

**RELIGIOUS ISSUES: TASLIMA NASRIN AND
FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

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Abstract

'Je ne Suis absolument pasd'accord avec vos idees, mais je ne battrais pour que vous puissiez les expirer.' Which means

"I may not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it."

This above statement by Voltaire him seems quite appropriate with a kind of life Taslima Nasrin is leading. We the South Asian nations may proudly call ourselves as democratic, but liberal... We are certainly not. We may disagree with what the others say and even object to it, but we do not have the right to forcefully shut their mouths. We certainly do not have the right to diminish a fundamental right like freedom of expression. South Asia is a home for many religions. It has got followers of all the religions. An issue like religion is too sensitive. It often provokes violence or intolerance. There are groups of people always catch hold of such a situation and manipulate it. Even the government agencies have become less pragmatic and have been using censorship to prevent such a work of art. The government agencies instead of enforcing the law have been trying to appease these groups. The paper focuses on Taslima's critical thoughts on Islam and also her objections on some of the religious practices, which threatens the fundamental rights of women. It also discusses the real danger to freedom of expression. Writers like Taslima is undergoing a kind of harassment by religious fanatics and there is an urgent need to protect the rights of such writers.

Key words: Democracy, Religion, Freedom of Expression, Blasphemy Law and Humanity.

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South Asia is a home for many religions. It has got followers of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. An issue like religion is too sensitive, in such a scenario criticism of God or Religion often provokes violence or intolerance. There are groups who are always waiting to catch hold of such a situation and manipulate it. Even the government agencies have become less pragmatic and have been using censorship to prevent such work of art. The government agencies instead of enforcing the law have been trying to appease these groups who behave rather unlawfully. It is truly the moral defeat of the state. It reveals how and why liberalism and individual rights have always been antithetical to the mindset of those who are controlling the state.

Taslima Nasrin, who has been the target of Islamists for being an

advocate of women rights in Islam and also for being critical about the treatment of women under Islam, is the subject of my discussion. My paper revolves round, how Taslima Narsin as a writer has been marginalized not only by the government agencies, or modern day feminists but even by our literary circles. She is a victim of democracy; she has been misquoted or misinterpreted by literacy critics.

Tashima Nasrin in an interview to New York Times in 1994 expressed this opinion:

'I said the Shariat law should be revised. I want a modern, civilized law where women are given equal rights. I want no religious law that discriminates, no Hindu law, no Christian law, no Islamic law. Why should a man be entitled to have four wives? Why should a son get two-thirds of his parents property when a daughter can inherit only a third? Should I be Killed for saying this'?

This excerpt of an interview clearly gives us a picture of Taslima's intentions. She is serious in dealing with a problem like inequality when it matters women. She, being a Muslim woman may be more critical of Islam, but that doesnot mean she spares other religions. The bottomline of all her writings is that she wants Humanism/Humanity in her writings to prevail. She clearly states that one should not make discrimination based on gender, race or class, for which she even goes to the extent of daring her own religious beliefs.

Here, in this paper I want to discuss in essence that Taslima Nasrin's liberal outlook of presenting gender, race, clan, community and religion that tends towards her individual perception of understanding the humanity.

According to Taslima, religion only brings discord, division and death. Religion also brings solitude. Speaking on religion she states that 'We have erected a wall within us. A strong, hard wall. In the name of religion and caste nurtured the poison tee of hatred and intolerance.' Taslima always believes it is religion which has been supporting patriarchal system. Religion from the start has been male dominated. The custodians and followers of the patriarchal system cannot possible, tolerate anything against religious personages or books. A strong wall has been built between us, a wall of religion which is

unbreakable, which separates humans.

Continuing her argument against religion Taslima says, 'It is no longer a matter of shame to use religion in one's self interest in a small or a big way. I am not advocating that religion in itself is a good thing, only its misuse is bad. Whatever use it may be put to, religion by itself is not a good thing. Not for an individual or for the society or the state.'

