CHAPTER III

HER CRITICISM OF FUNDAMENTALISM

One of the major themes that finds prominence in Taslima Nasreen’s novels is religious fundamentalism. She has bitterly criticised those people who divide the society on the basis of religion. Religious fundamentalism is the major problem of Indian subcontinent. Clarifying about fundamentalism, she points out:

Fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of consciousness and individuality, and undermines their personal rights. I find it impossible to accept fundamentalism as an alternative to secular ideas. My first reason is the insistence of the fundamentalists on divine justification for human laws. Second is the insistence of fundamentalists upon the superior authority of faith, as opposed to reason. Third is the insistence of fundamentalists that the individual does not count, that the individual is immaterial. Group loyalty over individual rights and personal achievements is a peculiar feature of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in their particular jacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life—everything would be determined by fundamentalist authority. Finally, though they proclaim themselves a moral force, their language is hatred and violence. Is it possible for a rationalist and humanist to
accept this sort of terrible repression? (Interview with Matt Cherry and Warren Allen Smith)

She has come down heavily on the extremists who are dividing the people on the basis of religion. Religious violence is the major burning issue that has gripped the whole Indian subcontinent. *Lajja*, the controversial novel by her, is perhaps the most burning book by any writer dealing with communalism. It is a savage indictment of fanaticism and man’s insensitiveness to man. The book reveals the height of man’s inhumanity to man in the name of religion.

The background of the novel is related to a shameful fanatic incident in India when Babri Masjid (mosque) at Ayodhya was demolished by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists on December 6, 1992 (Preface to *Lajja*, ix). The incident enraged the religious feelings of Muslims all over the world. The most horrible consequences of this incident were felt in Bangladesh where Muslim fundamentalists treated Hindu community in a very appalling way. The book deals with the persecution of Bangladesh’s Hindus, a religious minority, by the Muslims who are in majority.

The book came out in February 1993 in Bangladesh and sold more than 60,000 copies before it was banned by the government five months later, with the excuse that it was disturbing the communal peace. There
were marches on the streets of Dhaka by communalists clamouring for her life. But she was not ready to cow down. She writes in the preface of the book:

“But none of these things have shaken my determination to continue the battle against religious persecution, genocide and communalism.” (Pre. to Lajja, ix)

She cites the reason for writing *Lajja* by pointing out that she detests fundamentalism and communalism:

It is disgraceful that Hindus in my country were hunted by the Muslims after the destruction of Babri *Masjid*. All of us who love Bangladesh should feel ashamed that such a terrible thing could happen in our beautiful country. The riots that took place in 1992 in Bangladesh are the responsibility of all of us, and we all are to blame. *Lajja* is a document of our collective defeat. (ix)

*Lajja* is the story of Dutta family—Sudhamoy, Kiranmoyee, and their two children—Suranjan and Maya living in Bangladesh. Sudhamoy is a staunch nationalist and an atheist who loves his motherland like a true son of Bangladesh. A great idealist, he believes with a naive mix of optimism that his motherland will not let him down at any cost.

*Lajja* on the one hand narrates the communal atrocities committed against the Hindu minorities while on the other hand attempts to
document with statistics the discriminatory treatment meted out to the Hindus in Bangladesh over a long period. The novel explores the turmoil and torment of the protagonist Suranjan—a progressive, leftist and nationalist who witnesses the crumbling of all his ideals around him in a welter of communal frenzy. His desperate emotion turns him slowly into a communalist. Sudhamoy, Suranjan, Kironmoyee and Maya—few of the central characters of this novel, not only face difficult and adverse circumstances but more importantly, plunges into an identity crisis: does being Hindu mean being Indian?

