

Lajja: A Critical Examination of Religious Fanaticism in Taslima Nasrin's Novel

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Abstract

Taslima Nasrin's novel, Lajja, explores the theme of religious fanaticism and its devastating impact on individuals and society. Published in 1993, the novel offers a poignant portrayal of a Hindu family living in Bangladesh and their struggles in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition in India. This article aims to analyze Nasrin's Lajja in the context of religious fanaticism, examining the narrative's socio-political implications and its significance in promoting religious tolerance and understanding. The research paper follows both descriptive and analytical method, and is based on both primary and secondary sources. Taslima Nasrin's Lajja served as the primary source while many articles and essays constituted the secondary sources.

Keywords : Babri Masjid, Bangladesh, communal violence, gender, lajja & nationalism.

Introduction

Lajja, meaning "shame" in Bengali, delves into the harrowing experiences of the Duttas, a Hindu family in Bangladesh, as they navigate the tumultuous aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. Taslima Nasrin, a prominent Bangladeshi author and feminist, crafts a narrative that confronts religious fanaticism head-on, shedding light on the tragic consequences it engenders. Through the lens of the Duttas, Nasrin exposes the profound impacts of religious intolerance on individual lives, familial bonds, and national identity.

Lajja revolves around the Dutta family, primarily focusing on Sudhamoy, Kiranmaye, and Suranjan Dutta. As violence erupts against the Hindu community, the Duttas face the loss of their home, safety, and sense of belonging. The novel depicts their journey of escape and exile, highlighting the profound impact of religious fanaticism on individuals and families.

The characters in Lajja undergo significant development throughout the narrative. Sudhamoy Dutta symbolizes the voice of reason, advocating for secularism and harmony in the face of religious hostility. Kiranmaye Dutta portrays the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, while Suranjan Dutta undergoes a transformation of identity as he confronts the reality of religious intolerance.

To fully comprehend the significance of Lajja, it is crucial to contextualize it within the historical and social backdrop of Bangladesh. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India, in 1992 serves as a catalyst for the events portrayed in the novel. The

subsequent rise of communal tensions and violence in Bangladesh resulted in severe repercussions for the Hindu community, which is central to Lajja's narrative.

Nasrin's Lajja skillfully portrays various manifestations of religious fanaticism, illustrating the destructive impact they have on individuals and communities. The novel examines the distorted ideologies and rhetoric employed by extremists to manipulate religious sentiments and incite violence. Nasrin highlights the consequences of blind faith, including the erosion of personal relationships, the destruction of social fabric, and the loss of humanistic values. Critic, Datta (1996), observed the link between the dismantling of Babri Masjid by the Hindu extremists in India and its adverse impact on the innocent women of Bangladesh. It is male chauvinism and dogmatic religious practices that push women to remain passive in Bangladesh. Therefore, Nasrin is portraying the victimization of women caused by patriarchal norms. There are some critics who interpret communalism as the root cause of women's subjugation and domestic violence both in the Muslim and Hindu communities. Rao (2009) observed problems of the minority groups in *Lajja* in these words:

Nasrin strives to show how communal violence has been generated by the lunatic fringe in all communities, how innocent persons are duped into serving the ulterior purpose of communalists, and how extremist elements in the communities in fuse tension and hatred for their own ends at the cost of inter-communal harmony. The religious anarchy led to the suffering of the minority groups in Bangladesh. Communalism, based on religious belief, is the principal motive for the domination of the minority groups by the majority groups. According to Yadav (2020), Nasrin, being a woman, speaks against the maltreatment of women or the manifold dominations imposed on women in the Islamic world.

Religious Fanaticism and Its Manifestations: Nasrin's Lajja provides a compelling examination of religious fanaticism in its various forms. The novel exposes the destructive ideologies that breed hatred, violence, and discrimination between religious communities. Nasrin portrays how fanaticism emerges from an obsessive attachment to one's faith, leading to the dehumanization of "the other." The rise of fundamentalism, communal riots, and the ensuing persecution of religious minorities become prominent motifs in Lajja, illustrating the disastrous consequences of religious fanaticism.

