

## **Identity Crisis in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja***

**Ms. Meenakshi**

Phd Research Scholar

Department of English

BPSMV, Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat, Haryana

E-mail: mruhilma@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:-** Taslima Nasrin is known as one of the most powerful voices in the literary canon of the Bangladeshi English literature and her best known work *Lajja* is considered as a good example of identity crisis. In this novel, the identity crisis is faced by Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Before moving on to discuss the novel, one should have some information about the novelist, Taslima Nasrin. Taslima Nasrin was born in 1962 in Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan. She is a Bangladeshi doctor cum author who has been living in exile since 1994. Early in her literary career, she wrote mainly poetry and published poems focusing chiefly on the female oppression. She shifted to prose in the early 1990s and wrote three collections of essays and four novels before 1993. In 1993, she wrote *Lajja* which represents a cross-section of Bangladesh after a long time of partition from Indian sub-continent. For this novel, she had to face the wrath of the Islamic fundamentalists. A fatwa was issued against her and she was forced to leave her mother land and spend the rest of her life on a foreign land like India, Sweden and France. The reasons behind this exile were the burning issues that she has raised in the novel. Some of these issues were identity crisis, religious and cultural conflicts, issues on linguistic grounds, mass killing of Hindu families and violence against women, especially Hindu women. Another reason behind this problematic situation was that she herself is a Muslim woman. She is from a majority community and speaks against the fundamentalist attitudes and behaviour of her community. This seems indigestible to Islamic fundamentalists and it uses all its powers to silent her voice. She received life threats and her book was also banned. But the result came the opposite of the general expectations. She emerged as a stronger voice than before and now a day, *Lajja* is cited as a perfect example by those who work on the issue of identity crisis, identity conflict and identity politics. The paper aims to assess the destruction of identity of a particular community in Bangladesh with the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri masjid in India. The reasons behind the emergence of the identity crisis will also be discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** Identity, Community, Fundamentalist, Bangladeshi, Religion.

**INTRODUCTION:** It shall be injustice to the novel and its novelist to discuss all the thematic concerns of the text in one paper because the novel raises many important issues. *Lajja* is the magnum opus of Taslima Nasrin. In it, she addresses the plight and misery of the Hindu population in Bangladesh. It is also taken as a threat to Bangladeshi nationalism. Before the timeframe shown in the novel, there was a kind of equality between different

religious groups. They fought together in the Language Movement and in the Liberation War. They used to share language, history and culture. But with the passage of time, changes start taking place. It should not be taken as a sudden change in the mind-set of the Muslim community of Bangladesh. Its roots can be seen spreading just after the Liberation War. It is also made clear in the novel.

“On 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1970, very early in the morning, those belonging to the Hindu Rishi sect in Sabahon village in the Daudkandi sub- district of Comilla were attacked by a mob of nearly four hundred people from nearby villages. The government has declared that Islam is the state of religion. If they want to stay in an Islamic country, all of you must become Muslims. If you don't become Muslims, you will have to run away from this country', they shouted.” (p.no. 61)

So, the demolition of the Babri masjid in 1992 was just an opportunity for the Islamic fundamentalists to show their inhumanity to the worst. This was a direct threat to the people of Hindu minority. It was a threat to their identity. This threat was felt not only by the traditional Hindus but also by the secular Hindus. These secular Hindus are represented by Dutta family in the text.

As identity consciousness increased in the Muslim community, the Bangladeshi society was divided forcefully into Muslims and non-Muslims. The non- Muslims were classified as Hindus under binary logic. Their identity was questioned. Now, the only factor that defined them was their religious identity. If they are identified as Muslims, they are safe but if they are Hindus, they should be worried and afraid about their well- being.

Here comes the question what is identity? Another question will be on what basis a person's identity is formed and who will decide his identity? The concept of identity is many fold and difficult to define. Many twentieth century leading scholars of identity like Erik Erikson and Leon Wieseltier wrote a lot on the concept of 'identity'. Samuel P. Huntington is another scholar who in his book *Who are We?* defines identity as an individual's or group's sense of self. It is a product of self- consciousness that they or we possess distinct qualities as an entity that differentiates me from you and us from them. It is the images of individuality and distinctiveness held and projected by a person and formed through relations with significant 'others'. In a layman's language, identity is who we are. It differentiates one person from the other and one group from another group. It cannot and should not be forced by anybody else. People make their identity under various circumstances of pressure, inducements and freedom. Besides ancestry, gender and age, people are free to define their identity as they want but they may not be able to put these identities into practice.

Identity becomes problematic when people find it difficult to achieve an identity as they are not allowed by those who own that identity. This is identity politics which in turn gives birth to identity crisis. People are unable to create identity of their choice but the so called protectors of that identity resist them from doing so, giving them an altogether different identity. In this novel, Dutta family is a metaphor for all these people. There are four family members in Dutta family. They are Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee, Suronjon and Nilonjana or

Maya. Sudhamoy is the head of the family who lives with his wife and children. He inculcated the values of secularism in his children and also convinced his wife to be secular as well. He identifies himself as an atheist, communist and Bangladeshi. He does not practise Hinduism. But he was realized by different people at many places if he is not a Muslim; he is categorized as a Hindu forcefully. He does many compromises in his life. There is no limit to the sacrifices of Dutta family. He has to sell his ancestral property in cheap prices to save his family when Maya was abducted by some unknown people and anonymous letters threatened them in various ways. So unwillingly, they sell their property.

