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Iconoclastic Authorial Stands in *Lajja*, *Shodh* and *French Lover*: Religion through Taslima Nasrin's Skeptic Lens

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Abstract

Taslima Nasrin, the fiery feminist and acknowledged humanist offers iconoclastic views about religion and thus portrays the darker aspects of religious beliefs. A rational and scientific individual to the core, Nasrin proposes and propagates a society without religion so that the world becomes a better place to live in. This research paper considers three of her major novels—*Lajja*, *Shodh* and *French Lover* for critical understanding of Nasrin's iconoclastic views on religion. Each novel exhibits Nasrin's conviction of a society free from religion. The paper asserts that Nasrin's scientific analysis of religion is appreciable; however, her tirade against religions in general often turns out to be an attack on the religious sentiment of people from different belief systems. An attempt has been made in this paper to critically analyse and understand Taslima Nasrin's iconoclastic authorial stands on religion in the light of her real-life experiences. The research paper being qualitative in nature, employs close textual analysis as the methodology. Taslima Nasrin's novels are the primary sources while critical texts, journals, magazines and newspapers are secondary sources for this research project.

Keywords: Religion; Culture; Patriarch; Hyper communalism; Fidelity.

Introduction

Taslima Nasrin, the self-exiled Bangladeshi writer is a novelist, doctor, poet, columnist, humanist, secularist and human-rights activist all at once. Her idea of radical feminism and uncompromisingly atheist stances expressed boldly reflect in all her literary works. Religion is one of the dominant themes in her novels. Nasrin's views on religion are often iconoclastic, subversive and reactionary necessitating strict scrutiny of the arguments she puts forward. The research paper is a critical analysis of how Nasrin views, conceives and envisions religion in three of her major novels—*Lajja*, *Shodh* and *French Lover* through close textual analysis. Besides discussing religion as an institution and its basic tenets, the paper goes on to view Nasrin's irreverent tone towards religion critically so as to develop a conclusive understanding about the authorial intent. The author's skepticism and/or cynicism rooted in her scientific temperament receive a fair amount of attention in the present paper. The authorial stands of Nasrin receive a critical treatment in the current research paper disproving her arguments on religion as one sided and lacking in depth of information. Religion basically, is a social institution, a code deifying a supernatural power. Religion and morals are interwoven. Religion prescribes rules of conduct. It implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power. Hence it normally invokes a sanction which may be called supra- social. While prescribing rules, religion tends to identify these with moral conduct. There are mysteries and perplexities of life for which adequate explanations cannot always be found. The elements of nature, sunshine, wind, storm and rain – affect man in diverse ways. But these are, to a large extent, beyond his control. Then there is the mystery of birth and death. By way of response to such mysteries, man in all ages has thought of some supernatural and super sensory power. Arnold Tonybee empathetically pronounced that in the history of man religion stands as the centre. In an article in *The Observer* Tonybee said, "I have come back at the belief that religion

holds the key to the mystery of existence.” (Tonybee, 1954, p. 6)

Oxford Dictionary defines religion as, “Belief in a superhuman controlling power especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship.” Hence, religion is allegiance and obedience to an all- controlling power. Religion has been viewed widely and convincingly from sociological and anthropological perspective as well. James G. Frazer in his *magnum opus The Golden Bough* defined religion as a belief in “powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.” (James G. Frazer, 1990, p. 18) Frazer’s definition clearly indicates that religion is a belief in a superior power that controls everything in nature.

According to Ogburn and Nimkoff, “Religion is attitude towards superhuman powers.” (qtd. 1994, p.187) Such attitude gave rise to a coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning the super-natural order.

Emile Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1985) defines religion and says that all societies divide the world into two categories: “the sacred” and “the profane”. Durkheim believes that religion is based on the distinction of sacred and non- sacred. A. Kumar Sharma quotes Durkheim in *Structure of Indian Society*: “A religion is a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church to all those who adhere to them”. (Qtd. 1997, p. 37) Religion has three distinct aspects – rituals, beliefs and organization.

According to Karl Marx: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature; the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”(qtd. 1994, p. 188) Marx’s definition of religion affirms that religion would completely disappear in a communist society where there would be no more divisions of people into classes, the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited. In other words, communism would usher in a situation in which the social conditions which produce religion would disappear. Religion has, therefore no place in a communist society.