Analysis and Discussion

In the Preface to the novel Lajja, Nasrin writes,

“I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote Lajja soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1992” (ix). She further wrote,

The book which took me seven days to write deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in the majority. It is disgraceful that the Hindus in my country were haunted by the Muslims after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. All of us, who love Bangladesh, should feel that such a terrible thing could

happen in our beautiful country. The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of us all . . . Lajja is a document of our collective defeat. (ix)

Lajja's story revolves around a Hindu family whose father Sudhamoy Dutta, was by profession a distinguished professor and physician. He and his family is quite proud of their motherland—the only home they knew or acknowledged. But however, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992, many of Dutta family's relatives and neighbours had left Bangladesh as they could not cope up with the day to day failing of human values of the country. Sudhamoy Dutta's ancestral home was in Mymensingh but had to part away with his land by giving them to a Muslim family and accordingly seeking shelter in a small flat in Dhaka. Being a Hindu, Sudhamoy in the land of Bangladesh had to witness many difficult situations such as he was denied promotion even after his years of services as a doctor in government sector. Again, on many occasions such as partition of India from Pakistan in 1947, Freedom movement of 1971 in Bangladesh, demolition of Babri Masjid in India at the end of 1992, Sudhamoy Dutta was tortured and inhumanely treated. But Sudhamoy never supported the idea of leaving his motherland despite all the violence inflicted upon him. So here it can be said that the Dutta family ended up being probashi-or an alien. Sudhamoy always held the belief that he was a Bengali first and a Hindu later. But unfortunately, the system of which he was a part repeatedly reminded him of his minority status. He introspects about his participation in the freedom movement when he was caught in the prison including other Hindus who were treated in most sub-human condition.

The Plight of the Duttas: Through the experiences of the Dutta family, Nasrin humanizes the victims of religious persecution. Suranjan Dutta, the protagonist, struggles with his identity and grapples with feelings of alienation within his own country. His sister Maya embodies the suffering of women who bear the brunt of communal violence. Nasrin effectively portrays the psychological trauma experienced by the Duttas, shedding light on the profound impact of religious fanaticism on individuals and families. Nasrin skillfully explores various themes related to religious fanaticism. The novel emphasizes the destructive nature of religious intolerance and extremism, the subjugation of women within patriarchal systems, the significance of secularism as a safeguard against oppression, and the profound impact of communal violence on individual and collective identities.

An analysis of Nasrin's life and activism highlights her immense bravery in speaking out against religious oppression and advocating for women's rights. The author's personal experiences of persecution further underscore the urgency of her message in Lajja. She says:

I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote Lajja soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December, 1992. The book which took me seven days to write, deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh, by the Muslims who are in the majority. It is disgraceful that Hindus in my country were hunted by the Muslims after the destruction of Babri Masjid. All of us who love Bangladesh should feel ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. The riots that took

place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of all of us, and we all are to blame. Lajja is a document of our collective defeat. (Pre. to Lajja: ix).

In *Lajja*, Nasreen portrays the depressed condition of Hindus living in Bangladesh. She provides factual information regarding the destruction of temples:

A mob had set fire to the Dhakeshwari temple. The police had not made the slightest attempt to stop them. The main temple where prayers were offered was burnt to ashes and the dance hall of the temple had been damaged as well. The Shiva temple, the guest rooms and the ancestral home of Shridham Ghosh were all razed to ground. (*Lajja*:4)

Hindus in Bangladesh were treated cruelly by the Muslims in these communal riots. They were beaten brutally till their death. Many of Hindu families became landless as they were forced to abandon their own houses. Their women were raped again and again. Even children were not left by the extremist mob. Most of the Hindu families shift to India due to this exploitation. But Sudhamoy not even thought to leave his country as he believed that this country is as much his as that of any Muslim. He thinks about his past days when he was a young man, all his relatives had begun to leave Bangladesh one by one. As they migrated, they would request Sudhamoy's father to go with them by pointing out that this was the motherland of the Muslims and therefore life was uncertain in the country. But Sudhamoy's father, Sukumar Dutta was decided not to betray the values he had always upheld.

Lajja's enduring relevance lies in its ability to raise awareness about the consequences of religious fanaticism and its impact on individuals and communities. The novel serves as a call for interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and the promotion of secularism as a means to safeguard human rights. Nasrin's *Lajja* also examines the intersection of gender and religion, exposing the patriarchal nature of religious fundamentalism. Maya's character illustrates the double oppression faced by women, both as members of a religious minority and as targets of patriarchal structures. Nasrin challenges the regressive gender norms perpetuated by religious fanaticism and advocates for women's autonomy and empowerment within the context of religious identity.

