This chapter endeavours to deal with certain key concepts which Taslima Nasreen takes up in an almost insistent manner. As a writer born in a society which is predominantly Muslim, she has come face to face with issues related to religion in its distorted form. As a creative writer with a social consciousness, she has been a witness to the ugly contours of fundamentalism, religious bigotry, communalism and racism as also how they have vitiated the social, political, religious and cultural life of a large number of people. She realizes that religion is used as a potent tool by fanatics who with an inordinate lust for power and pelf would not hesitate to destroy the lives of others, particularly of those who do not belong to their own community and are in a pitiful minority. In the novels under study, that is, *Shodh* (1992), *Lajja* (1993), *Phera* (1993) and *French Lover* (2002), we come across a sensitive Taslima Nasreen who feels pained at the insensitivity of men and mullahs in the matters of religious beliefs and because of which not only the personal lives of a large number of citizens are decimated but the whole social structure of a nation is also fractured and fragmented. Her distress and anguish is not personal, rather it is the microcosm of the intellectual—Muslim as well as non-Muslim—communities, not only of her own country but the whole world.

In this chapter we are concerned with certain key terms which are: fundamentalism, communalism, racism and caste-based discrimination, as taken up in Taslima Nasreen’s works. Though these terms have been defined appropriately in the previous chapter, here, they are being explored in greater detail in the context of Taslima Nasreen’s works under study. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* explains fundamentalism as “strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion” (“Fundamentalism”). Etymologically speaking, fundamentalism is a noun form of ‘fundamental’, which means basic, serving as necessary starting point. Thus fundamentalism means strict adherence to fundamental tenets of a religion. But fundamentalism has now-a-days assumed a meaning similar to communalism, the term which stands for bigotry or discrimination on the basis of communities, that is, groups and sub-divisions in a social set-up. These communities may be religious, occupational or caste-based. According to Romilla Thapar, “Communalism in Indian sense is a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for an ideology. It then demands political allegiance to a religious community and supports a programme of political action designed to further the interests of that
religious community” (qtd. in Gehlot 159). In South Asian context, communalism has emerged as a false notion of religiosity. When the religious discrimination crosses borders and is based on human complexion or racial identity, it means racism. One feels that the race he belongs to is superior; all others are inferior. He belongs to the chosen one. Bertrand Russell encompasses all these issues under the concept of false pride when he says, “Another passion which gives rise to false beliefs that are politically harmful is pride—pride of nationality, race, sex, class, or creed” (169-70). He calls racism “even more harmful than national pride” (170). Hence, all these terms are near synonymous except that they are arranged in a hierarchy, as they all mean discrimination between man and man and are based on their religious, communal and caste-based, national or racial identities. Pitted against these themes are the themes of humanism and secularism, or more appropriately, as Taslima Nasreen prefers to call it, secular humanism. Both the terms, that is, secularism and humanism are believed to acquire their relevance in contrast to religion. For some people, secularism means negation of all religions. In its most accepted sense, the term secular denotes ‘related to this world’. It means that religion or divine concepts have no room in the human society because human life can be improved only by material means. Science is the chief means of progress as against fate or destiny which is based purely on divinity. However, in the Indian context, secularism has come to acquire an entirely different, perhaps erroneous connotation. Here, in India, secularism means equal respect for all faiths. It is accepted as a norm of life in which all religions are given equal opportunity to grow and flourish together. This view is represented by Pt. Nehru’s assertion that secularism means “equal respect for all faiths and equal opportunities for all, irrespective of the faith they profess” (qtd. in Gehlot 157). M.V. Kamath, a member of Constituent Assembly while participating in a debate, also spelled a secular state as “neither a Godless state nor an irreligious nor an anti-religious state.” (825-26). However, with the passage of time, secularism in its wider sense also in the restricted meaning in the Indian context underwent an eclipse as fundamentalist, communalist, racist forces started raising their ugly heads and tolerance and respect for different religions gave way to blatant discrimination and hatred for other religions.

In this process one concept that took a harsh thrashing was humanism. Since the times of European Renaissance humanism has come to acquire a great significance and this life becomes more important than the life beyond. Gradually humanism came to acquire the central spot in evolution of the progress of the civilized society. Thus, secular humanism becomes important for
Taslima Nasreen who believes that man would be happier without religion. For her tolerance and mutual respect and caring for the human rights and liberties is more important. For her humanism is supreme.