Here Nasreen raises an important question as well. Does nationality not stand above religion? She expresses her spirit of nationalism:

Did this generation have no sense of values? Where had the spirit of past gone? That spirit which had propelled the youth in 1952 to stage mass protests to make Bengali the language of the nation? (Lajja, 123)

The book opens on 7th of December, a day after the demolition of Babri mosque at Ayodhya. Suranjan is lying on his bed in a rebellious mood when his sister Nilanjana, nicknamed Maya, comes to request him to provide help to the family as he did earlier in 1990 by taking his family to one of his friend’s house. But this time, he is in no mood to take the family anywhere. He thinks that he is as much the citizen of this country
as the Muslims. Why should, then, he go in search of any safe place at the breaking of riots? Why should he flee his home simply because his name is Suranjan Dutta? Is it necessary for his family—Sudhamoy, his father, Kironmoyee, his mother and Nilanjana, his sister—to run away like fugitives just because of their names? These questions haunt Suranjan’s mind. Whenever riots took place, it was he who had to run away from his home. He had to take shelter in Kamal’s home, but Kamal never ran away from his home. It was true that Kamal was an old friend of Suranjan’s and friends did visit each other but not in such circumstances.

Suranjan knows very well about the critical situation of communal riots in his surroundings. Whether the demolished structure was the birthplace of Rama or a sacred mosque is a matter of little significance to him. But it is evident to him that the demolition of the sixteenth century edifice has struck a savage blow to the sentiments of Muslims in India and elsewhere. The act of destruction has damaged the Hindu community as well for it had been nothing less than an attack on ‘international harmony and the collective conscience of the people.’ At the instigation of the BJP, the Kar sevaks broke down the Babri Masjid only to strengthen the Muslim clerics of Bangladesh. These ideas come in the mind of Suranjan. He is aware of the view that a crowd of people could enter his house anytime to loot and plunder and even to raze it to the
ground. He also understands his responsibilities towards his parents and Maya. But willingly and out of frustration, he does not do anything for the safety of his family this time. Due to his negligence, Maya takes shelter in the house of Parul, one of her Muslim friends.

In *Laija*, Nasreen reveals the miserable condition of Hindus living in Bangladesh. She provides factual data regarding the destruction of temples:

A mob had set fire to the Dhakeshwari temple. The police had not made the slightest attempt to stop them. The main temple where prayers were offered was burnt to ashes and the dance hall of the temple had been damaged as well. The Shiva temple, the guest rooms and the ancestral home of Shridham Ghosh were all razed to ground.

(4)

Thus, Hindus in Bangladesh were treated cruelly by the Muslims. They were beaten mercilessly up to the death. Several of Hindu families became landless as they were forced to leave their own houses. Hindu women were raped repeatedly. Even children were not spared by the fanatic mob. Most of the Hindu families migrated to India due to this torture. But Sudhamoy never even thought to leave his country for he believed that this country is as much his as that of any Muslim. He thinks about the past when he was a young man, all his aunts and uncles had
begun to leave Bangladesh one by one. As they left, they would request Sudhamoy’s father to go with them by pointing out that this was the homeland of the Muslims and that was why life was uncertain in the country. But Sudhamoy’s father, Sukumar Dutta was determined not to betray the values he had always upheld. He would say:

If there is no security in your own country, where in this world can we go looking for it? I cannot run away from my homeland. You go if you want to. I am not leaving the property of my forefathers……………………………………………………………………
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I cannot leave all this to become a refugee on the platforms of Sealdah station.(6)

Sudhamoy has inherited all those values from his father. But he has to suffer the climax of torture due to his decision to stay there. The irony is that the very Hindus who had participated enthusiastically in the freedom struggle for Bangladesh, became the victims of religious fanaticism. They had contributed a lot in every movement. In 1952, Sudhamoy was an energetic young man of twenty four. On the streets of Dhaka at that time, there was a great deal of nervous excitement as the Bengalis agitated for the use of Bengali as the national language. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Pakistani head of state, however refused to
accept the demand and declared that Urdu be the sole national language of Pakistan. The young, brave and politically conscious Bengalis of East Pakistan as Bangladesh was then known, were not deterred, however, and rose in protest against Jinnah’s decision. There was bloodshed all over the country but no one backed down. They insisted that Bengali must be the national language. Sudhamoy, too, was charged by the spirit of revolt. He took part in the demonstrations and often headed the processions demanding ‘we want Bengali.’