Pathan and Jasrai (2016) further say, " *Lajja-Shame*, the most controversial novel by Taslima Nasrin, is a bold attempt to redefine religion and humanism in the most dreadful manner". If the novel is controversial, Nasrin seeks to redefine humanity. Judging on the thematic aspect of *Lajja*, Banashankari (2015) commented, "The novel depicts the struggle of a patriotic Bangladeshi Hindu family living in a Muslim environment". Cultural and ethnic differences were the principal causes of the Hindu-Muslims conflicts in Bangladesh. *Lajja* serves as a critique of the socio-political landscape of Bangladesh, exploring the fragile nature of secularism in a predominantly Muslim nation. Nasrin challenges the idea that religion should dictate one's citizenship or sense of belonging. The novel raises pertinent questions about the responsibilities of the state in safeguarding the rights of religious minorities and the importance of fostering a pluralistic and inclusive society.

One of the central themes in *Lajja* is communal violence and its profound effects on individuals and society. Through the lens of the Dutta family, Nasrin explores the trauma, fear, and displacement experienced by the Hindu minority. The novel also reflects on the repercussions of violence on the psyche of individuals, leading to a loss of faith in humanity and a sense of alienation. 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 Schneir, 272,282).

Lajja serves as a critique of the erosion of secular values in Bangladesh and the perilous consequences it entails. Nasrin emphasizes the importance of a society that upholds principles of equality, tolerance, and coexistence. Through her characters, she showcases the challenges faced by those who strive to maintain secular ideals and their struggle against the forces of religious fundamentalism. Despite the dark and distressing narrative, *Lajja* ultimately conveys a message of tolerance, compassion, and humanism. Nasrin underscores the need for dialogue, understanding, and unity in the face of religious fanaticism. She calls for individuals to transcend religious boundaries and embrace a broader sense of humanity, challenging the divisive forces that threaten social harmony.

Nasrin's *Lajja* portrays how social unrest and political manipulation exacerbate religious tensions. The author exposes the intricate web of political interests that exploit religious differences for their own gain, perpetuating communal discord. By exposing the underlying motives behind such manipulation, Nasrin encourages readers to question the intentions of those who stoke religious animosity for personal or political gain. In *Lajja*, Nasrin also examines the impact of patriarchal systems on marginalized communities, particularly women. The novel highlights how women bear the brunt of religious fanaticism, experiencing violence, forced conversions, and other forms of oppression. By highlighting the plight of women in a society driven by religious conflict, Nasrin exposes the inherent injustice and calls for gender equality as an essential component of social progress.

Moreover, the novelist in this novel reflects in about the honour of Hindus which was not safe, and how abduction and brutal rape of Hindu girls was a common thing in Bangladesh. In such circumstances, most of the Hindus sent their daughters to India for their education and security. Nasrin has mentioned the inhuman torture on women in the text: Manju Rani Seal, a student in the ninth standard . . . was abducted at 8 p.m., on the evening of 4 December 1988 by Abdur Rahim and his goons . . . there is still no trace of Manju Rani . . .

In Parkumira village of Tala sub district in Satkhira, Rabindranath Ghosh's young daughter, Chhanda, a third standard student was raped by her schoolteacher . . . In the middle of the night, her schoolteacher abducted her with the help of some young hooligans. They took the terrified little girl to garden nearby and raped her . . . a case was filed but no one was arrested. (48-49)

While depicting the harrowing realities of religious fanaticism, Lajja also presents a call for unity, understanding, and tolerance. Nasrin's characters, though deeply affected by the violence around them, embody resilience and hope, striving for a society that transcends religious divisions. The novel urges readers to reflect on the destructive consequences of religious fanaticism and to actively work towards fostering religious harmony and peaceful coexistence. Lajja serves as a window into the tragic consequences of religious fanaticism and communal violence. The protagonist, Sudhamoy, and his family, previously living harmoniously in a multi-religious society, suddenly find themselves targeted due to their Hindu faith. Nasrin masterfully depicts the terror, anguish, and loss experienced by the characters, highlighting the destructive power of blind religious fervor. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, underscoring the need for dialogue, understanding, and empathy to counter the divisive forces of fanaticism.

