Today, when human civilization has touched unheard-of heights by making sterling progress in the fields of science and technology on the one hand, and art and literature on the other, a new dark age is threatening to descend on the human world by imposing an order based on fanaticism, denying people their inalienable human rights. Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen has appeared on the literary firmament as a very articulate, thought-provoking and provocative writer endeavouring to give voice to the people who have wished, but dared not admit and express what they have believed in for long. A multi-faceted personality—physician, writer, feminist, columnist, novelist, short story writer and poet—Taslima Nasreen is an inordinately angry young woman. With a zeal to bring about change like Byron and Shelley, she is against exploitation of every kind and has the courage to challenge the rotten orthodoxy of society and ritualistic religion through her writings. Though a rebel, reformer and lover of freedom, she cannot be put in the category of romantic writers. In her fiction, which we are presently concerned with, there is no flavour of romanticism. She has the capacity to shock us but she does not endeavour to fill us with mystic horror. She does not indulge in flights of fancy but keeps her feet firmly fixed on the real solid ground, even if it happens to be a sordid ground. As a realist, Taslima Nasreen distrusts superstition and spiritualism and attacks them whenever she gets an opportunity to do it. Though she originally writes in Bengali, her mother tongue, most of her prominent works have been translated into major languages of the world. She is widely read as her writings transcend the topical and rise to the level of the universal; she raises her voice of protest against exploitation, particularly gender-based and religion-based exploitation. Her appeal cuts across the boundaries of race, region, culture and religion.

Taslima Nasreen challenges those orthodox concepts of Islam which she finds to be obnoxious in the modern context. In fact, she considers all religious scriptures including the Koran, the Bible and the Vedas out of place and out of time as they project woman physically and mentally inferior and thus are oppressive in nature. To her horror, Islam does not consider woman even a separate human entity. The increasing influence of religion in a male-dominated society and the inferior position accorded to women forced Taslima Nasreen to reject all orthodox rites and rituals as dead wood. She finds that the concept of marriage is based on patriarchy and religion is a mere constriction. In her fiction, she endeavours to expose the ugly face of a society that holds woman in perpetual subjugation. The same idea has been expressed
by Syed Badrul Ahsan in very precise terms, “In a world where bravery is fast receding from the life of the writer, Taslima Nasreen has in her lonely way kept our faith alive in the power of writing to bring about change in people’s intellectual dimensions” (“Nasreen”). Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s writings do not provide mere aesthetic pleasure to the readers by providing them the opportunity to explore the shades of beauty or to be amused and mesmerized by presenting the glossy hues of nature. Her aim is very different. She writes to arouse, provoke and stir her readers to ponder over the problems which touch human life in all its contours. She writes because she has a great deal to say about the sordid conditions of life and living which cramp the very human existence.

Taslima Nasreen’s literary career started at the age of thirteen when she first wrote poetry. She was the editor of a literary magazine *Senjuti* from 1978 to 1983. She brought out her first book of poetry in print form in 1986. Until now she has published around 33 books of poetry, essay collections, short stories, novels and autobiographical works. All her works were originally published in Bengali. Owing to the wide acclaim worldwide, her major works have been published in more than twenty languages. Beyond her own country, her literary worth was first acknowledged in 1992 when she received the prestigious Ananda Puraskar awarded by the Ananda Bazar Patrika of Kolkata. Since then she has been awarded more than twenty international awards, the latest being the Simone de Beauvoir Feminist Award for the year 2008.

Taslima Nasreen borrows heavily from her own personal experiences and also the experiences she has been a witness to. Thus, she makes her own life experiences the subject matter of her fictional work. In presenting the intimate details of her life and her views on it, she emerges as a fearless, free and frank individual. It is in this sense that Taslima Nasreen is considered a highly controversial writer.

Taslima Nasreen was born in Mymensingh in Bangladesh in 1962 in a Muslim family. Her father Dr. Rajab Ali was a famous physician and popular professor at the medical college. Her mother Idulwara Begum (Idun), a plain looking semi-educated woman, was an utter mismatch to her handsome, debonair husband and was frequently ill-treated by him. As a result, she escaped into the world of religion and found solace in it. She started visiting a religious leader so revered that women fought over his bile hoping his spittle would help them get into heaven. Taslima Nasreen’s mother took her to the place of that holy man. Taslima, however, found everything horrible and nauseating there. The reaction that was triggered in her
impressionable mind, became so strong that her novels harbour a strong tinge of distaste for anything having a religious flavour. These personal details coupled with her acerbic condemnation of values leaning heavily on patriarchy and all obnoxious religious rituals and attitudes make her an easy target of all fundamentalists and fanatics. Also coupled with these are her rather unorthodox views regarding sexual matters and the value systems thereof. According to Taslima Nasreen, the ‘Mullahs’ are the greatest power maniacs. For her their love for power is hidden under the religious cloak. Pretensions to spirituality pay them rich dividends in terms of money, respect and hold over the gullible masses. Taslima Nasreen disliked ‘Mullahs’ and in due course, the feeling became reciprocal.

