

'TASLIMA NASRIN AND ISLAMIC FMINISM'

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Abstract

TaslinaNasrin, a famous writer from Bangladesh is known to the world as a writer who fights for the cause of women in her writings. Many of the critics call her as a secular feminist which is by and large true. TaslimaNasrin a champion of freedom of expression, humanism and women rights is also known for her fight against Islam for not protecting the rights of Muslim women.

Talisma's fight is unique in the history of Bangladeshi literature and feminist movement, she like her other Muslim women writers who belong to a movement called Islamic Feminism also demands for corrections to be made in the sacred texts of Islam. Islamic feminists and TaslimaNasrin believe that Quran has been misinterpreted and misapprehended by Islamic religious clerics when it matters women. The Islamic feminists like Taslima are of the opinion that Islam as a religion is patriarchal.

In this paper I have probed some of the traits of Islamic feminism in the writings of TaslimaNasrin. This paper also shares Taslima's view on humanism.

Key Terms:

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"Nasrin's voice is the voice of humanism everywhere."

– says Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and the Nobel laureate

TaslimaNasrin stands as a symbol of resistance against Islamist fanatics and male oppression. She is also popular for upholding the fundamental right like freedom of expression. The critics and the fundamentalists call her as 'the female Rushdie' but not many of them know that TaslimaNasrin is a champion of humanism.

TaslimaNasrin is of the opinion that the world literature today needs to focus on some of the multifarious social and religious taboos. She dreams of a world without any rigid religion. She does not want to call herself a feminist but rather likes to be called a humanist.

Taslima hails from a democratic but Islamic country called Bangladesh, a country that has a poor track record of feminism and feminist movements. The Government and the Muslim fundamentalists, pseudo secularists, phoney intellectuals and the so called feminists did not lend their moral support to Taslima when she needed it most.

Therefore my prime objective is to prove that Taslima's perspective on religion, feminism and humanism. In Islam the *Codified* rules is different and unique.

Taslima suggests that

"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 think, only its misuse it 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".

My paper will also probe into Islamic Feminism which has different views on the problems faced by women of Muslim world. Taslima out and out rejects all the religions including Islam for suppressing the fundamental rights of women. But Islamic feminists are of the opinion that marginalization of women has got nothing to do with Islam. They argue that it is the misrepresentation of women by the misinterpreted versus of Quran which is posing the real danger for women.

The paper also discusses opinions of Muslim women from the Muslim world. There are two conflicting views, one that defends Islam and blames it on patriarchy and the other which blames Islam as a religion failed to protect the women rights. This is an interesting subject to deal with. The comprehension of Islam by these two section of feminists is a debatable issue, but the ultimate agenda of both Taslima who calls herself a humanist and Islamic feminist is to protect the rights of women from all kind of atrocities.

Let me give you a bird's eye view of the movement called Islamic feminism. This movement got shape and structure with the failure of secular feminism. It failed to protect and realize the problems of women in particular the lower strata of the society, especially the problems related to the violation of fundamental rights. The feminist intellectuals of the Muslim world were furious because the Western feminists treated them as a homogeneous category of powerless victims who needed to be liberated with their help. They neglected the fact that these women have different history, background and socio religious circumstances to fight with. Islamic feminism is a belief to provide the equality between male and female within the Islamic framework. These feminists defend Islam as a religion of equality and gender – equal and they also increasingly, see Islamic precepts and universal articulations of human/women's rights as compatible.

The movement originated first in Iran in the year 1994 with the publication of the Muslim feminist magazine *Zanan* (woman). Another important book titled "*Feminism and Islam*" (1996) by Mai Yamani also helped the movement to have a strong shape with the growing access to the sources of Islam by Muslim women in the twentieth century. The unperturbed social differentiation in the Muslim world made the movement strong. The Islamic feminists started to investigate the real meaning of Islam and Quran.

Islamic feminists are constructing a new understanding of religion that is dramatically different from what is produced in the ninth century Saudi Arabia. They are finding fault with the interpretation of Islam not with Islam itself. They argue that Islam is a religion that advocates gender equality and demand the end of patriarchal influence.

These scholars argue that Islam is not inherently oppressive to women and to counter Islam – bashing by emphasizing that factors other than Islam play a large role in the realities of women's lives. They believe that source of women's subjugation is variously identified as, for example, patriarchal and social relations that pre-existed Islam and shaped its development and legal spin-offs, or structural factors.

Islamic feminism is a reaction against Islamism, or political Islam. Islamic feminism deploys religiously grounded discourse in struggling to improve women's rights. They believe that Islam tells to respect women not to humiliate them. According to them Sharia was created by a group of men without any meaningful participation of women who were infact actively marginalized from the process of defining the faith. For example in a country like Afghanistan, the Talibans even today justify their oppressive policies against women in the name of Islam.

Al – Bukhari a widely considered pre-eminent collector of hadith (sayings of Muhammad) found out of 600,000 sayings that he traced across the Muslim world. He accepted

only 7,257 as reliable enough. It means to say that the remaining hundreds of thousands of false hadith are floating around and are created purely for selfish purposes. He along with his colleagues ignored many of the justified interpretations of Quran. According to them many of these sayings contradicted the Quran and the sayings of Prophet Mohammed who clearly and specifically condemned viewing women as property. Therefore the idea called 'Islamic Feminism' is taking place and it attempts to realize the "true" meaning of Islam.

Taslima's fight against patriarchal system is quite unique. She still believes that emancipation of women is still possible with relooking of some of the codified rules that are against women in Islam.