Fanaticism can be found in all religions either it is Hindu or Muslim or Christianity or Buddhism. Some cultures take change as sin and some others want to resist change due to fear of losing their position. Even in advanced country like America there existed it as Engineer opines, "The concept of 'fundamentalism' is in fact the product of modern American society. Some Christians believed during the 1930s in the literal truth of the Bible, and they were described as 'fundamentalists'. It is this borrowed western concept which is being applied to some religious movements in Asia" (703). Some religions are moderate and tolerant than others on the basis of their practices. Mainly at the time of radical, social and political upheavals problems like firmness, jealousy and fanaticism appear. Sometimes the firmness becomes good but they become risky when they are left uncontrolled. When people become totally blind in matter of social change and oppose introducing new ideas or emerging reality show fanaticism. In politics it may be simple but in the process of radical change and social disorders the blind faith can push the society in the grip of fanatics. Similarly, in the case of religion too, we find the same situation. When religious people resist change and want to maintain status quo same situation happens.

Tutul Gupta writes:

Lajja, the controversial novel by Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, is a savage indictment of religious extremism and man's inhumanity to man. Unremittingly dark and menacing, the novel exposes the mindless bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and brilliantly captures the insanity of violence in our time. (Lajja, Afterword). According to him, this novel displays the terrible effects of religious fundamentalism: loss of humanity, birth of violence and so on. The novel is a response of Taslima to anti-Hindu riots, which erupted in parts of Bangladesh, soon after the demolition of Babri Masjid in India on 6th December 1992. The book subtly indicates that communal feelings were on the rise, the Hindu minority of

Bangladesh was not fairly treated, and secularism was under shadow. *Lajja* brings to the forefront the destructive consequences of religious intolerance and its impact on individuals and society as a whole. Nasrin explores the experiences of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, who face persecution and violence in the name of religion. The novel emphasizes the importance of religious harmony and coexistence, challenging the notion that violence can ever be justified in the name of faith.

The economic exploitation in Bangladesh is so extreme that it sometimes manifests in riotism. When riots escalate, the Hindus of Bangladesh hide in fear. But Suranjan roams around the streets of Dhaka in a semi-trance. Religious fanaticism in South Asia has been responsible for the riots and violence (Hasan, 2013). Nasrin narrates, “His presence shocks his comrades who are organizing anti-communal demonstrations, yet take for granted that Suranjan should not appear in public” (Nasrin, 1993). He finds the practice of communal prejudice all around him in his society.

In *Lajja*, the characters grapple with questions of identity and belonging as religious tensions escalate. Suranjan, Sudhamoy's son, questions his own beliefs and wrestles with the weight of communalism that threatens to erode the fabric of his secular upbringing. Nasrin's exploration of this internal conflict resonates with readers, urging them to reflect on the complexities of identity and the human desire for acceptance in a society plagued by religious strife. Nasrin's portrayal of women in *Lajja* is particularly significant. The female characters, such as Maya, Suranjan's sister, and Kiranmoyee, Sudhamoy's wife, embody resilience, defiance, and strength in the face of oppression. Through their narratives, Nasrin challenges traditional gender roles and exposes the vulnerability of women in a society dominated by religious fundamentalism. The women in *Lajja* become agents of resistance, embodying the struggle for freedom and equality.

Central to Nasrin's critique of religious fanaticism is the call for religious tolerance and the preservation of secular values. *Lajja* underscores the importance of embracing diversity and fostering a society where people of different faiths can coexist harmoniously. By exposing the destructive consequences of religious extremism, Nasrin advocates for a society that upholds the principles of equality, justice, and respect for all religious beliefs.

Conclusion

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* stands as a powerful indictment of religious fanaticism and its far-reaching consequences. By illuminating the experiences of the Dutta family and exploring the intersections of religion, gender, and nationalism, Nasrin compels readers to reflect on the fragility of communal harmony and the urgent need to confront religious intolerance. *Lajja* remains a significant literary work that provokes critical conversations about religious fundamentalism, human rights, and the pursuit of a just and equitable society. Thus, Nasrin depicts the contradictory religious fanatic relations between Hindu and Muslim of Bangladesh in *Lajja*. Though the novel is based on the real events of demolition of the Babri Masjid, a noted mosque in India, and Hindu-Muslim violence provoked after the demolition, it is mainly caused by the religious extremism generated by fundamentalists

in Bangladesh. The fiction portrays the conflict between the minority Hindus and the majority Muslim in Bangladesh. Though set in Bangladesh, the book has a universal appeal. This can be transposed to any other setting— Nigeria, Urumki (China), Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, India, Pakistan, Chechnya, Kyrgyzstan or Bosnia-Herzegovina. Nasrin's intention is obviously to attack the Bangladeshi religious extremists who misuse politics and power against Hindu minority. She is critical to the oppression because she intends to re-assert the identity, rights, and liberty of all the marginal groups in Bangladesh.

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