Though Taslima’s mother was ardently religious in an orthodox manner, her father was more rational than religious. He never said a single prayer (namaz) in a day, not to speak of the ordained five namazes for the devout Muslim each day. He had good relations with all—Hindus and Muslims. Taslima inherited a strong strain of secularism from her father. There were a larger number of Hindu families than Muslim families in the neighbourhood and Taslima often participated in the Hindu festivals. Taslima’s younger brother was married to Geeta, a Hindu girl, and Taslima found her more accommodating than her elder brother’s wife, Haseena, who was a Muslim. Taslima Nasreen had many friends among Hindu girls. The point to be noted here is that Taslima Nasreen, right from her childhood was brought up in a tolerant environment fostered by her liberal-minded father. When Taslima Nasreen was twenty two years old, she received her medical degree and worked as a gynaecologist in the rural areas of her country. There she came in close contact with the poor women—both Hindu and Muslim—and became painfully aware of how cruelly they were treated by their men. Later on, she interacted with women of all classes suffering from various diseases and maltreated at the hands of their husbands. She gave expression to their plight and problems in her stories and became their unofficial spokesperson. She also witnessed the incongruities of Islamic teaching vis-à-vis women’s rights in Muslim society. All this, besides being witness to her own mother’s torture at the hands of her father, contributed towards making her a radical feminist. Her mother was a perfect example of a suffering woman. She was also a perfect symbol of helpless patience. In spite of being a good student, Taslima Nasreen’s mother had been forced into marriage when she was barely ten or eleven years old. Her husband was perpetually having affairs with other women right from the wedding day. Apart from his notorious relationship with Rezia Begum, the
only one affair Taslima’s mother would come to know about, he had numerous casual flings. Whenever Taslima Nasreen’s mother objected to his extra-marital relations, she was beaten mercilessly. Taslima Nasreen was a horrified witness to a horrible scene enacted in the family:

The more Ma heard about Razia Begum, the more she got mad at her. This mad Ma would sit with a face full of bitterness when Baba entered the house. If Baba vented his anger, she did too. One day Baba took out his whip from under the mattress, beat this angry Ma till she was soaked in blood and left her fallen in the courtyard. Like a beheaded chicken Ma tossed about tormentedly, crying out for mercy. Blood spouted from all over her body and the crows on the trees started cawing noisily, rousing themselves flew away to another area. The sight was inhuman, so we did not want to see it, and instead Yasmin and I sat with our doors closed. None of us had the strength or courage to snatch the whip from Baba’s hands. We remained turned to stone. (Wild Wind 197)

Taslima Nasreen’s mother wanted nothing except a little love and care from her husband which she never got in her whole life. After a great loss of blood due to her piles, she begged for a little milk and eggs and bananas but nobody bothered to give her what she wanted. The doctor husband never cared to treat her or give her proper medication. The little treatment that her elder son provided her with was a few tablets of expired date. Later on, afflicted with an intestine cancer, she died uncared for, unwept.

Her mother’s case was not an exception. The oppression of women in her society was quite common and Taslima Nasreen was a constant witness to all the atrocities and humiliations inflicted upon women by insensitive men who staunchly believed in the male prerogative. In a speech delivered at a women’s forum, Taslima Nasreen says, “My mother was not the only woman who was oppressed, for I saw my aunts, my neighbours and other acquaintances who were playing the same role, that of being oppressed” (“Speech”). And then Taslima Nasreen draws the conclusion: “Everywhere women are oppressed. And all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture and customs.” (“Speech”)

Taslima Nasreen was married thrice. None of her marriages was arranged. Her first marriage was a love marriage. Her first husband Rudra Muhammad Shahidulla, a talented young poet, died a couple of years after their marriage. The second and third marriages were the marriages of convenience and soon broke up because she could not stand the ever-bullying
husbands. As she is, by nature, unconventional, she has had a violent and unruly youth. That is why we come across, so frequently, unusual characters, rebels against social norms and conventions in her fiction.

Taslima Nasreen’s birthplace Mymensingh and the river Brahmaputra on whose banks she loved to play in her childhood figure in her novels again and again. Next to Mymensingh she is attached to Kolkata, Rabindranath Tagore and his Shantiniketan to which she has paid visits several times. The heroine of her novel, French Lover (2002) belongs to Kolkata. Rabindranath Tagore is a kind of leitmotif that runs through all her writings. Almost in every novel of hers, Tagore appears as a symbol of art and culture of undivided Bengal, and also the highest human values.