Taslima in her autobiography, titled *Not A Word From You – You Fallen Woman!* is of opinion that, 'There is no Eid, no Puja, no Christmas for me, and no Buddha Purnima. I observe neither Hanukkah nor the Sabbath; I have no faith in God, Ishwar or Allah. I am a person with no religion whatever. I believe in rationality and freethinking. I believe in the earthy, the mundane, in socialism and in humanism, in debating and in protest against discrimination of any kind. I may be irreligious but not immoral.'

As a writer Taslima is viewed as one who stands as a symbol of resistance against Islamist fanatics, male oppression of women rights and someone who always fights for the right like freedom of expression. People round the world admire Taslima for these aspects. Ranging from *Lajja, Home Coming, Revenge, French Lover, The Opposition, Invitation* and *Tell Him The Secret* focuses on these issues. Even her collection of essays and autobiographies do discuss and are centered on these issues.

Taslima believes that the unwritten laws, buried in customs and traditions, often conflict with the secular laws of the land and the constitution. 'There are times when they even override what is written in the Holy books. These ways are entrenched in the nations psyche and stretch back through history. Men control and in most cases project women under their guardianship: sisters, wives, mother and daughters and in return, women are expected to be chaste and obedient and above all, self-sacrificing.'

It need to be emphasized that freedom of expression is indivisible and if it applies to Taslima's critical references to Islamic figures and doctrine, it should apply equally to criticism of other religions, including Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism and Sikhism.

It is indeed the double standards of religious establishments the world over which instead of placing their faith in their respective doctrines rather than in the sanctions of the criminal law are united in demanding a legal protection and immunity for all religions from criticism. In a democratic set up like India and Bangladesh there has been an increasing realization that the legal mechanisms are inappropriate in dealing with matters like religion and faith. It needs to be noted that criticism, however strong, does not curtail the religious rights of others. In a democratic pluralist society any religious group can demand for its right to practice its religion and respect for its doctrine. But the fact is that it curtails the fundamental right like freedom of expression from others.

It is indeed the mockery of system that in a democratic country like India hate mongers who foment violence among the religious Communities do go unpunished while the writers like Taslima with her novels like *Lajja* and *Revenge*, artist like M.F. Husain painting a nude picture of Indian Hindu Goddess and film maker like Kamal Hasan for acting and directing a movie like Vishwaroopam, have all made critical references of religion and are often harassed through criminal cases. There is a law under section 295A, which is called as Blasphemy law applicable to all religions, that allows to award three years of imprisonment to those who deliberately with malicious intention outrage the religious feelings, beliefs and even insult any religion.

Blasphemy law is an attempt to send everybody back to the dark ages. It contradicts the basic rights ensured in the Constitution and contradicts the teachings of all the religions. In India section 295A in the recent years has been underlining the dangers of competitive intolerance and it is also curtailing the space given for freedom of expression.

Taslima being a crusader of women rights states that society is dominated by religion. Women cannot live with the rights of a human being, when religion dominates, patriarchy also dictates terms. Where religion and patriarchy are held in high esteem, women turn into slaves or sexual commodities or machines of producing children, and the path of women is strewn with the litter of a hundred thousand prohibitions. If women have to go forward, their most important duty is to check all these prohibitions in the

rubbish heap. The millstone of patriarchy, religion and a thousand prejudices still hangs heavily around her neck. Social reformers have argued for education and even self-reliance of girls. But has that changed things?

The country that guarantees human rights to some and denies the same to some others cannot be flaunted as democratic. Religions based on codes are anathema to democratic set up, and also for human rights and the privileges of women. A nation cannot call itself secular and non-communal until it abolishes the severe violations of rights to women on the banner of religion. For the security and unity of the country, it is imperative to introduce secular education by dumping religious edicts. It is imperative to replace religious laws by a common civil code. But the problem lies with the system and governments. Instead of upholding and safeguarding such basic rights it has developed a trend of pacifism, the result of which will be in distant future time will come when even a groan of a child will be condemned by some odd group or the other. All this should be stopped to uphold the constitutional rights.