The language movement of 1952, The United Front elections of 1954, the Education Movement of 1962, the Six Clause Movement of 1966, the movement protesting against the Agartala conspiracy case, the General Elections of 1970 and the Freedom Movement of 1971, were all rallying points for the politically conscious Bengali youth of the country (Nasreen, Lajja, 7). According to Nasreen, every new agitation only underlined the fact that division of India on the basis of religion was an incorrect move. Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, the first education minister of independent India, had once pointed out that it was one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity could unite areas which were geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally different. He further added that it was true that Islam sought to establish a society which transcended racial, linguistic, economic and
political frontiers but history had however proved that after the few decades or at the most after the first century, Islam was not able to unite all the Muslim countries on the basis of Islam alone (Qtd. in Lajja, 8).

Starting from 1947 and stretching upto 1971, the Bengalis witnessed wave upon wave of bloodshed and trouble, all of which culminated in the Freedom Movement of 1971. Sudhamoy, along with other Hindus and Muslims, also participated in the struggle for independence and faced the height of inhumanity. He recollects how he was once imprisoned by Pakistani soldiers and had gone through the height of cruelty. He wasn't provided even a drop of water at that time when he was dying of it. When he asked for water, the sadistic guards would laugh at him. And one day they crossed all the limits of shame when they took off his blindfold and forced him to watch them urinate into a pot and then forced his mouth open to pour urine inside his mouth. He tolerated all this for the sake of his motherland. But after independence, the people of his motherland made him feel alien in his own country. He was considered Sudhamoy, a Hindu, not a human being. Secularism was supposed to be one of the strong beliefs of the Bengali Muslim, especially during the war for independence, when everyone had to co-operate with one another to win victory. An independence that was earned at the cost of three million Bengali lives proved that religion could
not be the basis of national identity. Language, culture, and history on the other hand were able to create the foundation on which to build a sense of nationality. But the fundamentalists who had once opposed the Freedom Movement in 1971 and had maintained a low profile during the struggle, now ruled the roost, organizing processions and meetings. Sudhamoy thinks that 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 homes. After thinking this, he shuts his eyes. He does not know what would happen this time around. The one thing that comes in his mind is this:

As the Babri Masjid had been destroyed by Hindu fanatics it would be the Hindus in Bangladesh who would have to suffer. Hindus like him had not been spared by the Muslim fundamentalists in 1990, so why should they be spared in 1992? And so they would have to flee like rats! Just because they were Hindu? Just because the Hindus in India had broken the Babri Masjid? Why should he be held responsible for all this? (12)

The state of Bangladesh was founded on the basis of four major principles: nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism. The country had worked long and hard for its independence. Beginning with the Language Movement in 1952, the struggle had been long and arduous but independence was finally achieved. In the process, the evils of
communalism and religious fanaticism were defeated. After independence, the reactionaries who had been against the very spirit of independence had gained power, changed the face of the constitution and revived the evils of communalism and unbending fundamentalism that had been rejected during the war of independence. Suranjan noticed that now, religion was being used as a political weapon and a large number of people were being forced to follow the dictates of Islam. Thus, unlawfully and unconstitutionally, Islam became the national religion of Bangladesh. As a result, communalism and religious fanaticism exploded out of control.

Hindu girls were highly insecure in Bangladesh. They used to receive anonymous letters that threatened to kidnap. Hindu women were afraid even to use their religious symbols like bindi, syndoor, sankha etc. because of the fear of identification as Hindu woman. They were of the view, ‘It's better to be safe than sorry’ (Lajja, 13).

In Lajja, Nasreen has given ample evidence about the communal and sadistic approach of the administration and the justice system towards Hindus. At every level, they were harassed and haunted. Their system blindly favours the Muslims and Islamic communalism. It was almost impossible for the Hindus to get jobs or admissions in educational institutions. If they were appointed, they were harassed at all levels and
then their due promotions were denied. Even the justice system was biased and communal.