Max Weber’s interpretation of industrial society provides one of the earliest statements of the desecratisation theme. According to Max Weber, the industrial society is characterized by rationalism and intellectualization and above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.” The world is no longer charged with mystery and magic; the supernatural has been banished from the society. Bryan Wilson observes in his book *Religion in a Secular Society* (1960), “Religious thinking is perhaps the area which evidences most conspicuous change. Men act less and less in response to religious motivation: they assess the world in empirical and rational terms.” (Bryan Wilson, 1960, p. 483) Wilson identifies certain factors responsible for the development of rational thinking and a rational world view. Firstly, the worldly asceticism of Protestantism created an ethics which was pragmatic, rational, controlled and anti-emotional. Second, in an industrial society, men are involved in organizations which are based on rational principles. Third, modern knowledge is based on reason rather than on faith. Wilson further expounds, “Science not only explained many facts of life and the natural environment in a way more satisfactory (than religion), but it also provided confirmation of its explanation in practical

results”. (Bryan Wilson, 1960, p. 489) Fourth, the development of ideologies such as communism, organizations and trade unions offer practical solutions to problems. By comparison, religious solutions such as the promise of justice and reward in the afterlife do not produce practical and observable results. It is obvious that a rational world view is opposed to religion because the latter is based on faith and as such is non-rational. People no longer interpret the world around them in religious terms. There has, therefore, developed what is called ‘secularization of consciousness’.

The doctrine of salvation is common in all religions. Such a doctrine produces consequences in terms of influencing their attitude towards life and their behavior pattern. Max Weber brings out this aspect in the following words:

Our concern is essentially with the quest for salvation, whatever its form, in so far as it produces certain consequences for practical behavior in the world. It is most likely to acquire such a positive orientation to mundane affairs as the result of a conduct of life which is distinctively determined by religion and given coherence by some central meaning or positive goal, (Max Weber, 1968, p. 25)

The close link between religion and moral code is gradually being snapped in recent times. Institutionalized religion is gradually losing its sway over people’s minds. Religion is increasingly becoming more individualized. The most outstanding social and cultural development of the last few centuries has been in the direction of ‘secularization of culture.’ In traditional societies religion was all-pervasive in the sense that religion ordained everything from birth to cremation or burial including even mundane matters.

Religious institutions evolve (i) as patterns of worship, i.e. as a cult (ii) as patterns of ideas and definitions i.e. as beliefs (iii) as forms of associations or organizations. In other words, religious institutionalization occurs on the cultic level. These three aspects develop simultaneously as part of the same developmental process. From the preaching of the message of the Founder develop creeds and theology, from the cult, elaborate symbolic liturgies and from brotherhood of followers, the ecclesiastical organization. (Parimal B. Kar, 1994, p. 475) All religious groups are originally diffuse in nature with the gradual emergence of cult and rational theology. Religion establishes a new community of believers and a new pattern of life for the members.

Karl Marx described religion as an institution that “opiates” and that it is detrimental to the oppressed people. In his view religion often drugs the masses into submission by offering a consolation for their harsh lives on earth: the hope of salvation in an ideal after life. During the period of slavery, in the American South, White masters forbade Blacks to practise native African religion, while encouraging them to adopt the Christian religion. Through Christianity, slaves were prodded to obey their masters; they were told that obedience would lead to salvation, eternal happiness in the hereafter. Viewed from a conflict perspective, Christianity may have pacified certain slaves and blunted the rage that often fuels rebellion. (Richard T Schaefer, 1992, p. p. 418-19) Karl Marx asserts that religion is not necessarily a beneficial or admirable force to social control. From a Marxist perspective, religion functions as an “agent of depoliticization”. By obscuring

the overriding significance of conflicting economic interest and inducing a “false consciousness” among the disadvantaged, religion assuages the possibility of collective political action that can end capitalist oppression and transform society.

