

IDENTITY CRISIS AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN TASLIMA NASRIN'S 'LAJJA'

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Abstract

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 reflect 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. Her writings show a very strong identification of Taslima with her own identity. Lajja literally means shame and true to its title, every human being, after reading this book would be ashamed of the religious fanatics that exist today in different parts of the world. And at the same time be really ashamed of the gender identity where women are treated no less than a property. Thus Taslima Nasrin's Lajja remains a bold writing of identity crisis and gender identity.

Key words: identity, minority, community, gender, crisis

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Taslima Nasrin was born on 25th August 1962, in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. She is a Bangladeshi ex-doctor turned author who has been living in exile since 1994. She works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought, equality for women and human rights by publishing, lecturing and campaigning. From a modest literary profile in the late 1980s, she rose to global fame by the end of the 20th century owing to her feminist views and her criticism of religion. Since fleeing Bangladesh in 1994 she has lived in many countries and currently lives in Sweden after expulsion from India in 2008.

She started publishing prose in the early 1990s and produced three collections of essays and four novels before *Lajja*. In 1993 she came up with her most discussed novel *Lajja* that changed her life and career dramatically. Following the publication of *Lajja*, Nasrin suffered a number of attacks and in August, 1994. She was brought up on charges of making inflammatory statements and faced death threats from Islamic fundamentalists; she thus escaped to Sweden in 1994. One of the results of her exile was that she did not get to practice medicine anymore; she became a full-time writer and activist.

The story is of the time when Babri Masjid was demolished in India by the communal forces on 6th December, 1992. The story is a work of fiction and is made up of thirteen days just after the demolition of the Masjid. The story is a struggle of a Hindu family living in Bangladesh during those days; father Sudhamoy, mother Kiranmoyee, Suranjan and Maya being the son and the daughter of the family. There is a mention of all the incidents that have happened during those days, like the killing of Hindus, the ruining and destroying of Mandirs, the abduction and rape of Hindu women and the list goes on. There were more than 200 Mandirs that were destroyed and more than 1000 Hindus looted and rendered homeless. Almost all the relatives and friends of Dutta family leave the country and more on to live in India but the family hates the idea of leaving their own country in any circumstances. Sudhamoy the father is a man of high ideals and doesn't want to leave the country of his origin. He had fought for his country during all movements like language movement and independence struggle in the hope that life would be better after these struggles but the scene comes out to be different. The situation for the Hindus becomes worse in Bangladesh. The son, Suranjan also had the same ideology as his father, he treats everyone as a human being rather than Hindu or Muslim. But when his sister Maya was abducted by the Muslim rioters a sense of identity crisis started building in his heart. The point that is to be noted here is not the identity of the victim but how these identities are born, how they mutate, how they unite and how they divide. The author throws up the interesting question of transient identities and the sharpness with which their impermanence is felt. How do people resolve the dilemma of competing loyalties? What makes one identity

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over-ride and subsume the other? Added to this is the compelling question of the dissimilar experiences and impact of this identity crisis on men and women.

As it is a known fact that identity is the defining character or personality of an individual as recognized by society. 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 principles of exclusion as well as inclusion thus differentiating between individual and categorical identities. Taslima Nasrin's life and writings reflect this trend of identity conclusively.

Taslima Nasrin, with her writings has directly attacked the fundamentalist ideologies in Bangladesh. Growing up in a country getting increasingly controlled by fundamentalist forces, Nasrin started writing while still at school. Her experiences as a medical doctor working in the interiors of the country sharpened her understanding of the marginalization of minorities. Her writings have a raw appeal in account of their brazen directness. Her relentless and systematic attack has exposed the complex interlinks of religion, patriarch, y politics and identity.