He had lived in Akur Takur area in Tangail and a Muslim neighbour called Jamir Munshi had claimed a yard of his land. The matter had been taken to the court. Five years later, the suit had been decided in favour of the neighbor. Sudhamoy's uncle, Tarapada Ghoshal was compelled to leave Bangladesh and migrate to India. (19)

Similarly, Hindus have to face a lot of harassment and torture in the administration. We can take the case of Sudhamoy. In Dhaka, Sudhamoy had applied for a senior government job, one that would be a promotion on the official position he had in Mymensingh. But whenever he went to the ministry to check on the fate of his application, they would keep him waiting in a small room, among the clerical staff. Sometimes, he was allowed to sit and wait in the Assistant Private Secretary's room. Later he had discovered that officers junior to him had got their promotion. So there is a feeling among the Hindus that it is not right to expect too many benefits in a Muslim country.

Through *Lajja*, Nasreen has depicted the ugly face of communist people. Sudhamoy is the leading character in *Lajja*. Ironically, he is a communist and naturally, an atheist, which is a very common fashion
with Hindu communists to boost their intellectualism and liberal attitude.

He even encouraged his family members to eat beef:

Kironmoyee had cooked the beef after a good *dal* of Cajoling on Sudhamoy's part who had explained to his wife, at great length, the futility and illogicality of observing such customs. (86)

But all his Muslim communist friends are hardliners and practicing Muslims who even backed the communalisation of Bangladesh.

Often, if he went to a Muslim friend’s house he would be met with statement like ‘Sudhamoy, please sit in the other room while I finish with *Namaaz*.

As his leftist friends grew older, they had begun to turn to religion. (92)

Communists in *Lajja* have been described as artificially secular, as Suranjan feels. He could not remember having ever prayed in his life. Nor had he ever visited a temple. Though ‘Suranjan clenched his fists in disgust at the Hindu fanatics,’(140) yet his father, Sudhamoy was so scared of Muslims that he asked his wife not to use *sindur, loha* and *sankha* on her wrist and he too had given up his beloved *dhuti.*' But he could not dare to ask his Muslim comrades to shun fanaticism.

Nasreen is highly critical of the opportunist and coward behaviour of communists of Bangladesh. The protagonist of the novel, Suranjan,
who belongs to a communist family, no longer has any faith in the socialist party or in any communist leader. Even Hindus in the communist party were bowing to the current mood. Krishna Binod Roy was now Kabir Bhai and Barin Dutta, has had name changed to Abdus Salaam. Muslim communists bowed completely to the wishes of Islamic fanatics; their surrender was full and final:

When comrade Farahd passed away, a Quran Khani and Milad Mehfil were organized by the CPB office.................. Why did communists have to take shelter under the Islamic flag? Because they wanted to escape the misplaced accusation of the public, that they were non-believers, wasn’t that so? .......... He blamed the so-called leftist leaders, who were themselves completely bewildered and lost. (135)

In *Lajja*, Nasreen portrays the dual policy of the Bangladeshi Muslims living in Bangladesh. Most of the Bangladeshi people, political leaders including the then Prime Minister Khalida Zia, demanded the reconstruction of Babri *Masjid* but none of them talked about the hundreds of temples demolished in Bangladesh. The leaders said nothing when *Jamaatis* destroyed Hindu houses and temples. The Hindus, out of fear, could not go outside their homes and began to starve of eatable material. They were not safe even inside the home for any moment, a group of hooligans might have broken the doors of any Hindu home to plunder and humiliate. The evil eyes of fanatics fall on Sudhamoy
household when seven young men armed with rods and knives barge into the house of Sudhamoy. One of them shouts: “You bastards! Did you think you could get away after destroying the Babri Masjid?” (152). Frenzied and savage, they destroy the entire house and abduct Maya with them. Nasreen has very realistically delineated the miserable condition of Suranjan after Maya’s abduction:

How painful is the notion when he is forced to think that the abductors would be tying her hands and legs, stuffing cloth into her mouth and finally would be playing with her flesh one by one. Now he seems to live in a real hell which according to him is a state when, snakes bite, scorpions sting, the body is enveloped in flames and is gradually burnt to cinders, but one remains alive. (176)

