Ars Artium: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture
ISSN (Print): 2319-7889 • ISSN (Online): 2395-2423
Vol. 10, January 2022
Pp. 75-82
https://www.arsartium.org

Ethnic Cleansing in Bangladesh with Special Reference to Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*

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Abstract

The Bengali people are an ethno-linguistic group dwelling in the Bengal region of South Asia. Speaking Bengali mostly, its native population is divided between the independent country, Bangladesh and the Indian states by name, West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and some pockets of Manipur.

The Indian subcontinent has a chequered history of intolerance of religious character, particularly since 1947 when British India was vivisected into Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. However, religious solidarity could not keep Pakistan intact as it was partitioned in 1971, forming Bangladesh, the erstwhile East Pakistan, based on linguistic lines as the rulers imposed Urdu on East Pakistan, to the consternation of Bengalis. In the ensuing bloody war, India poked its nose into the embroiled warfare as minorities started pouring in and so it sent its troops aiding the people of East Pakistan and ensuring freedom of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has prided itself on its secular credentials since it gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Though the constitution stipulates Islam as the state religion, it also upholds the principle of secularism. But analysts point out that hard-line Islamist groups have gained prominence over the years who have failed to tackle the rising religious intolerance and fundamentalism. "The government has for political expediency compromised with the fundamentalist forces, particularly in the backdrop

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of constrained democratic polity" (Nasrin 78). They copy a leaf from the book of their counterparts, Bharatiya Janata Party (of India), though less aggressive, owing to the established Indian democratic polity and solid secular foundations. The paper seeks to explore ethnic cleansing as comprehended in *Lajja* (1993).

Keywords: Ethnic cleansing, fundamentalism, secularism, intolerance, democracy

The term, ethnic cleansing, is analogous to mass murder or extermination, genocide, final solution or holocaust. The main intent is to blot out a particular community or race from a geographical location with the active connivance of the state machinery. Ethnic cleansing have several faces – victimization, political repression, unjust incarceration, massacres, mayhem and genocide. It is really a travesty to see that the term 'ethnic' was originally used to denote different racial and cultural groups. It has been used to root out a particular group belonging to a large community. Bengalis are the fourth-largest ethnic group in the world, after the Han Chinese, Anglo-Saxons and Arabs. Thus, they are the second largest ethnic group within the Indo-Europeans. Bengali Muslims, who live mainly in Bangladesh, primarily belong to the Sunni denomination. However, in the Indian subcontinent, ethnic cleansing has generally taken the form of religious persecution of minorities under some pretext. Divided into two parts, the paper explores the issue in question followed by the plot of the novel, *Lajja* in the first section and the thematic engagement of the issue in the second part.

I

The term minority is generally used in pejorative sense and it denotes feebleness and powerlessness of a community instilling fear psychosis and triggering inferiority complex that they are hopelessly doomed to be on the margins. Bangladesh has been dominated by Sunni Muslims, who, by and large, have wedded to pluralism and religious tolerance. Nonetheless, the rise of communal-minded minuscule of strong nexus of economically strong Muslims, who are able to pull strings, are on the pedestal in the corridors of political power, seek to expect the minorities to conduct their lives at the majority's beck and call.

Communal forces have been on rampage despite strong democratic institutions in the subcontinent. The misery of Hindus in Bangladesh is perhaps more appalling for the Muslim youngsters run amuck exploiting the minorities in all the ways owing to the cultural lag and "economic instability". Communal forces are blind proponents of parochial notions of safeguarding the interests of community and with their dubious activities keep on stroking flames of hatred and flagrant notions of religious intolerance,

having been blind to the real nature of fears which are basically resultant of economic insecurity. Thus the expression, ethnic cleansing, is intended to press into service to mobilize people by harping on pseudo-religious sentiments, making their respective religions either dogmatism or skewed religious fundamentalism. Ethnic cleansing has yet to be recognised as an independent crime under international law. The term was first used in the 1990s pertaining to the conflicts arising from the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Ethnic cleansing is generally taken recourse by a religious group with the tacit conspiracy of the state to exterminate another group employing brutal methods. Therefore, it brings about post-traumatic stress disorder as it can be perceived by the agony of many in the minorities, depression as well as other forms of psychological morbidity, massive psychic trauma as shown in the novel, *Lajja*.

Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* is an artistic indignant expression response against the anti-Hindu riots that surfaced continually in large chunks of Bangladesh, after the demolition of the Babri mosque in India on 6 December 1992. The novel clearly brings out the fact that communal sentiments were whipped up to the dismay of the Hindu minority of Bangladesh who were ruthlessly subjected to all sorts of inhuman treatment. Taslima Nasrin, in her realistic narration, sheds light on the traumatic experiences of a Hindu family caught in the vortex of religious persecution. The thrust of the novel is about the family of Duttas consisting of four focal characters – Sukumar Dutta, Kiranmoyee who are husband and wife and their son and daughter, Suranjan and Maya.

II

The focus of the novel is the exodus of the minorities and the studied malfeasance of the Muslims to force the minorities either to conversion into Islam or leave Bangladesh for good. The predicament of the Hindus in particular and other non-Muslims in general in Bangladesh as evidenced in *Lajja* could not be mitigated owing to the passivity of state. The communal forces ran berserk preying upon the Hindus after the demolition of the Babri mosque. Taslima Narin's novel, *Lajja*, shows how the blatant discrimination against the minorities results in the minority complex of the Hindus in Bangladesh.

In the post-demolition of the Babri mosque, the events that take place in Bangladesh make the Hindus despair of any prospects. Blatant intolerance to minorities and disregarding some of their natural rights, legitimizing discrimination against them make the minorities shudder with fear. On many an occasion, the

Hindus are the targets of public wrath and the butt of their laughter. Like many postcolonial societies, which have failed to catch up with the pace of development with the rest of the world and are "locked themselves in the politics of blame" (34) as Said observes in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The Muslims, clinging to fundamentalism and refusing to switch over to modernity, direct their ire against their fellow countrymen, Hindus, at every slightest pretext. They are cowed into submission and are denied to some of the privileges and rights bestowed upon the majority. In *Lajja,* Nirmalendu Goon, who confines himself in a rented room after the riots that broke out in the wake of the demolition of the Babri mosque, makes a clinical observation regarding the precarious position of the minorities in India and Bangladesh: "The Muslims in India are in a position to fight, because India is a secular state. Here, power is in the hands of the fundamentalists. There is no scope to fight in this country. The Hindus here are second-class citizens" (Nasrin 81).

Instigating violence against Hindus and perpetrating indignities on them become commonplace activities in postcolonial Bangladesh. Suranjan considers himself a nonentity in its milieu. He is a staunch an atheist but traumatized as he has been, he loiters about the streets unheeding the danger to his life. As he moves into a street, he comes upon a pariah dog howling at him and he is terrified to the core. At the same time he hears the shrieks of some boys running after him and calling names. Without turning back, he runs as fast as his legs can carry him. His body breaks into a sweat but he keeps running. He stops at a corner and looks back furtively but cannot find a trace of humanity around him. All this connotes how individuals are struck down with minority complex when the majority is skewed to screw up the minorities. The complex is resultant of the high-handedness of the majority who are hell bent on subjugating and vassalizing the non-Muslims in general and Hindus in particular. They caused much suffering to Sudhamoy, Niranjan's father and forced him to wed to Islam. They are so dogmatic that they have mutilated his penis to make him a Muslim but the irony is that he is a staunch atheist. Later, his wife has been frightened and so she has stopped applying *sindoor* – vermilion mark that adorns the forehead of Hindu married women. Sudhamoy considers himself an atheist and communist, and Bangladeshi. It is ironical to see that he is not a practising Hindu but he is labelled as a Hindu. He has to sell away his ancestral property for a pittance. Their fate remains the same even later after the formation of Bangladesh. It is sheer travesty that the communal forces, generally backed up by the state, have succeeded to make his atheist son communal-minded.

