

RELIGION AND SILENCE

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'If you wish to protect Islam hang Taslima'

The novel *Lajja* (*Shame*) was first published in Bengali in Bangladesh in 1993. The English translation appeared a year later.¹

The novel created a lot of controversy - on the one hand, Taslima Nasrin was awarded a prestigious award; on the other hand, Muslim fundamentalists not only banned the novel and burned hundreds of copies, but called for Taslima's death as well - with rewards of up to \$1250 for her head. The anger of the mullahs was directed at Taslima for her iconoclastic views on sex, marriage, and religion. What made them furious was her statement, made in Calcutta, that the shariat laws must be revised. What is unpardonable is that a person - a woman too - should speak her mind! Even a liberal minded politician was quoted as saying: 'Championing freedom of speech at the expense of faith can only provide a fillip to extremist trends. The experience of Iran and Algeria are only too vivid in recent memory.'² Taslima remains unintimidated and vocal. On Australian television, she publicly proclaimed herself as humanist and declared that Islam treats women as slaves, adding: 'If women want to live like human beings, they will have to live outside the religion and Islamic law'.

The novel is set in Dhaka in the thirteen days after the demolition of Babri Masjid in India. Nasrin structures *Lajja* around the conflict of cultures. At one level, the novel is a finely grained, empirically rich study of a distinct cultural group - the Hindus in Bangladesh. On another, it traces the systematic persecution of the religious and ethnic minorities of Bangladesh over the past two decades. The novel also opens up questions of marginality and non linguistic domains. Marginality brings in, among other aspects, the conflict of the sexes; while Nasrin extends her support to the theory that the non-linguistic is not pre-language but exists alongside and sometimes in addition to language: they are overlapping, intersecting and interwoven.

Let us first look at the conflict of cultures. The public or masculine cultural trauma consists of the political, social, economic, and intellectual victimisation of a minority group by the power group. There is a desire on the part of the minority group to bond themselves to a new community, and even the power group at one stage felt it was possible to bond themselves with the

Hindus in Bangladesh on the basis of language and culture, working with the conviction that 'Islam was not able to unite all the Muslim countries on the basis of Islam alone'.³ They had worked together, in the 1969 Movement, Hindus and Muslims, for a separate Bengali nation. (They fought against the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Pakistan.) However, religious fundamentalism had reared its ugly head, leaving liberal-minded Hindus and Muslims anxious and defeated. The conflict of cultures may be explored by studying the marginalised family, in this case the Duttas, in terms of where they come from, and the marginality of what they do not say, in terms of covering up anxieties in order to fit more easily into the system.

The Duttas - Suranjan Dutta, his father Sudhamoy and his grandfather Jyotimoy - had not listened to their Hindu friends and relatives who warned them that they would not be able to live as Hindus in this country. They had resolved to stay in what they believed to be their own country. They had to make sacrifices: Sudhamoy discarded his Hindu dress, his dhuti, and took to wearing pyjamas and lungi. He had to leave his ancestral home and set up a practice in Dhaka. He bought beef and the whole family ate it. As Suranjan notes:

We have mixed and mingled so much with the Muslims of this country, that we never hesitate to say Assalam Aleikum, Khuda Hafiz, paani instead of jal, and gosol instead of snan. We respect their religious practices, and avoid drinking tea or smoking in public during the month of Ramzan. In fact, we do not even go to the restaurants on those days (107).

A recognition of the fact that the Hindus would remain always on the borders, always marginalised, strikes Sudhamoy the day some Muslims yanked his lungi off and on a later day kidnapped his daughter on her way back from school. The crumbling masculine power in the minority community is symbolised by Sudhamoy's inability to make love, and subsequently by Suranjan's inability to be an earning member and a responsible son. Helpless and frustrated, the men seek escape either by masking anxieties as in Sudhamoy's case, or in the silence of a subjective landscape as in Suranjan's case, or in the fantasy of television as in Nirmalendu Goon's case. Throughout, the narrative continually moves back and forth in time: memory is deftly juxtaposed with the present moment and subjective processes with historical events to produce striking refractions of agile and sensitive minds as they confront and evaluate reality.