Right on the heels of the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya on 6 Dec. 1992, communal riots broke out in Bangladesh. Many Hindus suffered at the hands of communal Muslims; many were murdered in cold blood for the sins committed by some fanatic Hindus in Ayodhya. Incidents of loot, arson, rape, destruction and desecration made headlines in the newspapers everyday. The Hindus were coerced into selling or abandoning their properties. Many of them were forced to leave their hearths and homes to find refuge in the neighbouring states of India. They were brutalised and murdered without compunction. The criminals were not brought to book by the government. Taslima Nasreen could not condone these inhuman brutalities meted out by Muslim fundamentalists to Hindus. The harrowing scenes traumatized Taslima so vehemently that she gave expression to her shock and anguish in the form of a book, Lajja (1993). That was a turning point in her life. Immediately after Lajja’s publication, she became a persona non grata in her own country. It was alleged that she had hurt the sentiments of the citizens and criticized Islam. There were large scale demonstrations organized by fundamentalists against her, demanding her execution. A fatwa (religious edict) was issued against her life. They demanded her immediate execution by hanging. The government of the country took no action against her persecutors; it rather took action against her and filed a case against her on the charge of blasphemy and an arrest warrant was issued. The danger to the life of a liberal writer attracted the attention of the people the world over. Owing to the pressure brought to bear upon the government of Bangladesh by the liberals all over the world, Taslima Nasreen was able to survive. With the mounting threat to her life, she had to flee her country and has not been allowed to return to and live in Bangladesh. Since then she has been living on
borrowed time in borrowed homes. However, she has not been cowed down. She has continued to wage her lonely battle against what she has detested all her life. She said in an interview to ISIS (International Society for Islamic Secularisation): “I can assure you that my ideological fight against religious fundamentalism will continue.” (“Taslima Nasrin and the Struggle”)

Taslima Nasreen is virtually a lone crusader in Bangladesh for the right of freedom of expression, human rights in general and the rights of woman in particular. Hiren K. Bose has justly said that nobody, even if he boasts of being secular or a nationalist, comes forward openly in support of this ostracized author. But she believes in Tagore’s “Jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe, tobe ekla cholo re, which means: If no one comes to your support, plough a lonely furrow.” (“Quill Courage”).

From 1994 to 2002, she got political asylum in many countries like Sweden, Germany, the U.S.A. and France. From 2002 to March 2008, she stayed in India and many more fatwas were issued against her during this time. She was allowed to stay in India till 17th Feb. 2009. After that she went to the States. She returned to India with the hope to settle here. Taslima Nasreen virtually looks upon India as her second home. She desires to secure at least the status of a permanent resident in India if she cannot become a citizen.

Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s fiction is not just a detached view of a distant observer or third person narrative of some second hand experience. Whatever she has suffered herself or has been a witness to, she turns into subjective writing. Khushwant Singh’s suggestion to a young author expresses a similar opinion: “No matter what your topic, most writers’ first novels tend to be autobiographical, camouflaged as fiction.” (“A Silly Book”). This is true of Taslima Nasreen also. Most of the heroines of Taslima Nasreen’s fiction are different aspects of a single person—the author herself. They are just thinly disguised versions of herself. Most other characters and incidents too are directly or indirectly related to her life. The names may differ, the places may change, yet the story remains the same.

Her literature is an odyssey of a silent sufferer at the hands of her near and dear ones. It may be observed here that it was not overnight that she became ‘blasphemous’, rather, in the adolescent phase of her life, she religiously followed her mother’s directions who wanted to mould her into an ideal replica of Ayesha and other wives of Prophet Mohammad. But a deep sense of reasoning and imperceptible influence of her father’s scientific temperament working on her brought her into direct conflict with religion, which preached just the opposite of what
science taught. It was not all of a sudden that one volume after another challenging religious beliefs and practices poured from the pen of a writer having a conservative background; in fact, it took years of dilemma and bewilderment to produce a literature that favoured no specific religion but the greatest of all religions—humanism. She had to face the onslaught of gender discrimination, hurt and humiliation, oppression and molestation till this inarticulate, feeble, timid and submissive child grew up to be one of the most fearless, bold and blunt writers of the times. So Taslima Nasreen’s autobiographical details assume paramount importance as the texture of her fiction is woven by the warp and woof of her personal impressions, experiences, attitudes, thoughts and feelings. These details are significant as they very clearly bring to the surface the underlying themes which are common to almost all her writings and which are to be subjected to critical scrutiny in our research endeavour; the first being fundamentalism, which is the ugly side of religion. Taslima Nasreen rejects religion in favour of humanism, which is just the antonym of fundamentalism. For her all religion is nothing but narrow-minded scripture-based orthodoxy. In Lajja, she writes, “Let another name of religion be humanism” (vi). Almost all other themes taken up in her novels are related to the issue of religion. She realizes that patriarchal structures dominate all religions whether they be Islam or any other religion. Thus, according to Taslima Nasreen, religion is the root cause of the victimization of woman at all levels starting from the smallest institution, i.e. family. Woman’s revolt and her negation of the religion-based patriarchal norms result in her social ostracism, as happened in the case of Taslima Nasreen herself, rendering her homeless. Hence the theme of homelessness finds a prominent place in her writings.