Iconoclasm and Religion in Taslima Nasrin’s Novels

Taslma Nasrin espouses views on religion and culture that go against established norms of the society. She encourages agnosticism and corrosively criticizes religion in her literary works in order to ignite scientific temperament of the readers. Her fictional works are fraught with bitter criticism of religion, holding it responsible for all evils in the society including suppression of women. She generalizes her caustic comments to all forms of religions. She asserts; “Not just Islam, I believe no religion gives women freedom.” (Interview, 2002, p. 1) Her withdrawal of faith from religion is spurred by scientific and rational temperament. She declares in *Dwikhandita*, “I am an atheist *cap a pie*.” (Nasrin, 2007a, p. 18) She believes that some clever, cunning manipulative brains with vested interest invented religion to prescribe ‘dos’ for some and ‘don’ts’ for the others. Nasrin boldly declares, “If any religion allows the persecution of people of different faith, if any religion keeps women in slavery, if any religion keeps people in ignorance, then I can’t accept that religion.” (taslimanasrin.com/index 2.html.) She points her finger to all religions because every religion accords a subordinate position to women. Nasrin further states in an interview, “Humankind is facing an uncertain future. The probability of new kinds of rivalry and conflict looms large. In particular, the conflict is between two different ideas, secularism and fundamentalism”. (Interview with Irshad, 2002, p. 1) There is an attempt on Nasrin’s part to proselytize the readers to her agnostic belief so as to enable them see the reality of religion.

Nasrin firmly holds that the very idea of religion is outdated and it fails to cope up with the changing needs of time. She strongly believes that in the 21st century scientific and technological progress rendered religion out of place. Referring to Islam, Nasrin registers an irresistible protest against religions:

I want to abolish religion only because, religion is against humanity. If religion is not against humanity, I have no problem with it. Because I believe in the idea of secular humanism, I know very well that religion is against humanism. If someone personally wants to believe in religion, I have no problem. But when they try to impose religion on others, then the problem starts. Religious law imposes. The *Quran* is the historical document. I can’t deny that it exists. But why should we follow it now, in this period, when it is outdated and out of place. Why do we need seventeenth century law now? (Interview with Irshad, 2002, p. 6)

Nasrin is all for a traceless extermination of religion in all its forms. According to Nasrin the *Quran* is outmoded and its text and context are also outdated and unacceptable. Her concept of religion becomes interestingly clear when she says, “I am fighting for truth. Devastated women seek shelter in religion and religion is for that. It is for weak people, vulnerable people, ignorant people, foolish people.....” (Interview with Irshad, 2002, p.5). Thus, Nasrin calls herself a scientific, logical and rational thinker for whom believers in religion are weak and foolish. She

strongly holds that a sound brain with sound thinking should not accept religion because religion is based on superstition and blind faith which is akin to Karl Marx’s views.

Taslma Nasrin’s novel *Shodh (Getting Even)* 1992, is about a well- educated youthful, vibrant Jhumur, subjected to suppression, humiliation and patriarchal torture turning her rebellious. She defies all religious and cultural restrictions, overthrows patriarchal dominance by avenging her husband through an illegitimate pregnancy. The novel throws ample light on the capabilities of a modern woman who can lead life on her own terms and defeat all social restrictions and impositions. Religion and religious ideals receive a fatal blow from Jhumur, the protagonist.

Jhumur (Jinnat Sultana) an M.Sc. in Physics, was married to a wealthy businessman called Haroon. She loves freedom and often utters blasphemy. She is all set to undermine even the religion she is born into. According to Jhumur, religion is ‘superstition’ and those who practise it are ‘superstitious.’ Religion seems to her a tormenting system that impedes progress and obstructs ‘free thinking’ thus compelling her to abominate religion and religious practices. Jhumur neglects ‘veil’ she is expected to wear as a new wife in a religion bound family. When her husband asked her whether she had veiled her head when she was on the roof, she briskly replies, “I said, I did not remember.” (Nasrin, 1992, p. 8)

Jhumur is advertantly indifferent and unmindful to what her religion ordains. She calls physical relation outside marriage as “The rites of spring!” (Nasrin, 1992, p. 61) thus trampling upon the religious belief system she is born into. Jhumur argues and tries to defend her idea by referring to her friend Shipra who had had physical relation before marriage. She calls this act as example of humanity, “Had not Shipra have a physical relationship with Dipu before they became man and wife? Could I blame her for that – rather I would hold them both as shining examples of humanity”. (Nasrin, 1992, p.78) Jhumur espouses a radical concept about religion. She represents secularization of conscience. She is not only irreligious but also a threat to all those who respect and abide by religious codes. Womenfolk will surely find themselves in utter chaos, especially in the postmodern society when there is continuous blurring of moral and ethical norms with increased moral degeneration.

