the pot roasting. She has invested her mental and monetary resources to keep the family together. In 1972 Mary Wollstonecraft, an English woman wrote *Vindication of the Right of Woman*. She deplored the fact that women were kept at home confined in cages, like the feathered race. What is sad about Kironmoyee is that she is expected to work hard for others in the house, but her needs and her desires are never recognized by others. Burying all her aspirations, she has to be toiling all the time for others. Consequently, she has turned almost mute, and endures everything like a mute mule.

Kironmoyee would silently leave food for him every day. At times, her silence would infuriate Suranjan. Did she have nothing to say about her sick husband, her son who was present only in body, so to speak, or her daughter who was lost? Was she made of stone that she did not react to anything at all? Did she have nothing to oppose? How strange – she was unresponsive, unrelenting and as unemotional as a corpse. (*Lajja* 194)

Indian society, though has imposed many restrictions on women, is projected as one giving deceptive respect to women in the family. Glorifying motherhood and venerating woman's nature of completing all domestic chores with a cheerful countenance, the family exploits her. Women in many families are not allowed to showcase their talents in public. If they do, they are criticised and discouraged by the public. Kironmoyee in *Lajja* is good in singing and she was often requested to sing in public ...she had sung the song, 'Ananda loke...Mangala loke...Birajo ...satyasundaro...' (In this world of peace and happiness, let us live together to perpetuate its beauty...). After independence, Kironmoyee becomes reluctant to sing in public. When Sudhamoy asks Kironmoyee to sing, she says that those who clapped their hands and applauded her also said, "It is only because Hindu women are shameless that they learn how to sing; that is why they sit in public in front of unknown men and sing for everyone. A lot of men used to say it is not for women to learn singing. They believed it would spoil their character" (*Lajja* 37).

The novelist portrays not merely the ordeal of a girl child or a family but the sufferings, uncertainty and threat under which the women in a society live at a particular

period of history, that too, a period when the emancipation from a foreign rule is to be celebrated. Despite winning political freedom, the society instead of making it a cause of celebration for women has added to their woe. A situation like this wherein the female world is not allowed to partake in the celebration of political liberation is symptomatic of backward movement from an attempt to strive or dream for breathing the air of safety. For trekking towards international harmony, a world of Tagore's dream should be created:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments

By narrow domestic walls

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection (*Gitanjali*)

Conclusion

Looking at the various characters, there is a message that the world for a woman is not dark, but one which has rays of hope rising from within and outside. A feminist perspective brings out not only the sad state of affairs down the history, but also shows that there is a hope for a better world where the power of women is recognised.

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