

Readers' Forum

≡ Communal Time Bomb ≡

I hold in my hand a book open to the title page. Underneath the typeset print, *Lajja*, there is a crudely scrawled, delicate signature: "To Avanti, with best wishes, Taslima Nasrin". The title, *Lajja*, roughly translates to "shame" in English. Nasrin seems to use it to denote the feelings that have arisen in reaction to the human rights abuses against Hindus in post-independence Bangladesh.

Shame wells up in me as I hold the book, not as a reflection of what is inside, but rather ironically in reaction to the audience's divisive antagonism to Nasrin when she spoke at Wellesley College this past May. Though I had read and heard about Hindu-Muslim antagonism, this was the first time that I witnessed a real situation in which the two groups, so obviously threatened by each other, created mental barriers to a constructive dialogue.

My parents are moderately devout Hindus of the exodus generation, but my father has increasingly become a Hindu nationalist over the past few years. He had long ago exhorted me to read *Lajja* since he sees it as proof of the historical victimisation of Hindus by Muslims. He also concurs with most of the Western world in believing that Muslim women are oppressed and (though the Western world may not agree with him on this point) he correspondingly sees Hindu women as relatively unoppressed. So I came into this debate having heard mainly one side of the argument and wanting to

transcend my narrow knowledge of the issues. It frustrated me to see the younger generation, with the bonus of a once-removed perspective from our parents' prejudices, engaging in the same defensive arguments that have never gotten our parents anywhere.

My first memories of that night are of Taslima Nasrin, a well-known Bangladeshi writer, a smallish woman who looks exactly like she does on the back cover of her novel. She has short, dark hair and a face which remains in a constant expression of turbulent indifference. The face is almost childlike, yet she has the air of one who carries a heavy burden and has therefore learned to conserve her energy.

Nasrin condemns the human rights abuses (especially against women) of Muslim fundamentalists in her homeland. Much of her poetry is very feminist and poignantly realistic in its accounts of the abuses against women. Due to her condemnation of Islam's treatment of women, a death threat (*fatwa*) has been issued against her, so she travels carefully and defends her right as an artist to express any political belief, like Salman Rushdie. That night she read some of her poetry and some excerpts of her other writing followed by a question and answer session. It was during this session that the audience, laden with female students (Wellesley is a women's college) and Boston-area intellectuals in rapt attention, got a chance to express itself.

While most faces focused intensely

on Taslima's reactions, I watched the faces of the audience. One of the first questions was asked by a devout Muslim who happened to be a good friend of mine. She read the question from a piece of paper which she held in her hand. She asked how Nasrin could say that the Quran does not respect women when it states that "Paradise is at the foot of the mother" and cited another quote. Nasrin, in her broken English, responded basically that the Quran may say these things, but it also advocates violence against women. Some people in the audience retorted with comments in defence of Islam and one even asked how Nasrin lives with the guilt of having caused the deaths of numerous people in communal riots instigated by her writing. Other audience members booed in response to these comments and antagonised the Muslim contingent by apologising for the rudeness of commentators and for the noisy attendees. Unruly sections of the audience began jeering whenever people said something they disagreed with. As the crowd's noise and antics increased, tension and emotion also rose.

Then some audience members asked Nasrin whether she blamed the interpretation of Islam, and not the religion itself, for the human rights abuses against women in Bangladesh. Nasrin said something to the effect that she doesn't distinguish between religion and interpretation. Under her breath, someone in the audience murmured "Blasphemy" — quite a serious accusation to be made against

any speaker. As for Nasrin, she was clearly not becoming provoked and was instead — as I was, albeit a bit more wearily — observing the emotions that she was bringing out among these people. The fact that she was not provoked, however, seemed only to intensify the emotions in the audience. Like a lightning rod, Nasrin had become a medium through which all the hatred in the room passed and crystallised.

Not surprisingly, the reality of the human rights abuses against women in South Asia never even came up. We got so caught up in the theoretical, the emotional, and the moral that we never got to the practical. That women were being raped, oppressed and abused while we were sitting in a beautiful auditorium debating whether or not one who writes about the atrocities — no matter who she blames — is “just”.

In my view, most fundamentalisms oppress women and minorities since they often advocate a return to traditional ways of living. There are contradictory feminine ideals in most cultures, including Western ones, although we would like to think there are not. Though “paradise” may lie at the foot of the mother and (in Hinduism) earthly paradise may be visualised through a female *devi* figure, in both Hindu and Muslim culture women are limited to very specific, traditional roles, usually relating to their reproductive functions.

As soon as I left the auditorium that night, sobs of frustration and pain erupted from deep in my chest. What I had hoped to do by coming to Wellesley was to learn from other people’s perspectives that either of us could be “right”, but after this event, my idealism was sorely tested. We



Taslima Nasrin

Pana India

discussed the lecture in my South Asian politics class and it was wonderful to hear the variety of views on the affair. One woman, a Bangladeshi Muslim, said how she connected deeply with Nasrin’s patriotic prose and poetry, despite Nasrin implicating Islam in political abuses. If Nasrin’s writing were to condemn Hindu fundamentalism, I would love her work just the same.

In a way I feel burdened with having to work through a terribly complex issue that’s been politicised by my parents’ generation. Along with the *bhajans* and *Bharatnatyam* have been passed down to me, I’ve been slipped a little time bomb called “communalism” with the inscription: “To Avanti, With Best Wishes”. The British may have helped construct it, but it is my generation who must defuse it with minimal knowledge of how to go about it. My simple academic desire to see the South Asian community flourish in its diverse strength seems likely to die hard as the Muslims and Hindus, as well as the Buddhists in Sri Lanka and the Sikhs in Punjab, fight it out in the streets. It seems that we don’t even need a

conqueror to divide us anymore, we manage pretty well on our own.

At the end of the lecture forum, I thanked this small woman for implicitly agreeing to spur on our fears and passions and asked her to sign my book. As I handed her the book, I found in her smiling eyes what I had been vainly looking for in all the theoretical contortions of the audience members: a spark of humanity. She did not condemn the audience’s disrespectful behaviour arising from their angers, fears, and hatreds, but rather welcomed them as the very real feelings that arise

when people are dealing with serious issues. Her secure smile communicated to me that this was exactly why she gave up being a doctor to become a writer — art can provoke, but art can also be provocative. In time, perhaps even the angriest audience members may calm themselves enough to entertain the thought that “perhaps another perspective is just as valid as mine”. She asked my name and began signing the page.

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