Jhumur herself admits, “Ma-in law went in for rigorous Namaz”, which implies that she is married to a religious family. When her mother in-law asked Jhumur to offer Namaz and to pray for Haroon, she says, “... I do not know how...” (Nasrin, 1992, p. 105) Jhumur’s reply bewildered and shocked her mother-in-law because, knowledge of religion and religious rites are natural expectations from a Muslim man or woman. Her mother-in-law instantly interrogated her, “Don’t you know how to read the *Quran*? How’s that possible? What kind of woman are you?” (Nasrin, 1992, p. 195) Finally, she advised Jhumur, “... pray to Allah so that Haroon is able to get out of the mess.” (Nasrin, 1992, p. 106) All this shows that Jhumur’s in-laws are strong believers in religion and God’s benevolence. As a pious woman, Jhumur’s mother-in-law thinks that Haroon could be pulled out of the business mess only by God and hence the advice to Jhumur. But Jhumur debunks her mother-in-law’s belief in religion and calls it superstition.

All the major religions in the world, be it Islam or Christianity or Judaism or Hinduism strongly believe in a supreme power governing the universe. Religion is not a superstition nor is it a meaningless institution. The concept of mystery, miracles and mysticism are still there despite tremendous progress of science. It is difficult to imagine a society without religion because; religion regulates life and brings harmony among people. Jhumur's disrespect towards religion exhibits want of knowledge about the significance of spiritual life. Thus, Haroon's upbringing in a religious Muslim family reflects in the lines:

One day Haroon decided to miss office. He stayed at home to arrange the visit of Moulavis and organize the Milad which was to take place in the evening. He kept himself busy from the morning with the three Moulavis reading the *Quran*. There was a heavy smell of attar in the air and I felt as if a death had occurred ... (Nasrin, 1992, p. 159)

This shows Haroon's upbringing in a religious family which he wants Jhumur to get used to. However, Jhumur has her own plans and blasphemous thinking that clashes with her husband's. She rails at the use of *attar* (a kind of special perfume used by Muslims on religious occasions). For a follower of religion, Jhumur is a treacherous and unfaithful wife with no sense of fidelity to her husband. She commits adultery, gets impregnated by Afzal and her bare breasts bearing marks of red patches caused by Afzal's love-bites are all acts against religion. It is a sheer infidelity which no religion approves.

Jhumur debunks religion when her mother-in-law said, as a response to a debate going on about whether Jhumur would give birth to a boy baby or a girl baby. Her *Ma-in-law* demonstrates resignation to the will of God as she says "We'll accept which ever Allah gives us." (Nasrin, 1992, p. 176) Jhumur's reaction to the mother-in-law's faith, "I wondered if anyone would want to know why x matched x and not y," (Nasrin, 1992, p. 176) exposes her scientific understanding behind a human birth. Jhumur is a staunch believer in the argument of science which asserts that x gene matches x gene to make a girl or x matches with y to make a boy. But religion believes in God's intervention in the creation of a child. According to Islam it is God who decides whether a boy or a girl should be created from the womb of a pregnant lady. Here Charles Darwin's *on the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1895) deserves mention. Although Darwin based his theory of the origin of species on science and is well-received and acknowledged, still the church believes in the Authority of God and the hand of a divine power behind any creation. Jhumur's understanding of x gene and y gene is scientifically true which is outweighed by her in-law's religious blindness.

Religion does not divest women of complete freedom; rather, all the religions have a reverential attitude towards women. Hinduism calls wife "*Ardhangini*" and "*Sahadharmini*". Religion prescribes mutual understanding and compatibility between the husband and the wife. The husband should respect the wife and *vice-versa*. Obedience and allegiance are the pre-requisites of a happy conjugal life. Jhumur wants her husband to obey her while she makes some unjust demands to which Haroon fails to subscribe. Jhumur becomes a teacher and without waiting for Haroon's permission joins a school giving Haroon the impression that she is no longer under his control. Religion disapproves such behaviour of a wife. Jhumur represents

Nasrin every inch. Nasrin is an atheist and critical about religion. She believes that religious rules only subordinate women and make them only 'sex objects. No religion subscribes to this view. In fact, religion is an institution that establishes peace, harmony and solidarity in the society.