The violent acts whipped up show the seamy side of the state right from the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. It openly panders to majority communalism, which is more dangerous than minority communalism because the former tries to wipe out minorities or compel them to practise the religion of the majority. Nasrin portrays the plight of the Hindus as discrimination against them is deeply institutionalized. The riots in the wake of the demolition of the temple is not the new trend, rather, it has always been a part of the country's political ethos dominated by Islamic ideologies. In the wake of the tearing down the Babri mosque, Muslim mobs in Bangladesh take to streets attacking the Hindus' homes. Nasrin reveals the brutality of the mob without mincing words. While the Hindus, like Sudhamoy and his family members, are waiting in their homes, the Muslim mob passing by their house rants and raves in all its fury: "Hindus, if you want to live, leave this country and go away" (Nasrin 100). Scores of Hindus are tortured and done to death and hundreds of Hindu temples have been razed to the ground. The attacks on them as shown in the novel are incited clandestinely under the nose of the government. The Sikh mob is followed by a Muslim one. Lenny in Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) watches the mayhem and conveys it through a powerful image: "Every short while a group of men, like a whirling eddy, stalls, and like the widening circles of a treacherous eddy dissolving in the mainstream, leaves in its centre the pulpy red flotsam of a mangled body" (35). As Kajal Debnath is agitated as Hindus are treated as second- class citizens and they are not considered to be an integral part of the social milieu. There is no Hindu in the administration. Since the formation of Pakistan, no Hindu has been appointed to the post of a secretary in government service. As awful reality stares into his face, Sudhamoy has resolved to leave for India with a great burden in his heart.

As communal virus preys on people, they fall upon one another with the ferocity of cannibals intending to chase the minorities out of their own lands. In *Tamas*, the Hindus and Sikhs have pulled out of Muslim areas and the Muslims have evacuated from the Hindu and Sikh pockets. In *Azadi* (1979), there is a mention about the Hindu population, which has been either driven out or completely exterminated. It is the show of strength and unable to withstand minorities run away from their own land. Running for life, Ranna in *Cracking India* comes upon a deserted village. Barring some animals, there is no one residing in it and the village puts on a deserted look. Later he watches the lurid scene of the mob of Sikhs and Hindus approaching the village. What happened to the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in 1947 across in some pockets in northern India was a genocide or ethnic cleansing, a precedent to another ethnic cleansing that took place at the birth of Bangladesh.

The treatment meted out to the Hindus in eastern Pakistan, later called Bangladesh, is tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Unable to withstand torture and onslaughts on their life, the Hindus start pouring in into India. Sudhamoy in *Lajja* cannot prevail upon many Hindus not to migrate but they brush aside his pleas as they dread hooliganism. The demolition of the Babri mosque has incurred the wrath of the Muslims and fearing assaults; the Hindus leave the country for good. The statistical information furnished by the novelist corroborates the fact that the Hindu population is on the decrease over the years: "In 33.1 per cent of the population of East Bengal was Hindu … In the early 1990s Hindus constituted around twenty per cent of the population" (Nasrin 10). It stands to reason that they have been driven out or else they, resenting the unfair treatment as aliens in their own land, move towards an uncertain address like hunted deer. Nasrin reasons out the unjustifiable stance of fundamental forces in Bangladesh, though unjust on any account, were incited by Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in India who masterminded the demolition of Babri mosque.

The vulnerability of women and their metamorphosis into possessions during holocaust is dealt in the novel. Nasrin gives a graphic description of the dangers that plague young women in Bangladesh. The local boys besides bullying, intimidate them, saying that they would abduct them. Sudhamoy narrates the story of a young girl whose sari has been stripped off in the middle of the street by a gang of boys. Sudhamoy reflects that it is the question of the weak bulldozed by the strong but not an issue of exploitation based on religion. Since women are vulnerable, men would like to put down them with an air of oppression. Hindu Bengali women live in utter disgrace and face inhuman treatment and discrimination.