And the women? What were they doing? What did they think? Did it really matter to anyone what they thought? After all, South Asian women had from very early times been silenced by fear, communal pressure, religious pressure and political authority. They had become virtually mute characters. Everywhere, in history, in fiction, in life, they appeared not as subjects but as objects. Their lives, images, activities and status served as emblems of a male defined and dominated intellectual and moral universe. So, did it matter what they thought? Did it matter that Kironmayee, once the daughter of a well-known lawyer, had been reduced to poverty, and was now the homeless wife of an impotent husband, Sudhamoy. Did it matter that Kironmayee had 'secretly shed tears' every time her friends and relatives packed and left for India? No. On the contrary, all her persuasions, pleadings and requests to leave were turned into jokes, and Kironmayee 'had no alternative but to abide by their decision'. She is in effect thrice removed: she is a woman, a Hindu in a Muslim country, and yet not a Hindu either. She had been warned by her husband not to pray in the traditional way or wear the traditional sankha on her wrists or sindur on her head. Yet, in spite of having no voice or control, 'the responsibility of keeping the family afloat through all the crises that had visited had devolved upon her' (113). Thus, on the one hand, she is the soft, gentle, peace-loving wife guarding her chastity and carrying on silently with the household chores; on the other, she is the great pillar of strength holding the family together. The dominant discourse has been dominated by men, and so Kironmayee seeks to create alternative forms capable of accommodating her experience. She was a good singer but had to give that up, for it was believed that 'it was not for women to learn singing' (37); so she stopped singing and hummed instead. Anytime the issue of music was mentioned she would sit with her 'back to the light and her face... covered in shadow'. She silenced the craving in her body for sex but she could not control the need within her body, which shook with pleasure at the slightest proximity to the male body. What remains unheard are her sighs: every time Sudhamoy's friends' shadows fell on her lap 'almost involuntarily she would wish that those shadows were real'. No one listens to her or takes her requests seriously so she cries within herself. To the men, unable to understand her, her crying seems childlike, her silence impenetrable:

Kironmayee showed no sign that she had heard him... She simply stood there with a cup of tea in her hand. Suranjan thought she had wanted to say something to him, but she did not utter a word (53).

The turning point in her life, and in the novel, is the abduction of her daughter Maya by hooligans. This event makes her aware of her own marginality as well as the marginality of the men around her. This realisation at first stuns her, then releases her from her role. Her release is symbolised by her clasping her god: 'she had found a picture of Radha Krishna somewhere which she held fiercely and touched to her forehead occasionally' (165). Note the change, no longer soft and gentle, but 'fiercely'. Not only does she pray to Lord Krishna, but releases herself from confinement through an act of cultural reappropriation: 'Without warning Kironmayee rent the silence of the house' (212).

Her howl is something that Sudhamoy and Suranjan are not prepared for and can neither control nor understand: 'So intense and unbearable was the sound of her wailing that Sudhamoy sat up in shock and Suranjan came running'. Her articulation not only completes her experience - 'For days and nights she had kept these tears in check but the dam had burst' - but the text of the novel as well. Kironmayee finds a viable position for herself whereby she is able to live within a repressive society and not lose herself: she discovers a 'voice' and a powerful way to speak. Or we could say that she finds the voice to speak against the shackles of rules and chains of titles (Wife, Mother, but never a woman) imposed on her. The openendedness of this ending leads to unresolved questions of independence, choice and fantasy.

It can be said that if Kironmayee personifies silence, her daughter Maya is the 'raw welter of cadence that tumbles and strains towards words', but remains unheard. As daughter, her position in the family is even more precarious and unstable than her mother's. The places of silence are usually places of great wrongs, and so it is with Maya. As a young girl, she was kidnapped. 'Two days later Maya had come back home by herself. She had been unable to provide any clues as to where she had been or who had kidnapped her.' She internalises her pain almost to the point of self destruction: 'For two whole months after the incident she had behaved in a strange manner. She slept fitfully and would awake abruptly in the middle of the night' (15).

The silence of horror that cloaks Maya's world is symbolised by her concealment of her illness:

She had been a very young girl at that time, and on that particular day was suffering from an upset stomach. She did not have the sense to say that she had to go to the toilet, so the result was a white pajama turned yellow, and Maya standing all by herself in the garden crying her heart out (141).

Her position of belonging to a minority community, of being marginalised as girl and daughter, without job or money, makes her voiceless, invisible, indistinguishable. And yet again, she and not her brother is the second earning member of the family. She provides strength and support to her father when he is paralysed. Maya's silence is not a sign of her weakness. For not only has she strength but also a will to survive. Accustomed to a world where cause and effect sequences are essential links to a logical explanation of events, she has no hesitation in stating that she would say 'La llaha illalahu Muhammadun Rasulullah' and call herself 'Feroz Begum'. Desires she has many - at heart she is a romantic who enjoys reading Jibananda and wants to visit places described by him in his poems. Continually she is torn - Maya's predicament is sealed by the tension between her own desire and the traditional constraints surrounding a Bengali daughter, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Bengali need to be submissive and self effacing. No resolution emerges. Like Sita of the Ramayana, Maya finds it impossible to be modern and intelligent and be heroic. And like Sita, she is sacrificed - by her community, by her family, by the narrator - and left silent, missing, absent, invisible, hidden. She leaves behind the 'silence of the graveyard', a graveyard none the less full of marks; like the gaps, the unheard sighs, the dashes, in the novel.