Lajja (1993) is Taslima Nasrin's masterpiece catapulting her to international fame overnight. It unravels in facts and figures the fierce riot that erupted in Bangladesh at the backdrop of the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in India on December 6, 1992. The plot of the novel revolves around a certain Bengali Hindu family, namely Dutta family comprising Sudhamoy, the patriarch, Kiranmoyee, the mother, Niranjan the son and Nilanjana, the daughter. The novel shows how different members of the family felt about the communal riot in their own ways. Taslima herself calls the book as "a book written against communalism" (Nasrin, 2007a, p. 260). The book is dedicated "To the people of Indian subcontinent." (Nasrin, 1993, preface i) It was published in February, 1993 in Bangladesh and sold over 60,000 copies before it was banned by government five months later. *Lajja* begins with the inscription, "Let another Name for Religion be Humanism." (Nasrin, 1993, preface i)

Sudhamoy recollects those days of trials and tribulations in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) where Bengali youths irrespective of language, religion and cultural background made sacrifices and participated in different national movements. The Language Movement of 1952, the United Fronts Elections of 1954, The Education Movement of 1962, The six clause Movement of 1962, The General Elections of 1970 and the freedom movement of 1971- all these movements that led to the birth of Bangladesh witnessed a whole hearted participation of Bengalis irrespective of religious background. Religion, caste and creed did not come in the way of the Bengalis in these movements. Sudhamoy observes a declining graph of the Hindu population in Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan): In 1901, 33.1 percent of the population of East Bengal was Hindu. In 1911, this figure went down to 31.5 percent. In 1921, it was 30.6 percent. In 1931, it had further decreased to 29.4 percent and in 1941; it was only twenty-eight percent. Within ten years after the division of India in 1947, the percentage of Hindus went down from twenty eight percent to twenty two percent. (Nasrin, 1994, p. p. 10-11)

The statistics makes it clear that Bangladeshi Hindus started moving out of the country in to India as "..... the division of the subcontinent (India) on communal lines had left the borders open for Hindus to escape to India." (Nasrin, 1993, p. 10) Sudhamoy further observed that the religious fundamentalists particularly, Muslim fundamentalists had once opposed the freedom movement of 1971. Now to his utter dismay and discomfort Sudhamoy observes, "It was the same group of people who were behind the ruthless crusade against Hindus in 1990, these were the hooligans who had broken Hindu temples and burnt down Hindu shops and houses." (Nasrin, 1994, p.12) The fundamentalists in Bangladesh devoured the Hindus just because Hindus were not Muslims. Sudhamoy is thoroughly confounded and perplexed as he discovers that the Hindu identity of the minority in Bangladesh was responsible for their brutal killings and shocking communalism. Some Hindus destroyed Babri Masjid in India; this does not mean that the Bangladeshi Hindus destroyed it. He finds himself answerless when a question

comes to his mind "... why should he be responsible for all this?" (Nasrin, 1994, p.12) Terror and mad communal frenzy makes Maya restless who decides to leave the house and stay at a Muslim friend's house to avoid being a victim of violence. But instantly she remembers, "*La ilahailallahu Muhammadir Rasullillah* is all that you need to say to become a Muslim that is just what I'll do, I will call myself Feroza, Begum" (Nasrin, 1994, p. 12) The novelist maintains, "... all she (Maya) had known from the time she was very young was that the National religion was Islam and that she and her family belong to Hindu minority which often had to make compromises with the system." (Nasrin, 1994, p.13) The Bangladeshi Hindu minority had no option other than compromising with the Muslims for their survival. However, Nasrin's depiction of such extreme communalism has been contested in the literary circles of Bangladesh as myriads of intellectuals had raised their voice for the minority during the violence.

The novelist depicts the circumstances under which Suranjan had to sell off his house, gardens etc. Maya was kidnapped when she was barely 10. She returned home after two days of her kidnap. There were anonymous threat of kidnapping Maya again, the neighbours used to "invade their orchards, pluck the fruit from the trees, trample the vegetable garden, strip the flowers from the garden and there was nothing they could do." (Nasrin, 1994, p.15) This shows how the minority Hindus are tortured in Bangladesh. Demolition of Babri Masjid created a tumultuous condition in Bangladesh and the Muslim youths shouted the slogans, "Let's catch a Hindu or two, eat them in the morning and evening too...." (Nasrin, 1994, p.17). An uncertain future loomed large for the Hindus in Bangladesh in 1992. Hindu women, as Nasrin views, are not safe in Bangladesh. Asit Ranjan's conversation with Sudhamoy gives a fair idea about the precarious situation of the Hindus, "Maya, after all, is just a little girl. It is not as if she faces the dangers that plague our young women. In fact we had sent our young daughter Utpala away to Calcutta because she could not even attend college without being teased and threatened." (Nasrin, 1994, p.17) Thus, *Lajja* depicts a communally volatile society spurred by fundamentalism and fanaticism.