Humanism is superiority of man over God. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines humanism as the attitude of mind which attaches primary importance to man and to his faculties, affairs, temporal aspirations and well-being (from Latin humanus, “human”; cf. homo, “man”, hominess, “mankind”), often regarded as the characteristic attitude of the Renaissance in Western Europe” (“Humanism”).

In spite of the fact that Taslima Nasreen is aware of some of the drawbacks of secularism and socialism, she refuses to accept fundamentalism as an alternative. She is against every kind of religion, because she is against fundamentalism. So far as she is concerned, religion is the root, fundamentalism is its stem and communalism, sectarianism and terrorism are the shoots, hence she condemns in her works of all such practices exercised by man against man. But before we move on to the detailed analysis of the theme of crusade against fundamentalism and other related issues in Taslima Nasreen’s works, it is relevant here to have a peep into her psyche as a young girl. As a student of science she would raise embarrassing questions about Allah and Islam for which she got regular scolding from her mother. Using logic and reason as her tools, this young girl would question the validity of the Islamic tenet that a woman was created out of man’s body. She read in the Koran that man’s female companion has been created out of his ribs and one of the bones in a woman’s neck is crooked and that is the reason why no woman can think straight or walk on a straight path. Taslima Nasreen scoffs at such puerile ideas and beliefs and disproves them with the help of her knowledge of medical science and polemics.

> There are two hundred and six bones in the human body. My teacher in the school said the same thing. I could spot no difference between Dada’s neck and mine!...Strictly speaking, Baba ought to have one rib less since Ma was supposed to have been made from it. What if a man had four wives? Would he lose four ribs? I could not believe it. (*My Girlhood* 145)

One day Taslima Nasreen found a Bengali translation of the Koran in her mother’s cupboard and read it. It said, “The moon has its own light. The earth always stands still”(144). But she had been taught that the earth does not stand still, it moves around the sun. She wondered which was right, what the Koran said or what science said. Young Taslima had long arguments with her
mother on the matters of God, religion and the holy book. She put disturbing questions. When her mother told her that asking such questions was a sin and she would have to pay for it, Taslima Nasreen said that her teacher had taught her that asking questions was the way to get knowledge. Her mother said that everyone who was not a Muslim was a *Kafir*. He would go to hell. Taslima Nasreen said that if a child was born in a non-Muslim family it was not his or her fault. She argued, “You have often said yourself that nothing can possibly happen on this earth unless Allah wills it. So it was Allah who wanted that child to be born in a non-Muslim family. If anyone must be blamed, it should be Allah. Surely it should all be His fault” (135).

When young Taslima raised her doubts about the acceptability of the religious statements before her mother, the latter said, “If you say such bad things about Allah, your tongue will drop off” (176). Unafraid of her mother’s warning, Taslima made up her mind to verify the truth of it.

To test this out, I sat in my room one day, with the door closed, and said, “*Allah you are bad, you are ugly, you are rotten, you are crook, you are son of a bitch, you son of a pig*” my tongue remained in place, it did not drop off. Now there was no doubt in my mind. Nothing happened if you abused Allah. Ma was quite wrong. I had learnt something else.” (176)

No doubt, this is stark blasphemy and Taslima Nasreen seems to be drawing adolescent pleasure from the shock and pain that her deliberate use of such words would cause to the believers. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt about her bold experiment with truth. Moreover, she shuns religion because she believes that eradication of the evil of fundamentalism is impossible without first getting rid of religion, an outdated dead practice already in this scientific age.

Fundamentalism, especially religious fundamentalism, which we are presently concerned with, is generally misinterpreted as Islamic fundamentalism, hence, a careful scrutiny is required into the major religions of the present times to reach the core of the problem that lies in distorted, and sometimes, overzealous implications of religious beliefs.