The novelist examines succinctly the power relations existing among different persons and the trauma that such relations entail. The visitation of Maya's memories is so strong and profound that Suranjan, the Hindu boy, even in a state of drunkenness, shocked his friends by suddenly bursting into tears. He rests his head on a friend's shoulder and cries bitterly. He rolls on the filthy floor in anguish and his dirty cloths become even grimier. Then comes the return of the repressed, which remains alive in the unconscious. "They took Maya away last night" (Nasrin 70). Again on seeing a Hindu girl, he thinks of Maya: "How many of them were raping her at the same time? Five or seven? Or even more? Was Maya bleeding profusely?" (Nasrin 175). Suranjan is ashamed of entering his father's room, as though the shame of Maya's abduction is entirely his responsibility. He is so traumatized that he rapes a Muslim

girl. The unconscious hatred for Muslims which surfaces on and off, and leaving discretion and decency, molested her with all brutality.

Maya was wrongfully retained, concealed causing psychological trauma to the members of the family. Her abduction has brought about traumatic effects not only on the abducted one and the searching parents and her brother but also on the community in the vicinity. Gradually their health breaks down. There is loss of communication for days together among the members of the family. After this incidence she does not talk to anybody. "How strange she was – unresponsive, unrelenting and as unemotional as a corpse" (Nasrin 194). Suranjan is also unable to speak and so he pretends to be asleep. The eerie silence that haunts the house does not go unnoticed by Sudhamoy. His plight is like that of Kanshi Ram in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* who has gone through the same living inferno and finds himself before a long tunnel where he cannot see the other end. He feels so exposed, so naked and so defenseless that he stops wearing a turban, a symbol of dignity, since he has no dignity left. To top it all, along with the members of his family he finds himself at a loss of contact and of communication. After the partition trauma, they can neither share their feelings, nor put their thoughts into words that are too meagre to convey their anguish. The loss of communication throws them into a whirlpool of complete isolation and alienation, and making each a prisoner of his or her single self.

The tolerant ethos of the people living in the subcontinent as brought out by *Lajja* in particular and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* in general, can offer a workable solution. Whether Hindu or Muslim, the people engage in a broad spectrum of artistic activity. Both Hindus and Muslims worship local deity deo, in *Train to Pakistan* (1975). They share the *Hindustani* classical music and dance tradition, while they also appreciate nonclassical popular forms of their counterparts. Syncretic practices, in fact, should be appreciated and promoted and they will certainly mitigate the issue of blatant intolerance and religious persecution leading to ethnic cleansing.

Conclusion

To root out any community on the face of a particular country is unjust and an anathema in democratic polity bringing about great loss to the ethos of a country like India or Bangladesh. It also thwarts the pace of development of its economy as it had been unstable and this would be further aggravated owing to predominance of fundamentalism at the expense of national development. In *Lajja*, Suranjan

contemplates ruefully: "… that in a poor country inhabited by people of various religions and castes, only the dissemination of one religion was favoured … How can we spend so much money on Islamic matters when the economy is completely crippled" (Nasrin 186). What hurts him most is not the religious persecution but the forced identity thrust upon him by an anarchic system and his total inability to hold out any resistance. He shows predilection to migrate to India which does not compel him to embrace any creed against his wishes. A theocratic state or a state steeped in religious fundamentalism cannot live up to expectations of its citizens. Brushing aside genuine economic issues and ingenious ways to address legitimate grievances of people on the important economic front, Bangladesh pandered to whims and fancies of the lunatic fringe and its people wallowed in rabid discriminatory practices which are against the tenets of Islam. Given the ripple effect, India should also guard itself and stem in the tide of rabid forces of fundamentalism while strengthening its democratic and secular institutions and practices of syncretism by people of different faiths. It can safely be inferred the societies which have wedded to true democratic practices will flourish as they can safeguard diverse identities of people with a spirit of bonhomie.

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