“Life is short,’ Sudhamoy had said. ‘I want a carefree life with my children.’” (p.no. 23)

It remains just a dream to lead a carefree life. He has to give up wearing dhoti and starts wearing pajamas. He watches his juniors getting promoted while he remains on the same post till his retirement, even though he was eligible for the promotions. His wife, Kironmoyee stops applying vermilion on her head and gives up wearing conch shell bangles. However, Sudhamoy has a positive perspective for the hostile atmosphere of his country.

His son, Suronjon follows his father’s path. He never performs puja. There is no picture or idol of Hindu God or Goddess in his house. He has more Muslim friends than Hindus. He does not consider himself as Hindu or Muslim but as a human being. He is also denied jobs because he is a Hindu and does not greet the interviewers as ‘As -salamu- alaykum’. He was a brilliant student in the university but never got deserving marks in the exams.

Maya has to do many compromises as well. In her childhood, she was abducted by some people on the pretext of being a Hindu girl. Although, she came back by herself after a few hours, but it left its imprints on her mind forever. At the time of riots after demolition of the Babri masjid, she leaves her house to live at her Muslim’s friend’s house to save her life. She also changes her name for a short period of time.

“Apparently you can become a Muslim by chanting “La ilaha illallah muhammadur rasulullah. I’ll do that and call myself Firoja Begum.” (p.no. 18)

She pays the highest price for being a minority woman. Her abduction for twice first as a child and then as a young girl of twenty one adds to this fact. Some people forcefully enter the Dutta house and takes Maya away with them. They must be Muslims because they call themselves by Muslim names as Kironmoyee confirms. Her future remains uncertain. She never comes back. Her family get information of a girl’s dead body but nobody dares to go and confirm its identity. All the family members suffer from identity crisis. But there is a slight difference between them. Kironmoyee and Maya are somewhere aware of the cruel reality of their beloved nation. Many a times, Kironmoyee requests her husband and son to go to India. No doubt, she considers Bangladesh as her nation but she also wants to see her family alive and safe. Maya also supports her but all in vain. Sudhamoy and Suronjon never agree to them. Like his father, Suronjon is also an atheist. He has no emotional contacts with any temple or the idols installed in them but the selective destruction of temples and massacre only of Hindus forces him to re-assess reality. His bitterness increases when he witnesses the

bitter polarization of the country into the binaries of us and them. This happens when Hyder said in anger

“After Bangladesh was created, all of you thought that in this secular country all your rights would be protected. However, when this country became an obstacle to you people realizing your dreams- all of you were deeply hurt.” (p.no. 125)

It is the moment he realizes his classification as being made a Hindu and his friend considers himself as Muslim. He feels deeply hurt when he is held responsible for the demolition of a mosque in another country he has never visited. He is taken aback by this forced identity of an enemy and outsider in his own country by his fellow citizens. On top of that, he is completely unable to show his anger and resistance. In the ending chapters, he prefers the migration to India after losing his dear sister, Maya. He wants to migrate to India because there he'll not be forced to practise Hinduism which his country cannot offer.

So, it can be concluded that the idea of oneself which we commonly perceive as our identity is not based on a fixity of meaning. It's an abstract idea. It shifts its positions based on the changes of time and space. The Hindus of Bangladesh were known as Hindustanis before partition, and then known as East Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis after the Liberation War. That time also, their identities were changed but it was done by them willingly but the identity of an enemy, an outsider, a Hindu is imposed upon them against their wish. Here aroused a conflict between where an individual wants to place himself and where the society places him forcefully. Dutta family consider their primary identities as Bangladeshi citizens but they are made second class citizen on the basis of their religion.

Taslina Nasrin deserves appraisal because of the clarity and sincerity with which it raises the question of identity construction and identity crisis. Of course, migration is not an ideal solution to this problem. Not only Bangladesh and not only with Hindus, but it is for all the countries which claim itself to be secular. Citizens of one country should not be blamed or tortured by the actions of the people of the same community in some other country if they are not involved in it. Security should be maintained but not on this cost as happened in Bangladesh. It becomes more pathetic when the people who share same language, history and culture are considered 'others' or 'unwanted'.

## REFERENCES:

1. Huntington, Samuel. *Who are we?* UK: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd., 2004. Print.
2. Johnstone, Ronald. *Religion in Society*. U.S.A.: Pearson Education Inc., 2007. Print.
3. Mehta, Minu. *Looking through the identity lens: A Cross Cultural Perspective with Special Reference to Taslima Nasrin's Lajja*. 13 Feb., 2014
4. Nasrin, Taslima. *Lajja*. Trans. Anchita Ghatak. New Delhi: Penguin, 2014. Print.
5. Nasrin, Taslima. *No Country for Women*. New Delhi: Vitasta Publishers, 2003. Print.