Religion is a very old institution governing the lives of human beings. In pre-historic times, religion was born out of the fear of the phenomena of nature. The primitive man was awed by the sights and sounds of fire, lightning, thunder, storm at sea and on land, and in order to pacify and tame them, he began to worship them, believing that “the course of nature is to some extent elastic or variable and that we can produce or induce the mighty beings who control it to
deflect, for our benefit, the current of events from the channel in which they would otherwise flow” (Frazer 51). Thus, whatever man found incomprehensible and mysterious, he attributed to gods. Later on, the beliefs were transgressed to other generations and all this became a dead habit, and in due course, a part of our sub-conscious and travelled down through generations. Hence, J.G.Frazer is quite right when he defines religion as a conscious and personal force which governs the world. It involves, “first, a belief in superhuman beings who rule the world, and, second, an attempt to win their favour” (51). The Concise Oxford Dictionary too defines religion as “the belief in a superhuman controlling power especially, in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship” (“Religion”).

This concept of a superpower evolved out of the belief that everything was made by somebody and hence, this world, too, was created by somebody. It is a common belief that God created man; conversely, it may be said that man created God and visualized his image as a long white-bearded being, sitting on the highest throne in Heaven with his associates. Some gods were kind; others were cruel. Moloch, for example, as mentioned in Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667), had small children sacrificed to him. King Agamemnon, the husband of Clytemnæstra, Helen’s twin sister, had his dear daughter Iphigenia sacrificed to placate the angry winds at sea. Then, with the concept of God and goddesses came the concept of Heaven and Hell. Heaven is the abode of God and gods and the religious people after their deaths. Hell is a place of permanent torture for the sinners who are bitten by snakes and scorpions or thrown into cauldrons of boiling oil or acid. In fact, the concepts of hell and heaven are almost similar, with some variations here and there, in all religions. The concept of religion and God suited rulers and benefited priests. Some early civilizations had priests as kings:

The union of a royal title with priestly duties was common in ancient Italy and Greece. At Rome and in other cities of Latium there was a priest called the Sacrificial King or King of the Sacred Rites, and his wife bore the title of Queen of the Sacred Rites. In republican Athens the second annual magistrate of the state was the King, and his wife the Queen; the functions of both were religious. (Frazer 9)

Ever since the human history came into being, priests have enjoyed power and pelf. When the priests started losing their administrative hold, they began to exercise their power over kings. They believed in and propagated the doctrines of the Divine Right of Kings making rulers
the nominees of God on this earth, and so to defy them or rise against them was an anti-God, anti-religion activity. Not quite unexpectedly, people began to revere them not merely as kings but as intercessors between man and God and offered them prayers and sacrifices expecting them to bestow blessings that were beyond the reach of common people. In India, it has been a practice until quite lately and has been mentioned in *Manu Smriti*, too. Quoting the same source, J.G. Frazer writes, “...in India ‘every king is regarded little short of a present god...even an infant king must not be despised from an idea that he is a mere mortal; for he is a great deity in human form’” (100). The rulers held power and the priests who supported them lived in luxury. It is hard to conjecture when religion, a set of dynamic rules of conduct framed for humanity as exemplary, degenerated into rigid absurdity imposed on the simple-minded masses by the priests who have made religion “red in tooth and claw” like Tennyson’s nature. In Europe Catholic priests began to forgive sins and reserved seats in heaven by taking money from the gullible people. Some people like Martin Luther of Germany protested and Christianity was split into Protestants and Catholics who clashed and killed large numbers of people in the name of religion. The religious crusades in Europe were the bloodiest affairs in human history. Queen Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII of England, had three hundred Protestants burnt at stake and was dubbed as Bloody Mary. The sacrificing or killing of human beings or animals in one way or the other at the altar of religion continues even now. In Northern Ireland terrorism and murder go uninhibited even today in the name of Christ, religion and God.

Among the chief religions of the world, Hinduism is one of the oldest. Nearly all religions have one prophet and one holy book. Only Hinduism is an exception. It has no single prophet and no single holy book and no fixed ideology. Those who believe in God are Hindus but those who do not believe in God are also Hindus as one of the six Shastras of Hinduism is on Atheism. That is why some people call Hinduism a mystery while others call it a muddle. There is much variety, diversity and flexibility in Hinduism which is its great merit. Khushwant Singh shows great insight in the labyrinths of Hinduism in his book *India: An Introduction* (1990):

Hinduism defies definition. The word Hindu does not appear in any of the sacred texts of the Hindus. Hinduism has no Prophet or messiah in the sense. Jews, Christians and Muslims have prophets and messiahs. It has no one sacred book like the Bible or the Koran. It has no special creed. It is as Dr. Radhakrishnan, the eminent interpreter of Hinduism, says “a name without any content.” (19)
Islam is not a very old religion in the relative sense. Its Prophet Muhammad was born in AD 570. “Within a few years Muslim Arabs spilled over the neighbouring countries carrying the message of Islam with scimitar and fire” (Singh 69).