Perhaps these are the circumstances which forced him to be a fanatic and thus retaliate in the manner of Muslim fundamentalists. Suranjan, who used to be a man of great ideas, turns out to be a fanatic and goes to the extent of assaulting a Muslim prostitute:

Suranjan, however, did not look upon Shamima as a whore. To him, she was a girl, who belonged to the majority community. He was longing to rape one of them, in revenge for what they had done to his sister. (200)

This is perhaps his reaction against the attitude of Muslim fundamentalists that he behaves beastly with Muslim prostitute. Raping a
Muslim girl perhaps provides him mental satisfaction and in this way he avenges the abduction of his sister. Suranjan, as well as Nasreen considers it victory—At least one of the victims could take revenge. But suddenly, he realises that he raped a girl who was helpless and he gave her money after looking at her pitiable condition. Frustrated and anguished, he burns down all the books, which preached humanity. Ultimately, he requests his father to leave this land. He thinks that his father has done a lot for this country. He participated in Language Movement, fought to drive away the Pakistanis, and this country could not guarantee them protection. They felt alienated in their own country. It was as though they were not human beings anymore, not even Bengalis, but just two footed creatures called Hindus.

The book ends with the defeat of Sudhamoy. Even a strong mountain like Sudhamoy is forced to leave his motherland due to the riots. The book reveals that these were not riots but simply a case of Muslims killing Hindus. Defeated Sudhamoy in the end decides to migrate India but at a terrible cost.

As soon as *Lajja* was published, a debate among Bangladeshi intellectuals ensued. One of the principal criticisms against the book was that it presented a lopsided picture of Bangladeshi society, especially with regard to the communal relations. In scathing reviews critics argued that
such a projection would incite violence. A society which takes pride in maintaining communal harmony was challenged by Nasreen. Nasreen's portrayal of the Bangladeshi society offended not only the clerics but also those who claim themselves secularists. Though put in a very blunt way, Nasreen's point asked a soul searching. The claim that an average Bangladeshi politician or intellectual makes that the religious minorities in Bangladesh are treated equally, perhaps is not the whole truth. Regarding this view, Ali Riaz points out:

Had that been the case how could a Deputy Secretary (Border) of the Ministry of Home suggest the banks in the areas bordering India to take special caution in providing loans to the Hindus? [Memo no. 12/10/92 (C-2) 1872-2008 dated 17/10/92 signed by Abul Basher Mollah, Deputy Secretary (Border). It is nothing surprising that he did get away with this despite severe criticisms from various quarters. This is one of the very obvious examples that bear the fact that discriminations are present. Exposing prejudices and discrimination posit challenges to the communal interests. (61)

The novel also portrays the whole Muslim community as savage and barbarian. Not a single hand comes forward to help the helpless Hindus. Here Nasreen seems to depict the things from a myopic vision and thus ignores the other side. She also seems to deviate from the path of a true artist because the publication of it put so many Indian Muslims in
danger. In her over missionary enthusiasm to attract the conscience and attention of the people towards the atrocities perpetrated on the Hindus of Bangladesh, she created problems for herself and millions of Indian Muslims as well. The riots were really intolerably damaging and did a great harm to Bangladeshi Hindus. After riots it was the moral duty of authors to provide healing balm to bruised bosoms and not to restore a post-mortem to inculcate others for the crimes they did not commit.

Moreover the book presents Muslims as barbarians devoid of all human sentiments. It is really hard to believe that no one in the whole country comes forward to help the victims. There may not be great philanthropists in Bangladesh but it is difficult to believe that the entire country lacks human sensibilities. Every nation and every community can certainly have some great figures who can immolate themselves for the sake of nation's peace and brotherhood. Here also, Nasreen's vision seems to be one eyed for she has not delineated even a single strong character who could stand firmly as a rock between the Muslim rioters and Hindu victims. It could be a Muslim or even a Hindu who could have become a martyr for noble cause of protecting the victims. Moreover, literature is not supposed to be an authentic record of crimes. If the aim of an author is to expose, it is also his moral duty to present the brighter side of human psyche. And the way Nasreen has dealt with Lajja may drill into the
minds of fanatics throughout the Hindu living countries and would become a weapon to retaliate.