What appears black and white to the undiscerning reader is, in the course of the text, dialectically broken down and synthesised into an endless variety of shades of grey. Which brings us to the two rapes in the novel: the rape of Maya by the Muslim hooligans, and of Shamima, a Muslim prostitute, by Suranjan. It is significant that the fates of Shamima and Maya are interwoven. Suranjan's rape of Shamima opens up the untold story of the rape of Maya by the Muslim fundamentalists; and Shamima's rape would never have taken place had Maya not been abducted by the hooligans. Suranjan's rape of Shamima may be read variously, but it is essentially symbolic of a young man's assertion of power at a critical juncture. Suranjan vents all his frustration and anger at not being able to save Maya on Shamima: 'He bit her breasts, one part of his mind understanding that what he was doing was certainly not love' (200).

The girls had lived similar fates. We have heard the silences of Maya's life, but Shamima's - we do not even know what her name really is, is it Shamima or Pinky or...? What we realise is that

When it came to young women it was not a matter of Hindus and Muslims but a question of the weak always being bullied by the strong. Women were the weaker sex, and as such were oppressed by the men who were the stronger sex (18).

Shamima had, like Maya, been a 'mild gentle girl', but a Muslim, to Suranjan: 'To him she was a girl who belonged to the majority community. He was longing to rape one of them, in revenge for what they had done to his sister' (200). Just as, to the Muslims, Maya was a Hindu girl who had to be tormented and punished: 'Where was Maya? Had they tied up her hands and legs to rape her? Were all seven of them raping her together she must have been in great pain too, she must have yelled out too' (201).

She surely must have stood 'naked and shivering with fright' as does Shamima by Suranjan's door. Both become victims of the social system. Nasrin relies on animal imagery: he 'took deep breaths, as he dug his nails' and 'bit' and 'pulled her hair, bit her on the cheek, neck and breasts... scratched her waist, her stomach, her buttocks, and her thighs with his sharp nails.... the girl moaned with pain, screaming occasionally. Suranjan laughed with savage satisfaction.' She was like a 'deer' that 'tries to escape the tiger'. Maya was probably undergoing a similar treatment, 'crying in front of a pack of wild animals'. Perhaps, like Suranjan, they too come to realise that they have behaved like dogs. Suranjan comes round to a full possession of himself, gradually becomes confident in his powers to shape a new identity for himself. In the end we see him as a changed figure who seems to negotiate power from the margins and throws in the possibility of forging a new identity in a new land. The terrible irony in all this is that this discovery was arrived at through a terrible crime. The ending is as grey as the beginning: the men realise that religious and political issues are inextricably bound, and they see themselves not as individuals but as part of a larger political framework.

It is in such spaces of grey that the ambivalence and the shifting nature of terms like outsider and insider, identity and belonging, marginality and privileged is contested. It is true that Suranjan cannot save his sister: but Haider fails too. Suranjan fails to marry Parveen, but Jehangir fails in his promise to Maya. It is true that Kironmayee cannot match Aleya Begum's smiling face or her shining clothes or her sparkling jewellery. But then, how true is the smile on Aleya Begum's face or Parul's or even Parveen's? Does their privileged position make them any happier? Or are the women, wherever they may belong, on the same scale? Parveen, Suranjan's lover, was certainly not happy at marrying a Muslim and had to go through a divorce after just two years' of marriage. None have an identity they can keep: Hindu 'girls

have to give up their names when they are married'. And we are all aware that if the Muslims have their way, 'women would walk the streets with burkhas on' (207) and sit behind locked doors and windows. The ambivalence extends even further. Throughout the novel, Nasrin has inverted the old equations of Women/nature/weakness and men/culture/strength into women/nature/strength and men/culture/weakness. The Kironmayees, the Maya, the Bashonas the Shamima were all alike: soft, gentle and peace loving but possessing innate strength and character. The male characters pale in comparison.

It is only by reading the multiple voices that such a reading emerges. Nasrin obviously realised the virtues of pluralism. Her intention is to open up issues that have not been asked seriously, or have been dismissed as unscientific or unsolvable or treated as if they never existed. The chorus of voices becomes the dominant presence in the text; in fact the novel is nothing more than the interweaving of formal and informal, linguistic and non-linguistic voicings. As she engages with religion and history and the experience of a community under political and climatic upheaval, she consistently avoids the single perspective, the conventional authorial voice, the omniscient narrator and the official line. Multivocality becomes for her a method and a form.

An analysis of the novel along these lines helps us to show the polyvoicedness of the text and helps us to understand that the various voices at the margins are not 'simply opposed to the centre but... an accomplice of the centre'. Understanding is arrived at not by hearing one voice but through the interaction of voices. Multiple voices express multiple ideologies leaving meaning and understanding open-ended and changing. It is in this way, by foregrounding and commemorating voice and silence, tears and babble, women writers may stylistically begin to speak back alongside established discourses of power.

REFERENCES

¹ Taslima Nasrin, *Lajja (Shame)* (trans. by Tutul Gupta. London: Penguin, 1993).

² Khan Chowdhury Salahuddin, quoted in S. Kamaluddin, 'Goodbye to all that', in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 4, 1994, p. 27.

³ Maulana Abul Kalam Azad challenging the two nation theory had said 'It is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally different' (quoted in the novel, p. 8).