Though the ultimate goal of every religion is said to be salvation, yet, sometimes, as observed by Shashi Tharoor, “many faiths do tend to see theirs as the only true path to salvation, and their religious leaders feel a duty to spread the light of a supposedly superior understanding of God to those less fortunate” (“Respect”). John Bowker’s *What Muslims Believe* (1996), a book based on a series of programmes telecast on B.B.C. World Service, summarises the opinion of Muslims about non-Muslims, “Worshipping idols is disgusting, because it is an insult to Almighty God, who created us, if idols are worshipped instead of him” (53). He further claims:

> It’s not an attack on the individual, on the harm he is doing in believing something wrong, and it’s not because we are intolerant of one person believing whatever he wants; it is because the net effect is that they are establishing a faith or belief which is erroneous and which is leading people astray. It is our duty as Muslims at least to set a limit to what people are saying adversely about our Creator. (94)

Sociological study of religion suggests the line of thought that one’s own religion is superior to that of others. In every religion, there are two kinds of people: the moderates and the extremists. The moderates are relatively tolerant and harmless; the extremists are intolerant and cruel to others. Thus, it is the embattled, stubborn, entrenched, and occasionally violent form of religiosity that defies reasoning is known as fundamentalism. Actually, the term fundamentalism came into existence at the Niagara Falls Bible Conference which was convened during the late nineteenth century as a reaction to modernism as also to define those things that were fundamental to the true spirit of Christianity. Those who believed in those fundamentals were termed as fundamentalists. Thus, initially, at least, fundamentalism did not have a negative but a positive connotation. However, in present times, the term is generally though erroneously confused with Islamic fundamentalism, considered by the West just a synonym of Islam itself. The thinking is born out of the prejudice that a Muslim is cruel by birth and violent by nature. Now-a-days, there has been a lot of talk on Hindu fundamentalism, too, which is believed to have come into existence as a reaction to Islamic fundamentalism. There are other hues of fundamentalism, too, including the Islamic green and Hindu saffron. Christians, Jews, Buddhists,
and Sikhs too have fundamentalists among them. It is a travesty of truth to say that Hindus are non-violent. The Hindu-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 when three thousand Sikhs were killed, the burning alive of Australian missionary Graham Stains along with his two sons at Manoharpur village in Orissa in 1999, the Gujrat pogrom in Sep. 2002, and attack on the Christians in Kandhmal in Orissa in 2008 are glaring acts of Hindu fundamentalism. It is a fact that fundamentalism is not restricted to one or the other religion. It has acquired universal hues as is reflected in the words and acts of intolerance leading to atrocities and inhumanities perpetrated on human beings belonging to other religions and, on occasions, on the members of one’s own religious community, too, in case they try to defy the norms dictated by the fanatical religious pontiffs. Thus, fundamentalism is a global fact and has surfaced in every major faith in response to the problems triggered off by modernity and social thought. The Western media often gives the impression that it is a purely religious phenomenon. On the contrary, it takes shape when the process of modernization is at an advanced stage. At times, the religious people seek a compromise between their faith and modernity but often, some people resort to extreme measures. Karen Armstrong in her book, *Islam: A Short History* (2000), discusses the common factors that are shared by all faiths such as: “All fundamentalists reveal a deep disappointment and disenchantment with the modern experiment, which has not fulfilled all that was promised” and that they are “convinced that the secular establishment is determined to wipe religion out….All are intrinsically modern movements and could have appeared at no time other than our own.” (165). Some other reasons are the exaggerated propagation by the media of the erosion of moral values like unbridled mingling of sexes, unwed motherhood, divorce and drug addiction etc. Fundamentalism hand in glove with aspirations of power-maniacs wreaks havoc on innocent people’s lives.