Another novel which deals with the communal violence in the Indian sub-continent is *Curfew in the City* written by Vibhuti Narain Rai. The novel is a sensitive and touching story of the people in a crumbling inner city locality when curfew is suddenly clamped on them. With no confidence-building mechanism in place, the administrative machinery can hardly cope with the communal frenzy between the Hindu and Muslim population. The authorities of law and order are wholly discriminatory in the exercise of their powers, fanning the fears and insecurities of the poor people. The novel focuses on a Muslim household of *beedi*-workers who live on the edge of subsistence.

Though begun in 1980, in response to a riot in Allahabad that Rai personally observed as the Senior Superintendent of Police there, the book came out only in 1988. The novel starts with a small incident when a handful of boys come out of a lane near the Bank of Baroda's branch office at the intersection of Mirza Ghalib Road and G.T. Road. They throw a hand bomb at the wall of a temple near the Gariwan Tola, then run back into the lane. In fact, what exploded on the temple wall was more like a firecracker than a bomb. It only made a very loud noise, and caused no damage or injury. But because it had been thrown at a temple
wall, Hindu bystanders conclude that the perpetrators could only have been Muslims. They immediately start attacking every Muslim who comes that way. The first target was three people on a motorcycle.

Everywhere, hand bombs were exploded but no one was injured. In each instance, however, it was immediately assumed that the bomb had been thrown by some Muslims. There promptly followed a search of all the Muslim households in the locality. Rai has depicted the situation of curfew in Hindu as well as in Muslim locality. The police is very discriminatory towards Muslims. Curfew is strictly imposed on those localities which have sizeable Muslim population whereas in those localities which have Hindu population, the children are playing on the ground. They are also chanting slogans which show unity between Hindus and the police:

The children would scamper away, but return in no time. Soon they started a chorus: ‘Hindu-pulis bhai-bhai Katua Kaum Kahan-Se ai?’ (The Hindus and the police are like brothers, where did these Katua people come from?)

The chief protagonist of the novel, Sayeeda faces two serious problems. One is her little girl's condition who suffers from cholera. Her condition has so deteriorated that Sayeeda's more experienced mother-in-law begins to believe that the girl is not likely to survive.
Sayeeda’s second problem is of a peculiar nature. The house in which she lives is in very poor condition. When Sayeeda stepped into the latrine for the first time, she almost collapsed trying not to throw up. Her eyes started to water, and a bilious drool oozed out of the corners of her clenched lips and spotted her clothes. The latrine is only six feet by three and has a raised `seat'; its roof is so low that it is almost impossible to stand in it.

Rai describes one incident of rape. A girl, whose home is in a lane where a curfew is imposed, was coming back from her school. Suddenly, she is dragged into a small, narrow room that housed a milling machine. The girl requests to let her go. But the men do not let her and they rape her. Rai does not reveal the identity of the girl. He portrays the rape scene in a very pathetic way:

What she next experienced was totally obscene and terrifying. She felt as if a hot rod was pushed into her body. A wave of pain rose from the soles of her feet and went to the top of her head, leaving her body racked. When an animal is slaughtered it makes a terrible gurgling sound—something of the same nature came out of the girl's lips. She struggled to get up, but only bruised herself more against the sides of the charpoy (coat). Her futile struggle stopped only when she lost consciousness. (65-66)
Through this incident, Rai wants to convey that irrespective of her caste, or religion, a curfew can deprive any girl of her life's tenderest experience. It can knock her down to the level of animals, and drag her through experiences that could turn to rest of her life into an inescapable labyrinth of nightmares.

