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Portrayal Of Women: A Socio-Political Approach To Taslima Nasreen's Select Novels

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Characteristics of South Asian Writers:

Today, South Asian fiction in English is the wonder of the literary world. South Asian writers are creating new linguistic paradigms for the English language and are constantly winning or being short-listed for major international literary prizes.

Taslima Nasreen:

Taslima Nasreen is a Bangladeshi writer who has published poetry, essays, a syndicated newspaper column, and novels. She has received awards in India and Bangladesh for her work. She sprang into international consciousness when her novel, Shame, which depicts Muslim persecution of Bangladesh's Hindu minority, brought forth a death threat from Islamic militants. She had to flee from Bangladesh and lived in Sweden for some time. To "Times of India" she spoke: "For me secularism is a state where no religion exists. I don't believe in God." Though she condemns men, she has male friends and they have always stood up to her at the time of crisis.

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Themes and Techniques in Taslima's Novels:

Lajja, which spans over a period of thirteen days in the year 1992, is a mirror on the anti- Hindu riots that broke out in Bangladesh in retaliation to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India. Bangladesh witnessed a massive massacre of Hindus by Muslims. Its intent is to warn the people of Bangladesh that communalism is on the rise, that the Hindu minority is badly mistreated and that the secularism they once fought for is in grave danger. In the 'Preface' to the novel, Nasrin herself states the reason of writing the book:

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 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 ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. …Lajja is a document of our collective defeat. (1994: ix)

The novel opens with a helpless Hindu family comprising of four members - the father is a doctor named Sudhamoy Dutta, who has a patient and strong willed wife Kironmoyee, an educated but unemployed son Suranjan and a bright diligent girl Maya. The narrative is fast paced with numerous newspaper reports, infiltrating into the story which involves the Dutta household from 1947 to 1992. Nasrin takes the pain of keeping a record of numerous newspaper articles related to persecution of Hindus by Muslim in 1947, 1952, 1964, 1971, 1978, 1988, 1990 and 1992, incorporating them within the narrative to show the shame on religion and politics. It was not only a matter of communal violence that drove the Hindus out of their homes in Bangladesh; it was also a serious breach in the faith one person can have on the other. *Lajja* addresses the dark realities of the violence which is not

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a spontaneous outburst against a community, but has, along with it, the ulterior motives of gratifying the greedy desires of property, money, and women. Nasrin talks about the essence of riots through the words of Sudhamoy where he says:

Riots are not like floods that you can simply be rescued and given some murk to survive on temporarily. Nor are they like fires that can be quenched to bring about relief. When a riot is in progress, human beings keep their humanity in check.

Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply a perversion of humanity… (165)

The story of the Duttas - Sudhamoy, Kironmoyee, and their children, Suranjan and Maya – is more interesting. For generations they have been land owners, possessing coconut and betel nut plantations, yards and yards of rich paddy fields, a house that stands on over two big has of land near Myemsingh, what is now in Bangladesh. After the partition of India in 1947, when most of the Hindus left for India, a secular country, Jinnah, the Governor-General of Pakistan, assured Hindus security and equal rights in Pakistan. He, for the sake of his vote and power, declared that a man was Punjabi or Bengali before he was Hindu or Muslim. They shared a common language, culture, and economy. Yet, by drawing up nationalism against religious fundamentalism, the novelist emphasizes the not so ancient or organic borders that separate West Bengal from Bangladesh and in effect says:

"Let's forget about our historical connection to India; in Bangladesh we must remain faithful to the secular ideals we have fought for. From this day onwards, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists will not be identified by their respective religion, but by their identity as Pakistanis." (87)

In addition to the major themes like fundamentalism, feminist concerns and home and homelessness with which Taslima Nasreen is intensely preoccupied with her novels portray numerous themes and employ numerous techniques, which are

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clearly perceptible. A novel unless and until it is a fantasy, cannot exist without a social milieu. The major characters do not move in vacuum; a novelist needs to create a fitting environment in which the characters move and operate. This social milieu creates the richness and depth in the fictional world of an author; while the author is preoccupied with his creation that deals with the themes, certain undercurrent and latent themes cannot be ignored as they weave the fabric of the novel. They may not be significant in the context of the novel but their worth cannot be underestimated as it is; they make the novel wholesome and rounded.

While the novels of Taslima Nasreen are engrossed with the themes like fundamentalism, gender issues, her novels also encompass the multi faceted human and social relationships and sub themes which not only add colour to them but also create a composite picture of the background against which the mighty drama of human passion and pettiness is enacted. While the novels concentrate on the doings of main protagonists, the minor characters too contribute to the progress of action of the novels as also they shed light on human behaviour, characters and attitudes.

Interpersonal relationships in Taslima Nasreen's novels include man-woman relationship within and beyond sex-relations viz, brother-sister relationship, mother-son relationship, father-daughter relationship and relationship among female characters. Man-woman relations have to some extent been covered under the theme of feminism but there are other areas too, in which these relations operate.

In French Lover, Nila's relation with her parents, her lover and friends; in Phera, Kalyani's interpersonal relationships with friends; in Lajja, Suranjan's relation with his comrades, his parents and his sister; in Shodh, Jhumur's relations within and is beyond social definitions are covered.

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