No writer writes in vacuum. He/she is influenced by the immediate socio-political changes that occur around him/her. Bangladesh, her motherland, which she loves greatly, has a strong bearing upon her writings. In fact, it would not be out of place to mention that Taslima, the girl and Bangladesh, the nation grew side by side. Just a small child, she had to suffer the hardships of being a war refugee, that, too, in her own country away from her home town, to hide in some distant village. To understand the situation better, a short history of Bengal’s partition and Bangladesh’s independence needs to be discussed at some length.

The cradle of Indian Renaissance and national freedom movement, Bengal, has long since been the cultural centre of India. In Sanskrit literature old Bengal was known as Gauda or Vanga. Bengal was partitioned in 1905 by the British imperialist regime in India and the Bengali
communities were torn apart. But after a period of six years this partition had to be revoked when revolt broke out and people objected to the disintegration of their land. Peace was restored in 1911 when the partition was annulled by the declaration of King George V at the royal darbar in Delhi.

Paradoxically enough, Bengal, the cradle of resurgent nationalism, became, with the passage of time, a hot-bed of racial politics and was again bifurcated in 1947. In 1947 came the great division of India, the Muslim dominated North-western zone became West Pakistan and with the Muslim majority, the Eastern zone became the East Pakistan. Thus, Bengal, with a common language, literature, tradition and way of life, was partitioned for the second time. West Pakistan dominated East Pakistan completely, considering it a colony and deprived its people of their democratic and human rights. Shared faith—Islam—could not keep together the two wings—East Pakistan and West Pakistan—and in 1971 the people of East Pakistan waged the war of independence and won it with great sacrifices. It is obvious that no war is fought without its attendant evils like shedding the blood of innocent citizens, indiscriminate molestation of women, death, displacement and destruction. East Bengal witnessed a repetition of the holocaust of 1947 in 1971.

After independence East Pakistan was named Bangladesh and registered itself as an independent country on the map of the world. Sheikh Mujib-ur Rehman became its first President. The state of Bangladesh emerged as a secular polity. The first Constitution passed on November 04, 1972 abolished all kinds of communalism, recognition of religion for political purposes and discrimination on religious ground. The preamble of Constitution emphasised secularism as one of the fundamental principles of state policy. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujib-ur Rehman, the process of Islamisation of the country started and during the military regime of General Irshad, People's Republic of Bangladesh was declared to be the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh. The secular character of the state was gone. Consequent upon the rise of communal politics, the Hindus were rendered insecure in Bangladesh. Later on, when Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hasina, one after the other, came to power through election process they continued the policies of previous governments. Each government sought the support of and gave importance to those very religious groups that in pre-independence days had sided with Pakistani army in heaping atrocities on Bangladeshi nationalists.
When human values are set at naught, humans become inhuman. This is what happened in Bangladesh in the wake of Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya on 6 Dec. 1992. When the Hindus were persecuted, the country turned a blind eye to the sufferings of a section of its citizens simply because they followed a religion different from that of the majority community, that is, Islam. Thus, Islam is the greatest factor in determining the modes of thoughts and behaviour of its followers in Bangladesh. Hence, acquaintance with a few basic principles of Islam is necessary to size up the situations and events in the writings of the writer, Taslima Nasreen, her personal life and the lives of her characters. Such acquaintance is also necessary because Taslima Nasreen’s fight for the cause of women becomes, in the ultimate analysis, a fight against religion, rather a total rejection of religion. In her interview with Karan Thapar, Taslima Nasreen asserts: “We should not practise any religion because it is against humanity, against humanism, against human rights, against women rights, against freedom of expression” (“Devil’s Advocate”).

Muslims believe that the Koran is literally the word of God as recited to Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Thus the Koran is of divine origin. It is the perfect word of Allah and it contains absolutely no errors or contradictions. So it must be followed ad verbum, without an iota of doubt. The criticism of Koran is equated with the criticism of Islam and Allah. Muhammad is the Prophet, the messenger of the final revelation that he named the Koran. He is righteous and holy. Giving up Islam is called apostasy. Amina Wadud in Inside the Gender Jihad suggests:

…any expressions of dissatisfaction with being Muslim legitimates the punishment of apostasy and many would fear for their lives and safety, so might find it better to remain closeted about their real feelings on the matter….One wonders, if the threat of death did not loom large over them, how many would just as soon not be Muslim. (82)

The penalty for apostasy is death. All schools of Islamic jurisprudence contend that a sane adult male apostate must be executed. A female apostate should be put in prison till she repents, according to some, but the majority view is that she should also pay for the sin of deserting Islam with her death. This practice of Muslims is inconsistent with Human Rights Conventions that recognize a human being’s right to change religion. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. ("Criticism")