In the meanwhile, Sayeeda's daughter dies; she curses her husband for being inactive because he could not bring medicines due to the imposition of curfew. The worst tragedy in the world for a mother is to have her child die in her lap. It occurred a few hours ago in that hellish home consisting of a room and a verandah. When her father-in-law comes out from his house to get curfew passes so that the family could bury the child, the treatment which he gets from the police is horrible. The policemen abuse him in a very derogatory manner. They even beat him with lathis.

‘Mother f..........! walking around in the curfew ............. Did your doctor ask you? The old man's lips trembled in an effort to say something but only a meaningless whine came out’. (73)

The old man tells in a trembling voice that his granddaughter has died. That is why he is going to get curfew pass in order to have a burial of the child. At this, the policeman comments:
Katuwas! The bastards do nothing but produce children, like mice... then they go and die. Hey you, now run off. But if you come back without a pass, you know your ‘daddy’ will be waiting for you.

Sala! (74)

Thus the police have a sort of prejudice against the minority community and they held this community responsible for the communal riots.

Rai has shown the ugly face of politics in Ram Krishna Jaiswal who is a staunch Hinduvadi but he also has close ties with Haji Badruddin, the bidi tycoon. At present, Pandit Ayodhyanath Dixit was representing the city in the legislative assembly. He had been on the stage, but, after his own speech, had come down. At the moment he was very worried. The riot was a threat to his political survival. There had been a riot around the time of the previous elections too, but that had gone in his favour. This time his old rival, Ram Krishna Jaiswal, was reaping the benefit. The main danger from a riot too close to the elections was that it would divide the voters into Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims would all seek shelter behind Haji Badruddin, while the Hindus, looking for a Hindu leader, would come together behind Jaiswal.

In the Indian sub-continent, there are mainly two books, which deal with the theme of communal riots. These two books are: Lajja (‘Shame’)
in Bengali, written by Taslima Nasreen, and *Shahar Mein Karfiyu* (Curfew in the City), in Hindi, by Vibhuti Narain Rai. Nasreen's book gained immediate notice in South Asia and abroad due to the fatwa issued against the author. Rai's book has remained much less known even in India, though it did generate the wrath of some votaries of *Hindutva*, who successfully prevented it from being made into a film. Both Nasreen and Rai have written about the persecution of minority communities by the majority communities to which they themselves belong in their respective countries. Otherwise, the two books are different.

Nasreen's linear narrative covers thirteen days in the life of a Hindu family in Dhaka in 1992 with considerable speed and passion; it also contains lengthy segments of a purely documentary nature. The book generally dismayed the reviewers in Bangladesh and India. But the novelist Amitav Ghosh more accurately understood the aims of Nasreen's narrative when he wrote:

> Taken on its own terms, the book’s strength can be seen to lie precisely in what appear to be its formal weakness. In its breakneck urgency, its direct and unembellished Bengali prose, in the narrative inseparability of its fictional and documentary material, in its polemical repetitiveness and its undisguised emotional immediacy.\(\text{Qtd. In the foreword, Curfew in the City,10}\)
He then went on to compare Nasreen with the Egyptian feminist Nawal-El-Saadawy, and argued that the two `have pioneered one of the most powerful forms of our times. The polemiction—polemical fictions that are perhaps the most appropriate possible literary response to the oppressive banality of contemporary religious fanaticism.'(Qtd. In the foreword, Curfew in the City, 10)

Rai's novella is not `polemiction'. It is in fact quite modest in ambition and execution. Its episodic narrative covers three days in the life of a small neighbourhood in Allahabad under the grip of a curfew during the riot. Divided into nine short chapters, it alternates between the story of Sayeeda, the wife of a bidi-maker, and her family, claustrophobic in effect in being confined to their one-room house, and other simultaneous events that take place elsewhere. That `elsewhere' is spatially more open and varied, but affected by the curfew—equally distorted and horrifying. The two progressions meet in the penultimate chapter, where a police party conducts searches in Muslim homes—the home of a nationalist lawyer, Sayeeda's home, and the palatial compound of the Haji. At the end of the book, the curfew continues.