Taslima in one of her famous novel called *Lajja* attacks Muslim fundamentalists for being brutal on the Hindu minorities which was the fallout of demolition of Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992, Ayodhya, India. Islam that is known for peace and propagates universal harmony across the world, the followers of the same Islam disrespect Islam by raping an Hindu girl called Maya. Taslima exposes the unremittingly dark and menacing mindless blood thirstiness of fundamentalist Muslims. The novel brilliantly captures the insanity of violence by Muslims on minority Hindus under the banner of a religion called Islam. In fact Muhammad Prophet advocated the equal rights and respect for women.

Taslima questions the very attitude of Muslim fundamentalists who act against the ethics of Islam. Nowhere in Quran it is written that a Muslim has a right to take the life of an individual of other religion. Islam or Quran never expects a Muslim to show disrespect against other religions.

Another argument which proposes to deal is that of Taslima opposing women wearing burkha / veil, a codified rule imposed on women by religious clerics in the past. She suggests that there is no such reference in Quran, which according to her is a violation of fundamental right, where man dictates women what to wear and what not to.

To defend her argument I quote the lines from an article by M.A. Siddiqui

"In fact, the face is not included in veil, there are number of Koranic verses and statements of the prophet which clearly prove that covering the face is not required in Islam. As the Koran says: "Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them, and God is well acquainted with all that they do and say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, that should not display their beauty except what appear from their beauty." (S: XXIV: Verse, No: 30, 31)

It appeared in *The Hindu* on 3rd of June 2012 in Open Page written by MahmoodAlamSiddiqui, an Assistant Professor, Centre of Arabic and African studies, JNU, New Delhi. He clearly defends the argument of Taslima and also the Islamic feminists, who clearly object the misinterpretations of Islam on women.

Taslima's objection of patriarchal instinct is quite evident in her another novel *Revenge*, where the protagonist Jhumur marries for love a boy called Haroon, when she crosses the

threshold of Haroon's family home, Jhummur finds it very difficult to cope up with her mother-in-law who is orthodox and traditional. Jhummur being a liberal attitude Muslim woman finds herself in a traditional orthodox home which expects her to cover her head; eyes averted and doesn't allow her to leave the house without an escort.

Taslima questions the prohibition of women to attend a prayer if they are having period. Jhummur who is the mouthpiece of Taslima's religious sentiments rather ironically says:

"During prayers, men stand together in the open courtyard, while the women mumble their prayers huddled indoors, veiled and excluded. Because I was "polluted" with my period, I was exempt from any prayer at all." (P-128 Revenge)

To substantiate this basic argument I quote

"Prophet Mohammed not only encouraged Muslim women to attend the Mosque but also commended Muslim Men that they should not prevent their wives from attending them to Mosque for their prayers." (Article by MahmoodAlamSiddique in The Hindu 3rd June 2012).

Islam does not oppress women. It is men who oppress women. The reasons behind the exploitation of women in all religions and communities are the same, women being kept in the dark about their rights, and patriarchal skewed interpretation of the religious text.

Taslima also shares the same opinion of Islamic feminists. She feels that the law of the seventh Century still hangs on the heads of Muslims. These have not been modified for ages. Whether they like it or not Muslims are forced to accept these outdated laws obediently. But in some countries men cannot divorce by uttering talaq thrice and even if they want they cannot keep four wives at a time.

TaslimaNasrin after attending a human rights conference in Paris on her way back to Bangladesh in early May 1994, visited Kolkata and was interviewed by SujataSen, a reporter for the *Statesman*, local English daily. In the published report, Sen quoted Nasrin as saying that "The Quran was written by a human being" and it "should be revised thoroughly." (Riaz Ali 1995).

Taslima added that she promoted change to the Sharia, the texts of Islamic law, but not the Koran. She issued the following clarification as reported in a journal:

"I hold the Koran, the Vedas, and the Bible and all such religions texts determining the lives of their followers as out of place and out of time. We have crossed the social – historical contexts in which these were written and therefore, we should not be guided by their precepts; the question of revising thoroughly otherwise is irrelevant. We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we want to progress" (*Women and Revolution* (1945-95), 14)

With these extracts of her interview and journals Taslima takes a stand which is also the stand taken by Islamic Feminists.

Taslima is furious of Muslim personal laws which according to her is violation of human rights or equal rights to women. She stresses the need for a civilized law in all religions. She is of the opinion that –

“If one believes in humanism, if one practices humanism as a way of life, then there remains no distinction between the rights of women and men.” (page – 244 No country for women).

Taslima’s attack on religion is not limited to Islam alone. She even attacks Hindu religion for the way Rama treats his wife Sita in *Ramayan* by suspecting her after her return from Lanka She says –

“Ramayan has not given women their due place but has taught us that faithfulness is not for men, and even a chaste and faithful wife is dishonoured by society. She has to pass through fire to prove that she is pure.” (P=87 *Selected Columns*).

“People admire Sita’s chastity. They applaud her passing through fire to prove that. In Mahabharatha and Ramayana, Women’s degradation has been shown many times (P-87).

These views by Taslima are enough to understand that all religions across the world have failed to treat women equally. This is the reason why Taslima openly attacks religious bigotry and she advocates the equal rights of women.

Taslima suggests her basic attitude in *No country for women*.

“In a society 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 there turn into slaves or sexual commodities or machines of producing children.”(P-40).

She continues her attack and says women are, whether educated or illiterate, are oppressed. This is because religion, patriarchy, culture and society are against women.” (P-41).

Taslima feels both Islam and patriarchy are equally responsible for the present fate of woman. She as a writer and a humanist wants to see this world standing on the foundation of humanism. To conclude Taslima’s literature itself is a protest against anti-women rules and regulations and conspiracies of the society. This is the reason why critics call her as a humanist.

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