The Koran recognizes man’s dominance over woman. It gives the husband the unqualified right to beat his wife. The husband is the lord; the wife is a housekeeper, a cook, laundrywoman, valet and what not. For the most part marriage in Islam is an institution of woman’s subordination. Man-woman relationship is not based on the principle of equality of sexes. Man is considered superior and woman inferior. Amina Wadud also expresses a similar view when she talks of man-woman relationship in Islam:

Men and women are not simply considered different from one another, as we speak of people differing in eye-color, movie tastes or preferences for ice cream. In every domain of life, men are considered the normal human being, and women are “ab-normal,” deficient because they are different from men. (190)

To cap it all, a Muslim man has the sole right to dissolve marriage with or without any reason at any time, by simply declaring “Talaq, Talaq, Talaq” three times. This is called repudiation. If after talaq the spouses are reconciled, they cannot unitestraightway at will. There is a clear-cut procedure laid down in the Koran. The woman has to marry another man and it is only when he divorces her after a certain period that she can remarry her former husband. The threat of Talaq hangs over the head of almost every Muslim wife like the proverbial sword of Democles. The Koran allows man to take up four wives at one time but the privilege, if at all it is a privilege, is not given to the woman. Polygamy is permissible but not polyandry.

A Muslim woman inherits half the share of what her brother does from their father’s property. Thus, the Muslim woman has a second class status vis-à-vis Muslim man in the family as well as in society. This explains why Taslima Nasreen is critical of the treatment of women under Islam and becomes a fiery campaigner of women’s rights. Feminism, which is the main theme of her novels Shodh and French Lover, has stemmed from Taslima Nasreen’s own observation and experience. Irshad Manji, too, observes in The Trouble with Islam Today (2003):

Why appeal to Islam at all? It’s a question posed by Taslima Nasrin who adamantly believes that reform will emerge only when religion retreats. As far as
she’s concerned, Muslims need to replace religious laws with civil ones, completely separating mosque and state. (189)

But Taslima Nasreen’s condemnation of Islam can, perhaps, be properly understood and appreciated only by the rational people, not by the credulous and blinkered religious ones. The seeds of rationalism were sown in her mind at an early stage of her life. She was a science student and judged everything on the basis of logic and common sense. She also realized that religion forbids free thinking. Here the terms related to religion, which emerge as major themes in Taslima Nasreen’s writings, need to be taken up and defined briefly.

Fundamentalism, as defined by *Chambers Concise Dictionary*, “is belief in the literal truth of the Bible, against evolution, etc., adherence to strictly orthodox religious or other, e.g., political doctrines” (“Fundamentalism”). The term was originally coined to describe a narrowly defined set of beliefs that developed into a movement within the US Protestant community in the early part of the twentieth century. These religious principles stood in opposition to the modernist movement and espoused the strict adherence to and faith in religious “fundamentals”. The argument is better supported by the definition of fundamentalism given in the *Webster’s New World Dictionary* as “the Twentieth century movement among some American Protestants, based on these beliefs” (“Fundamentalism”). But the term has acquired negative religious connotations since the Iranian revolution, and is now used to characterize religious advocates as clinging to a stubborn, entrenched position that defies reasoned argument or contradictory evidence.

When religious fundamentalists turn fanatic, the result is communalism. Blurtit defines communalism as to “preaching religion oriented views as well as carrying out religious activities with a view to degrading some other religion” (“What is Communalism”). The term ‘communalism’ is generally used as an opposite of secularism and does not believe in tolerance for other religions. It believes in extreme fundamental ideas about a religion and tries to further the cause of one religion at the expense of other religions. Practising communalism invariably leads to social tensions as groups belonging to different religious groups tend to clash with one another. In India the term communalism is used to describe what is generally termed as sectarianism which means bigotry, or discrimination, intolerance or hatred arising from attaching importance to perceived differences between subdivisions within a group, such as between different denominations of a religion or the faction of a political movement. The most common
examples are the Shia and Sunni sects among Muslims and Catholics and Protestants among Christians. Non-sectarians espouse political and religious pluralism.

The terms fundamentalism, communalism and sectarianism—all have their association with religion. But sometimes, as put by Karren Armstrong, “...when the secularist attack has been more violent, the fundamentalist reaction is likely to be even greater. Fundamentalism therefore reveals a fissure in society, which is polarized between those who enjoy secular culture and those who regard it with dread.” (166)

The word secular means ‘of this world’ in Latin, and is the opposite of religious. George Holyoake coined the term ‘secularism’ in 1841. His “English Secularism” (1896) defines secularism as follows:

Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: (1) The improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good.

(“Secularism”)

The word secular, from which secularism is derived, refers to something concerned with temporal, worldly matters rather than with religious or spiritual. Secularism has mainly been a Western concept and requires the separation of church and state but the Indian model of secularism does not follow the principle of religious neutrality and demands that all religions are to be treated equally by the state. In India, secularism came into being as a political ideology in opposition to organized religion. Hence, in Indian context secularism has developed as a force to counter the evil of communalism.