The novel pinpoints a fact that although Bangladesh claims to be a secular country, there is always an undercurrent of discrimination on the basis of religion. The Hindus are tortured, humiliated and deprived in every possible way. Hence the novelist questions:

Secularism was supposed to be one of the strong beliefs of Bengali Muslim, especially during the war for independence, when everyone had to co-operate with one another to win victory. What had happened to all those people after independence was won? Did they not notice the seeds of communalism being sown in the national framework? ((Nasrin, 1994, p.55)

Nasrin questions the sudden banishment of secularism from the soil of Bangladesh and argues as to why the leaders of the society failed to prevent the spawning of communalism when it was gradually gaining ground in the country. Communalism in the country was spread by fundamentalists who should be exterminated root and branch. Suranjan becomes furious at the communal development and says:

They (Muslims) are angry when a Mosque is destroyed, don't they realize that Hindus will be just as angry when

temples are destroyed? Just because one Mosque has been demolished, must they destroy hundreds and hundreds of temples? Does not Islam profess peace? (Nasrin, 1994, p.55)

Suranjan has a secular view to offer. He feels that all religions preach the same ideologies. Islam itself preaches peace but the fundamentalists are causing breach of peace in the society and the government as well as the public is silent. Thus, Suranjan recalls the statistics of how many Hindu temples were destroyed and Hindus killed in the riots of 1979, 1990 and 1992 respectively. Suranjan asserts that riots are caused not for love of any particular religion but "...their main aim is to loot and plunder" (Nasrin, 1994, p.61). Islamisation and declaring Bangladesh as Islamic state had a depressing effect on the minorities like, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians because they also fought for the independence of Bangladesh. Suranjan believed in humanism and abolition of religions. He was a secularist and humanist. His belief was:

Let all those brick-built buildings of worship be smashed into smithereens. Let there be no *mandirs, masjids, girjas* and *gurudwaras* and after they are all destroyed, we will build on their ruins beautiful flowers, gardens and schools for children. For the good of man, the place of worship should be hospitals, orphanage, schools and universities..... Let the other name of religion be humanity. (Nasrin, 1994, p.164).

Suranjan believed in a society without religious or cultural barriers. He nurtured respect for all and earnestly believed that religion creates divide and therefore, the buildings for religious performances should be replaced by secular institutions so that successive generations embrace humanism and live peacefully in in harmony. However, the heartless kidnap of his sister Maya, just for no reason made him violently rebellious and so he says, "come, let's go and set the Tara masjid on fire tonight." ((Nasrin, 1994, p.163) Suranjan turns communal because the law of the country forced him to be so. In a significantly meaningful and loaded statement Suranjan says, "I used to call myself a human being, and I believed in humanism. But these Muslims did not let me stay human. They made me a Hindu." (163) Thus Suranjan, a secular and humanitarian person gets communally driven and commits crimes unexpected of him. Sudhamoy also feels the same way that riots are simply perversion of humanity. Suranjan avenges the Muslims for the brutal kidnap and murder of Maya by raping a Muslim girl called Shamima. His revenge gave him a great self-satisfaction. This is how Suranjan a staunch believer in humanism became a communal Hindu. At home in Bangladesh, noted writers and intellectuals also raised their voice against Taslima. Ahmad Sharif is quoted as saying:

I think as a writer Taslima Nasrin is very immature. The book *Lajja* that has brought her honour and fame, terribly suffers from imbalance, as if a proper balance could not be maintained. The minority is marginalized in all the countries of the world. It is an eternal fact. They are always sickened by the narrow mindedness of the majority. But the people with broader and generous mentality always stand by them. The number of secular, democratic and generous minded people is not few. But in Taslima's writing such people find no mention. (Nasrin, 1996, p.p. 17-18)