Taslina by continuing her attack on religion and fatwa says that the terrible power that worked behind every fatwa was religious bigotry. It did not matter if the person issuing the fatwa was an insignificant wretch. As it had the consent of the religion, all these who would support the fatwa and patriarchy will nod their heads in unbounded joy. She even goes to the extent of asking which Islamic text says that woman can travel on land, in water, in the air without a guardian? Women are not supposed to step out of their doors and even if they do, they should be draped in a burqa. The best example for this can be traced in her novel *Getting Even or Revenge*, where the female protagonist called Jhumur is a Muslim woman who undergoes a litmus test by her mother-in-law while following some of the religious practices.

In Islam women are forbidden to exhibit their physical beauty in front of non-husband males. Women not abiding by this prohibition imposed by Allah are acting against the religion. To bring in religion within the fold of the state, society, the law and the family is to welcome violence against women, discrimination between men and women, child marriage, polygamy for men, the law of stoning women to death for supposedly committing adultery, beating women to death for not wearing the burqa or being disobedient to the

husband, the horror of triple talaq, imprisonment, unemployment, illiteracy, ill health, slavery and suffering for women. It is men whom religion provides with all kinds of comfort and support.

Although Taslima is critical on Islam, she has not spared the other religions including Christianity and Hinduism. The best example for this is found in the novel called *French Lover* where the Hindu female protagonist named Nilanjali undergoes lot of suffering due to the over suspicious husband called Kishanlal. She was married to her husband as per Hindu customs and rituals, but Nilanjali finds hardly any freedom. In the end she herself breaks free from the shackles of her husband which is enough to understand that as a religion even Hinduism has lacunae which has to be addressed properly.

Taslima feels almost all the religions in the world are not liberal on women rights, and it is time to overlook and amend such religious practices which have chained women from actual freedom.

In an interview to Sujata Sen of **The Statesman**, she suggests that

‘I hold the Koran, the Vedas, the Bible and all such relevant texts determining the lives of their followers as “Out of place and time”..... We have to move beyond these ancient texts if want to progress..... let humanism be our new faith.’

World needs a change, and we as citizens of this world have to look further a step ahead. We ought to come out of the religious hypocrisy, bigotry and abominable practices, We have to develop a liberal attitude in our thinking.

The Taslima narration has raised the serious questions about artistic freedom, fundamental rights of belief, freedom of expression and the State’s duty to protect writers from those who challenge them. A serious reader of literature would certainly feel that Taslima has every right to defend her rights. The religious fanatics may call her writing mediocre and may even call it provocative. Yet banning her literary works like *Lajja* and *Dwikhandito (Split in Two)* is not the solution. But the governments and some of the religious outfits have gone to the extent of banishing her, which is again violation of fundamental rights like **Right to live**, which is nothing but contempt for the

Right to Free Expression, in particular artistic freedom. It is certainly a hindrance for the creative work of art, for bold experimentation and it will certainly have an impact on rational inquiry.

Taslima has been misrepresented; her literary works have been misquoted. It is a fact that she questions the loopholes found in Islam, more so when it matters the rights of women, but that does not mean she is intentional in hurting the religious feelings. She has been able to criticize beliefs or faiths which threaten the fabric of society. She is a victim of mob censorship, as well as the State's cowardice in the face of communal bullies and religions bigots.

It seems that the State has yielded to the pressure and has granted the religious fanatics the right to vandalise works of art and criminally assault writers. In any case these groups have no right to usurp women's rights and are not permitted to decide what is permissible and what is impermissible. They simply do not have any business to dictate uniform codes or norms, whether it may be in respect of sexual preference, dress, religious practices or social behavior. Societies which are captive with rigid religious laws cannot flourish or cannot think of progress. They can greatly enrich themselves only by respecting the difference by celebrating the diversity and by allowing others to express freely, listen to what they have got to say.

To sum up let us leave it to the individual freedom, as every citizen has the right to know and think what is good and what is bad.

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