Besides the divisions based on caste, creed or community, human beings are also divided on the basis of biological identities called “races,” Usually, the term racism denotes race-based prejudices, violence, discrimination or oppression. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, “Discrimination on a wider plane, that is, bigotry, or hatred for certain groups of people according to their race is racism” (“Racism”). The Macquarie Dictionary defines racism as: “the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics which determine their respective culture, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior and has the right to rule or
dominate others” (“Racism”). According to the United Nations Convention, the term “racial discrimination shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin…” (“Racism” Wikipedia)

Being a realist, she distrusts superstition and spiritualism. She is not interested in God, angels, heaven, hell and devils. Her sole concern is with life on this side of the grave and not hereafter. For her, this world is all important and the other world does not exist. For her, ‘here endeth’. In this world too, she is most concerned for the protection and preservation of rights of its inhabitants as humans and not as living beings only. As she defies discrimination based on race and religion and gender, and denounces fundamentalism, communalism and racism, she emerges as a thorough humanist. Her faith in humanism dominates all other concerns as it is the only means available to fight the dogmatic practices which threaten a peaceful co-existence of the people of various communities. Humanism, as Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it, is “a system of thought that considers that solving human problems with the help of reason is more important than religious beliefs” (“Humanism”). In the early twentieth century, it was a literary movement shaping the ideas and attitudes of man. “It sought to bring about a unity between moral earnestness and aesthetic sensibility” (Ramamurthi 146). But in sociological context, according to Webster’s New World Dictionary, it is a “system of thought or action based on the nature, interests and ideals of man” (“Humanism”). Taslima Nasreen, too, expresses more faith in human potential than in divine guidance. She says, “I dream of a world where human beings will respect one another” (“Speech”). She examines human principles and values in a rational and human spirit and denounces all means of socio-economic inequalities. All her novels have been written in the backdrop of a sordid social structure and a religiously orthodox male patriarchal factor dominating the lives of the people. However, it is her liberal humanism that comes out triumphant in the ultimate analysis. Besides all these concerns, Taslima Nasreen shows deep insight in human relationships and complexities of human behaviour.

Condemning the discrimination based on caste, colour, creed, country, race and religion, Taslima Nasreen also strives to deal a death blow to the discrimination practised at the level of most primary human relationship, that is, discrimination between man and woman favoured by the patriarchal system, generally discussed under the theme of feminism. Feminism has been both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. In Taslima Nasreen’s writings feminism may be regarded as a
modern, social and literary orientation of thinking on women’s rights as individuals. In brief, the ultimate goal of all her works is to end gender discrimination from physical, social, emotional, intellectual and psychological spheres. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines feminism as “belief in the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunities (legal, political, social, economic etc.) as men” (“Feminism”). As a movement it started after the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 and gathered momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century with the significant contribution of feminists like Margaret Fuller and John Stuart Mill. The second wave of feminism came with full force with the publication of Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s own” (1929) and many such writings that share a number of concerns for women. In 1949 appeared Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxie Sex* (translated as *The Second Sex* by H. M. Parshley in 1960), one of the most significant works in feminist writings. Beauvoir tries to trace the roots of “otherisation”—her own term for female subservience. During the 1960’s feminists like Mary Ellman, Kate Millett and Elaine Showalter drew attention to a tradition of neglected women writers and hence started politicizing the movement. In 1980’s there was an attempt to review the works of earlier feminists. Still, it was not until the efforts of Gayatri Spivak that the universalization of feminist works started as she critiqued the feminists’ tendency to ignore the issues and writings of the Third World writers.

Feminism, since its origin, has undergone many shifts in thoughts, beliefs and ideologies and its various varieties came into being such as Amazon feminism, conservative feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism etc. These changes in ideology and thought have been duly reflected in the art of creative writers. Nearer home, in India, there have been writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy—all in their own individual manner promoted the cause of feminism. In Bangladesh, the flag of feminism has been hoisted by writers like Selina Hossain, Dilara Hashem, Purbi Basu, Naheed Husain, Niaz Zaman and many others. It may, however, be noted that feminists in this part of the world seem to strike a conciliatory note and instead of going the wrong hog in claiming equal rights and a just position in the society, they stop short of striking the final blow. Take for example, Shashi Deshpande’s celebrated novel *That Long Silence* (1989) in which the female protagonist Jaya at the end of the novel decides to give her husband another chance and start dialogue with him anew. Taslima Nasreen’s approach is a little different as she strikes a
rather loud note to assert her female protagonists’ rights in a patently unjust society organized on the principles of patriarchal philosophy.