Ahmed Sharif comes down heavily on Taslima Nasrin for focusing only on the negative aspects of Bangladeshi

society. He charges Nasrin of being fallacious. The famous poet of Bangladesh Shamsur Rahman on the other hand, states, “ Despite being from the Majority belt, the picture she has depicted of the minority being tortured, especially mental torture, looting- of course has not taken place that much, proves that she has done a responsible job.” (Nasrin, 1996, p. 19) The illustrious poet appreciates Nasrin’s realistic depiction of the torture meted out to the minority in Bangladesh. Salman Rushdie, the famous author of *Satanic Verses* commends Nasrin in a letter to her and calls her a “an advocate of free love.....” India, showed a mixed response to Taslima’s *Lajja*. Muslims as a whole denounced her as a “bad woman” and “blasphemous”. The fundamentalists demanded her execution. At the same time, the Hindus in India seemed to take much interest in the novel. There are charges, as Nasrin herself says in her autobiography *Dwikhandita* that even progressive thinkers like Ahmad Sofa had written, “Lajja is an obstruction in the unity of two Banglas.” Nasrin mentions leftist cinema Director Mrinal Sen who says, “Instead of calling *Lajja* a book, it is better to call it stanching rubbish.” (Nasrin, 1996, p 293)

Forashi Premik (2002), is Taslima Nasrin’s most noteworthy novel centering around Nilanjana’s desperate quest for love and independence in a strange and unknown city of France far away from Calcutta (India). Nilanjana Dutta, the protagonist is well educated and married to a Bengali restaurant owner in Paris called Kishanlal. Kishanlal made her a wife, supplied her everything a wife needed but failed to respect her wishes and desires. So, his luxurious apartment seemed to Nilanjana a ‘gilded cage’ where she felt stifled within its friendless confines. Her marriage turned her into a house keeper and a sex object which never satisfied her and therefore, she wanted to get out of this boredom. In such state of mental depression and boredom, she met a handsome French man called Benoir Dupont. She fell in love with Benoir, established physical relation with him and tried to fulfill her desire of leading life on her own terms. Benoir introduced Nilanjana to “the streets, the cafes and art galleries of Paris” but her passionate, sexually liberating relation with Benoir did not last long as Nilanjana realized that Benoir’s first priority was himself and not the woman he loved. Now the process of self- discovery begins.

Forashi Premik translated as *French Lover*, throws light on Nilanjana or Nila’s desire for freedom. Nila is a Bengali girl from Calcutta whose family is deeply rooted in Indian cultural and religious beliefs. Nila feels lonely at home therefore, in her absence she calls up Sanal, whom she knows to be “infamous for fooling around with other people’s wives, pouncing on them and eloping with them.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 63). No doubt, it is monotonous to be alone at home without somebody around to talk to, but Nila’s act of talking to Sanal and inviting him to her house in her husband’s absence speaks volumes about her character which Hinduism does not permit. Nila goes out alone in a strange city when Kishan is away, because she wanted to break the monotony. At the same time, Hinduism teaches that the wife should respect with all her being but Nila seems to be least interested in what her religion/belief system teaches. Her attitude towards her husband reflects as the novelist says, “The next night Kishan came back home to find Nila sitting on the sofa and watching T.V with her feet up on the coffee table.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 69)

Kishan is exasperated by her ‘unwomanly’ behavior and he express her dissatisfaction over Nila’s behavior.

Taslima’s protagonists are revolutionary who hardly bother about cultural or religious restrictions. Nila, being obsessed with the idea of financial independence finds out a job for herself as a worker, packing computer in boxes. Her husband doesn’t know it and when he learns it, he gets furious and wants her to give up the job. But Nila never gives up. This is against Hinduism because Hinduism asks women folk to be obedient to their husbands. Nila rejects Kishan’s idea that he should suggest her which job she should do, and so Kishan charges Sunil the mediator, “what girl is this you found for me, Sunil- she does not obey me.” (72) Hinduism is particular about wife obeying the husband because, it is a Hindu belief that *pativrata* women are spared from the pains of rebirth.