Lajja provides a clear insight into her interpretation of identity politics being played out in Bangladesh. Through the Dutta family's experiences, the idealist Sudhamoy, the quiet Kiranmoyee, the intellectual Suranjan and the helpless Maya, Nasrin tells us a sordid tale of death, destruction, arson and rape they are subjected to as a revenge for the razing down of the Babi Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in India. The book begins the days after the demolition of the disputed structure and ends on the thirteenth day. Meaningfully, the thirteenth day which signifies the end of the funeral rituals for Hindus is the day when the Dutta family wrenches itself away from this beloved country and decide to take refuge in India. Dr. Dutta's predicament is peculiar as he fails to understand, how the very same Bangladesh, which once came into birth on the basis of a shared language of the people irrespective of their religious adherence can now suddenly forget this basic logic and allow religion to be the new basis for identity. Again and again in 'Lajja' Sudhamoy discovers that he is a second class citizen, second to the majority Muslims, the so called minority. Being an atheist, he does identify himself as a Hindu. But as result of communal riots he had to undergo the humiliating circumcision that left him mutilate forever and raised a question on the identity as a minority. He has to sell his ancestral property for a pittance, he has to forego promotions he is eligible for he has to give up wearing the traditional dhoti and settle for pajamas, his wife has to remove the overt aspect of her married Hindu identity. She stops applying vermilion on her lead and gives up wearing the white conch shell bangles , Maya had to take refuge in her Muslim friend's house and changed her name to hide her Hindu identity. Sudhamoy slowly begins to realize that notwithstanding his personal non- identification with Hinduism has left him to a crisis of identify and loss of dignity.

Same was the case with the main protagonist, Suranjan, He is forced to come in terms with the fact that the world accepts no atheist; the binary classification in terms of Hindus and Muslims does not allow him the space for non-committal existence. He was looked up as an

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outsider intruding in the boundaries of Bangladesh, by the Muslim majority. He finds himself alien in a society where an atheist like him was forced to convert to Islam to qualify to marry Parveen. Moreover the abduction of his sister forces him to face his helplessness. Even the brutal rape of a Muslim prostitute fails to give him any sense of redemption. He then started questioning his belongingness, and perhaps this was the last nail to make him feel an identity crisis in Bangladesh.

Lijja has been influenced by Taslima's very staunch feminist views. Her interpretation of the plight of women as a consequence of the narrowing of social spaces remains incredible. Taslima Nasrin has sharply exposed the differential impact of social exigencies on men and women. Almost no experience is gender neutral and for women, the gender identity is so powerful and overarching that it canopies everything else. It is interesting to note that this gender identity seems to intensify the disabilities of other identities. Nowhere does it minimize or blur the narrow spaces set aside for women. Kiranmoyee the quiet and sacrificing mother-wife who has never learnt to assert herself. Her main concern is only the well being of her family and her personal choices are a non-issue. She takes into her stride her enforced celibacy to her husband's genital mutilation and never mentions this handicap as an issue. She submits to the demands made upon her by the communal atmosphere in Bangladesh and quietly accepts a new identity with an assumed Muslim name. She resigns to the husband's apparent blindness to the disabilities imposed on them by communal Bangladesh and his steadfast refusal to migrate to India. She invests all her resources, monetary and mental, in keeping her family together and even attempts a valiant fight with her daughter's abductors. Despite reservations, she cooks beef to make her husband happy and is even willing to accept her son's Muslim girlfriend Parveen as her daughter-in-law. Her lone act of assertion is her refusal to accept her son's help of money after her husband's paralytic attacks.

The daughter of Sudhamoy and Kianmoyee, Maya shows the impact of gender disability in a much more pronounced way. The identification of women as property, as a value leads to her abduction as a six year old child. The main intent is out-listing her father from their ancestral property and she is the tool. The strategy is successful as his father sells off all his land for a pittance and they move to Dhaka. Her failed affair with a Muslim youth Jehangir made her realize that emotion could be easily staked upon in front of a promising career. Her impatience with her family during the outbreak of the riots and her sudden refuge in her Muslim friend's house indicates that humanism from the hearts of human beings is replaced by communalism. What actually Nasreen wants to convey is the notion of women's honor linked up with defeat cuts across the majority -minority divide. After the abduction of Maya, Suranjan's brutal rape of a Muslim prostitute is aimed at an aggressive expression of revenge towards the majority community. The defiling of a woman of their kind, so women are made tools to convey the message of their hatred towards other community. So it is observed that all the four members of the Dutta family faces Identity crisis being the minority in Bangladesh and moreover Kiranmoyee and Maya meet their tragic ends because of the mingling of gender identity with the circumference of their own identity crisis. The success of this novel lies in Nasreen's ability to capture the trauma of the minority community despite belonging to the

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majority community. Her writing show a very strong identification of Taslima with own gender identity.

“We have just enough religion to make us hate but not enough to make us love one another”, said Jonathan Swift, the famous author and this book completely justifies the above statement, Lajja literally means shame and true to its title, every human being, after reading this book would be ashamed of the religious fanatics that exists today in different parts of the world. And at the same time be really ashamed the gender identify where women are treated no less than a property. Thus TasleemaNasrin’sLajja remains a bold writing of identity crisis and gender identity.

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