Next to feminism Taslima Nasreen is deeply concerned with the concepts of home and homelessness. Home means physical, social and emotional security. On the contrary, homelessness means not having a space where a man feels secure and comfortable in physical, material, social and emotional sense. In her writings, Taslima Nasreen espouses the cause of all those who are uprooted from their homelands and thus do not seem to belong. She empathises with all minorities, who have a sense of homelessness. In the same way she looks at all women as victims of this feeling. They live in homes and, still they feel intensely homeless.

The issues referred to above are important to our study as they emerge from the life experience and observation of Taslima Nasreen and pervade all her novels. Until now, Taslima Nasreen has brought out seven novels. Though she has received much negative and positive criticism throughout the world, and much has been written on the personal life of Taslima Nasreen yet her novels have not been thoroughly assessed. Her unconventional views and unusual ways of her life have attracted the attention of many writers, yet there is no substantial work of criticism on her works except on My Girlhood (1999) considered the best non-fictional work for the year 2002. Only a few critics have shown interest in her novels and only a few books have been brought out such as: Voice and Silence: contextualizing Taslima Nasreen (1995) by Ali Riaz; Taslima Nasreen—The Death Order and its Background (1997) by Peter Priskil, The Crescent and the Pen: the Strange Journey of Taslima Nasreen (2006) by Hanifa Deen and a few more in which she is discussed, but only for her poetry and non-fictional works and not her fiction. However, she constantly appears in newspapers and magazines and a number of reviews on her books are brought out from time to time such as: “Shodh: The Ecstatic Female Body in the Contemporary Bangladeshi novels of Taslima Nasreen” (1999) by Saiyeda Khatun published in Genders; reviews on French Lover like “A Search for Lilies” (2002) by Sudipta Dutta, “From Hoogly to the Seine” (2003) by Susan Chacko, and “Bold and Banned” (2004) by Sudhir Kumar; reviews on Lajja by Niloo Kalaam (1996) and I.K.Shukla (2005) and a few more. Apart from these valuable critical pieces, there is hardly any comprehensive detailed study of her fictional works. Hence there is need to undertake a close critical survey of her fictional works with an eye on the thematic concerns embodied in them. The present research is a step in this direction. The four novels under study are: Shodh, originally published in Bengali in 1992 and

As stated earlier, Taslima Nasreen is a writer with a purpose and she writes with certain issues in her mind. The first novel to be taken up for the thematic study, *Shodh* is a scathing attack on patriarchy and its power structures. Other related issues are women’s social and economic freedom, right to education, right and freedom to have or not have sex, right to choose friends, her right to good health, home etc. The novel is inspired from a real life incident in Taslima Nasreen’s life. Her feminist concern in regard to the upper class elites in *Shodh* reflects her own violent outburst of fury at her second husband, Naiem’s diabolic suspicion and his conservatism, his desire to keep her captive in the cage of his desires. Due to his stingy, jealous and vengeful nature, after marriage, the same Naiem, who was always engaged in keeping her happy, now kept her confined to the limits of his own personal joy. Earlier, he gave her freedom to drive his car. Now he did not even allow her small joys like visiting her parents. Feeling envious of her for her creativity, he limited her writing to his choice. At times, he trembled with anger when his wife refused to submit to him. Naiem was in the habit of giving her shocks and the greatest one was when he took her to a gynaecologist to get her to abort her foetus, the reason being his baseless suspicion that Taslima Nasreen had tricked him into marriage and she was bearing somebody else’s baby in her womb. Taslima Nasreen was too flabbergasted to react. This episode determines the central action in *Shodh*. The whole story of *Shodh* is woven around this incident only.

Taslima Nasreen who was perhaps not able to avenge the injustices done to her in her real life, entered into the character of Jhumur and openly flouted the patriarchal laws attacking her husband, Haroon’s masculinity, conceiving a baby of someone else and savoured every moment of her sweet revenge at his foolish pride that he took in considering himself the father of Jhumur’s son. *Shodh* works as an agent of catharsis for Taslima Nasreen satiating her feeling of outrage.

The second novel *Lajja*, which Taslima Nasreen claims to have written in just within seven days, raises the most relevant contemporary issues such as fundamentalism, communalism, secularism, nationalism, patriarchy and women’s plight. The novel was a result of her emotional
and intellectual outburst at the persecution of the Hindus by the Muslim fundamentalists subsequent to the demolition of Babri Mosque. She witnessed horrible scenes of barbarity all around her. She put these events in black and white and the result was the novel, Lajja.

On 6 Dec. 1992, Dr. Taslima Nasreen was on duty in Dhaka Government College. In the evening she had to visit her sister who had had a baby. While returning she came to know of tension in the city. Very soon she came to know the cause—the demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The next whole day, she had many casualties—someone with grievous head injuries, some other’s leg was cut off, somebody else’s back was broken. There was no more room for the patients in the rooms. They were being attended to in the corridors. She enquired about their names and she was shocked to know that each and every victim had a Hindu name. In the evening the surgeon remarked that the riot victims would keep on coming the whole night.