Nila emerges as a woman of extremely loose moral who experienced sexual encounter with Sushanta in Calcutta before her marriage with Kishanlal. After abandoning Kishanlal in Paris, she enters a highly indisciplined life in the house of Danielle, her friend. She caters to the lesbian desires of Danielle and then established a strong physical relation with Benoir Dupont whom she had met on the aircraft as she was coming back to Paris after Molina’s (her mother) death. A simple meeting with a stranger without any knowledge about him, was enough for Nila to throw her body to the wild lust of the Frenchman. The novelist expresses Nila’s ecstasy over the sexual gratification that Benoir gave her and compares it with her husband Kishanlal:

She had only ever been touched by two male organs in her whole life. Sushanta’s, she had not even looked at for shame and Kishan’s when her glance fell on it once by chance, was the size of little finger or the tail of a rat. If his penis was an anthill Benoir’s was the Himalaya in comparison..... (Nasrin, 2006, p. 184)

Nila could see in her complete reality so far as her moral standard is concerned in the above description the novelist gives. She forgets and even purposely dishonours the religion she comes from. She discusses her sexual encounters with different men without least inhibition. She strongly believes that moral codes and ethical norms are baseless, meaningless and it is practised only by people without common sense. She brazenly criticizes and protests against the religious rites and practices as she explains to Benoir, her new-found love, “In the Vedic age we all ate beef. Then the Brahmins introduced certain restrictions to differentiate themselves and they gave up beef. Slowly, the castes below them also followed suit. That is how it became status symbol not to eat beef and it became a custom.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 79). What Nila says is historically true, but it is an open dishonour to the religion if one thinks that not eating beef is a custom to elevate one’s social status. She is equally critical about the deities and the sacred things in Hinduism. This becomes clear when the novelist states: “Nila thought if she (Morounis whom Nila met by chance) had grown up in Calcutta, she would have been religious, worshipped Shiva and bathed in the dirty Ganga.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 194). Thus, Nila flays everything about religion and craves for a life full of sexual pleasure outside marriage. She throws to the wind all restrictions imposed by religion about morality and interprets sex outside marriage with Benoir thus, “This was not mere sex, it was genuine love. It soothed the body,

relaxed it and cooled it. It cheered the soul, broadened and brightened the spirit.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 205) Nila only understands that sex must give complete pleasure even if it is against religious/socio-cultural norms. She feels that one, who gives her sexual satisfaction, gives her real love. Nila’s sexual encounters with Benoir made her feel “some one really loved her, truly loved her.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 203) Her concept of love is different from the one taught to an Indian Bengali Hindu by religion. She says to Benoir, “When I love, this is how I love – One hundred percent.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 217). Nila’s concept of love is insalubrious, ghoulish and insurrectionary.

Nila is absolutely disrespectful to religion. She enjoys flaunting her disbelief in her religion. When her father Anirban advises, “Go after your mother’s *shradhh*”, she was indifferent as the novelist says, “Nila had no interest in Molina’s *shradhh*. She saw no point in feeding people and calling the priest.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 155) Religion means nothing to her, but her father’s unflinching faith in religion comes to light when he says to Nila, “Your mother’s spirit will suffer. Don’t behave like this.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 155) She calls the rituals and rules of Hinduism “a bunch of illogical rules and pointless emotions” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 159) When Nila was boarding the flight for Paris, her brother Nikhil gave a bottle containing her mother’s ashes to Nila. She returned it to him instantly saying, “Ma is not ashes to me.” (Nasrin, 2006, p. 162). Of course, she values Molina more than ashes, but it is a Hindu religious belief that the ashes of one’s near one has a spiritual significance. Nila’s defiance of religion can be attributed to her extreme love of freedom without interference. She wants to live life on his own terms. She is not a weak woman to be crushed by adverse circumstances. She knows how to struggle and assert her freedom. She leaves Kishan because she felt Kishan tried to control and restrict her movement on religious grounds. She disapproves of Kishan’s command and therefore leaves him.

Conclusion

The novels under study portray bold, educated young women subverting societal restrictions, norms and dictates finding out their ways despite all odds. Only Maya in *Lajja* appears relatively less volatile and revolutionary. These protagonists represent Nasrin’s ideal heroines destabilizing established socio-cultural and religious norms. The paper asserts that Nasrin’s criticism of religion is based on her rational and scientific understanding of issues in life. However, it remains a fact that there are mysteries and perplexities of life for which adequate explanations cannot always be found. The elements of nature sunshine, wind, storm and rain – affect man in diverse ways and these are, to a large extent, beyond his control. Hence, religion plays an important role in provoking man’s thought and inspiring him for certain plausible ideals such as honesty, discipline, hospitality, cooperation, harmony and so on and so forth. Dismissing religion as corrupting society amounts to attack on the sentiment of the people professing faith in various religions.

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