Despite a few instances of authorial interventions, Rai seems to strive for a cool, sometimes ironic and detached voice. Nevertheless, he too wants us to come close to the victims of violence and persecution
through our knowledge of their ordinariness. Thus Sayeeda, the central character in his novel, is not just a grief-stricken mother whose baby daughter dies during the curfew but also a rural person who hates using the latrine in her new home in the city. According to C.M. Naim: “It is not a story of people gone barbaric in the heat of a moment of passion or revenge. It is about cold, calculated greed and blind, senseless hatred”. (Qtd. In the foreword, Curfew in the City, 11)

The narrative focuses on how the curfew affects the simple, mundane matters in the lives of ordinary people; a sick child cannot get medicine; a family cannot get drinking water; a girl cannot walk down the street in safety; people cannot even stay indoors in security; a dead child cannot easily be given a decent burial. But political and civic authorities go on living their lives of privilege.

The theme of fundamentalism has been treated by Taslima Nasreen in her other novels as well. In one of her novels Shodh, the chief protagonist, Jhumur realises that Hindus can’t live in Bangladesh anymore because the incidents regarding their harassment and killings are increasing day by day. She recollects one incident when one boy named Sujit was taken to the mosque by a couple of boys to convert him into Islam. Sujit got frightened and started to run. The boys caught up with him, dragged him next to the river, and there hundreds of other people,
emerging from the darkness like an apparition, had hacked him to death. When Sujit was killed, he was just seventeen or eighteen years old. Everybody believed that he had died in a road accident. The real story was told to Jhumur by her own father.

In *Homecoming*, as has been pointed out in the first chapter of the thesis, Kalyani is sent to Kolkata because of being a Hindu young girl. When she makes a trip to Bangladesh with her son, Dipan, she finds that her home had been destroyed and the land had been seized. She visits Bangladesh to meet her close friend, Sharifa. But Sharifa is very surprised to see her. Sharifa's husband, Atahar, asks her why Kalyani has come if she does not have any relative? Kalyani recollects when she was leaving her home, Sharifa had wept and requested her to come back. But now, Sharifa was treating her as if she were a foreigner. She always considered Bangladesh as her home but the very people with whom she felt herself attached insult her by declaring her a Hindu, a traitor who had run away from her country. Even Sharifa talks with her unenthusiastically. Kalyani has to pass a night at Sharifa's home where she along with her son has to sleep in a room, which is full of mice. So she has to face humiliation at the hands of her own countrymen. At the place of her home, there was nothing but a solitary berry tree.
No house, no trees. Only a solitary berry tree loomed in the landscape. It was lonely, with companions. Standing on the ground where her ancestral house once stood, Kalyani felt that she too was alone. (65)

So, Kalyani’s journey back to Bangladesh reveals to her that her homeland had existed merely in her imagination and that she must share the fate of millions of others who have left one country for another, and do not belong to either. Her story is a paradigm of loss and displacement, of the failure to connect, which is the experience of migration.

Thus, Nasreen has termed religion as a divisive force. It does not often teach people to love one another. On the contrary, it often preaches them to hate people of a different faith. Religion also leads people to depend on fate and thus lose self-confidence. It unnecessarily glorifies poverty and sacrifice and in this way serves the vested interests of the wealthy few. She asserts:

The fundamentalist prescription for all ills of society is severely questionable. Obviously, they cannot go far. Even if they assume power here and there they cannot run a state on just religious rules, and I am sure they will also be challenged by the people after some time.

(Interview with Matt Cherry and Warren Allen Smith)

Nasreen does not find any difference between religion and fundamentalism. She considers religion the root, and from the root
fundamentalism grows as a poisonous stem. If we remove fundamentalism and keep religion one day or another fundamentalism will grow again. To get rid of religion as well as fundamentalism, people should be educated; especially they should receive a secular education. And the secular humanists should unite and fight fundamentalists without any compromise. She is sure that her ideological fight against religious fanaticism will continue despite threats and alienation. She does not believe in prayers, she believes in work.


**Works Cited**


<http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/nasrin_19_1.html>