Taslima Nasreen was stunned to hear this and asked where the riots had broken out. It was not the case of Hindus and Muslims attacking each other. A riot takes place when one community attacks the other and vice-versa. In this case, only Muslims were killing Hindus. She talked to her patients to draw out the identity of the attackers and came to know that most of them were their neighbours. She asked the victims if they knew the cause of attack and if they knew anything about Babri Mosque, they denied any knowledge of the mosque and its whereabouts. Quite innocently they said that on their way to hospital they did not see any mosque broken.

Taslima Nasreen was greatly moved to see the barbarism of man to man. She raged with helpless frustration, disgust and anguish. She kept attending to the wounds and injuries for the whole night of 8th Dec. 1992. At dawn a doctor from emergency asked her if she was a Hindu, she did not care to reply such an absurd question. But on repeated demand, gritting her teeth she retorted, “I am a Human.” After her duty, she kept moving around the whole city to witness the ugly face of humanity. She visited her Hindu friends and on the way saw burnt Dhakeshwari Temple, charred houses and shops all of which belonged to Hindus. Seeing all this, she herself felt ashamed of bearing a Muslim name and reflected that it was a shame that at the end of the twentieth century, when civilization is busy in the development of Science and Technology as well as creativity beyond imagination, one man pounces upon another like a ferocious wolf, just because he believes in a different religion. In spite of her shame, she could not console her Hindu friends that communal harmony would be restored, and that they should not leave their country. She put herself in their place and tried to understand how fierce their sense of insecurity was and
how it forces them to abandon their homeland. It was at those moments that the character of Suranjan, the protagonist of Lajja, the person who does not believe in religion, who is associated with a progressive group and most of whose friends are atheists, who loves his own country greatly but is shaken by communal violence, assumed shape and form in her mind. Now his ideals are shattered, his inherent impulsive love for his country starts diminishing, he suspects everybody and undergoes a nervous breakdown fearing that some day he, too, will be attacked by some fanatic.

Taslima Nasreen’s next novel under study, Phera, seems to be a sequel to Lajja and it starts where Lajja ends. Lajja ends on a pessimistic note with the Duttas leaving for India, the country where their community is in majority. In Phera, Taslima Nasreen deals with the problem of the Hindu refugees in India. A superficial reader of the novel may wrongly blame Taslima for siding with the Hindus in her novels, but the in-depth study reveals that her association with Hindus is long, strong and lasting and thus the understanding that is born after one has got a deeper knowledge of aspects that are more humane than religious. Nevertheless, she has perhaps never intentionally favoured the oppressed and maltreated Hindus. Their religion does not matter to her. Thus, Phera is most concerned with the theme of homelessness of war refugees and riot victims subsequent to fundamentalism, pseudo-nationalism, communalism, and at the same time, patriarchy and gender-based discrimination. Shodh and Lajja are based on the writer’s personal experiences and observations, but ironically enough, this novel too assumed autobiographical contours, later on, when in 1994, she became homeless in her own country and has not found any home till today.

In French Lover Taslima Nasreen voices the issue of racial discrimination that she suffered during her exile. Inspired by her personal experiences, as described in her autobiography, she acquaints her readers with the problems faced by the people of the Indian subcontinent regarding their job, residence and their passport-visas. Other related themes are feminism, love and sex, homosexuality and love for art and literature.

All the major themes will be taken up in the subsequent chapters. The second chapter concerned with the theme of fundamentalism will be an endeavour to comprehend the need for religion among primitive civilizations, its present moulds, which have become traumatic for many, and comfort to few, and its connection to other related themes like communalism and racism, and the counter issues like humanism and secularism.
The third chapter, devoted to the feminist concerns, will relate the concerned issues to their roots in patriarchy, the authoritarian social system, which finds acceptance in all societies and religions from pre-historic times and which is not confined to Islam only. However, in the context of novels under scrutiny, the factors of Islam influencing the life of women will be discussed at length.

The ordeal of the homeless will be fathomed in the fourth chapter. In this chapter, man’s urge for home since his very appearance on earth and his predicament on not finding any, consequent upon his banishment from those parts to which he belongs will be apprehended. In such situations as war and riots, woman is a double victim, being a sufferer at the hands of the enemy as well as her own people.

In the fifth chapter, my endeavour will be to bring together all the subsidiary themes that run through all of Taslima Nasreen’s writings, and are, in no case, of lesser importance.

The sixth chapter will be devoted to the aesthetic strategies of her works. In this chapter Taslima Nasreen’s individual writing style, her use of various narrative techniques, plot structure of her novels, art of characterization, use of symbols and imagery, irony and humour will be dealt with in detail.

The seventh and the last chapter will be in the form of conclusion. This chapter will be an attempt on overall evaluation of Taslima Nasreen as a creative artist and take into account the relevance of the main themes of her major novels.
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