In our present study, the main concern regarding fundamentalism is Islamic fundamentalism. In this sense of the term, some of the basic tenets of Islam need to be mentioned. The most important tenets of Islam, also called the pillars of Islam, are five. The first is the creed (*Iman*). There is one God only and there is no God save Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. He is the last Prophet whom Muslims revere the most. They revere other prophets, too, like Abraham, Moses and Jesus but none that claim to have come after Muhammad. The holy book of the Muslims is the Koran which is the word of God spoken through Muhammad. The second tenet is the Prayer (*Namaz*). There are five prayers which a Muslim must recite five
times during the day and night, with his face towards Mecca, the holy city, and knees bending to
the ground. The third is the giving of alms to the poor and the needy (Zakat). The fourth is the
keeping of fasts (Roza) from sunshine to sunset during Ramadan, the ninth lunar month of the
year. The fifth is the pilgrimage (Haj) to Mecca during Dhul Hajja, the twelfth lunar month of
the year. All these fundamental tenets promote the feelings of charity, forbearance and
benevolence to mankind. Yet there are some very rigid rules too which seem to threaten the
basic principles of humanity.

One point which deserves special attention is the Prophet’s attitude towards non-
Muslims. “Slay those who ascribe partners to God”, says the Quran (Sura IX,
verse 5). Confrontation with the infidel was Jihad (holy war). The Prophet
specially excepted Jews and Christians from the taint of infidelity because they
were shi-kitab (people of the Book, the Torah and the Bible). No such exemption
was provided for the Hindu or the Jain or the Buddhist, or for their religious
offshoots which came late. (Singh 63)

At its outset, Islam was not altogether a conservative ideology. Karen Armstrong, in
Islam: A Short History, quotes that the values that Muslims cultivated were: “a passion for social
justice, an egalitarian polity, freedom of speech and…a principled separation of religion and
politics” (136).

With the dawn of the twentieth century, there came a turning point in the religious
perspective as the West became dominant with its ideals of pluralism and human rights. The
Islamic reformers, too, wanted to keep up with the progress but found it difficult because
traditional Muslims restricted themselves to literal interpretation of their religious texts, the
Quran and Hadith. Hence, the Western concept of democracy was quite inapplicable to Muslim
societies as it is the government of the people, for the people and by the people, as defined by
Abraham Lincoln, while in Islam it is God, and not the people, who gives legitimacy to the
government. As a result, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded on Wahhabi ideal, a
puritanical religious form. In the Arabian Peninsula, Muhammad ibn Abdal-Wahhab (1703-92)
tried to restore the religious order by a fundamentalist return to the Koran and Sunnah and by a
rejection of all later accretions. Still, from the very beginning a class of Muslims sought reforms,
and reformers like Iranian intellectuals Mulkum Khan (1833-1908), and Aqa Khan
Kirmani(1853-96), Egyptian writer Rifah-al-Tahtawi (1801-73) and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan
from India tried to adapt Islam to modern Western liberalism. However, the Egyptian
ruler Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) used brutal methods to drag the backward province into the
modern world. He massacred the political opposition and marginalized ulema who in turn
became more insular and closed their minds against modernity. Muhammad Ali’s grandson
Ismail Pasha (1803-95) outdid even his father in modernizing Egypt but the cost of his ambitious
progress made him bankrupt and, Egypt, a British colony (in 1882 Britain established its military
occupation in Egypt). Ataturk (1881-1938) in Turkey closed down all the Madarsas, suppressed
the Sufi orders and forced men and women to wear modern Western dress. In Iran, the Pahlavi
monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi (reigned 1921-41) was also ruthless in his efforts to introduce
secularism. He deprived the ulema of their endowments and replaced the Shariah with a civil
system, forbade Iranians from going on the Haj pilgrimage. Islamic dress was prohibited and
Reza’s soldiers used to tear off women’s veils with their bayonets and tore them to pieces in the
street. Under the rule of his son Muhammad Reza Shah (reigned 1944-79) madarsas were closed,
hundreds of madarra students who dared to protest against the reign were shot in the streets,
leading ulema were imprisoned, exiled or tortured to death. There was nothing democratic about
this secular reign. The king systematically denied the Iranians fundamental human rights that
democracy was supposed to guarantee.

It was, therefore, difficult for Muslim countries to set up modern democratic states and as
coercion is always counter-productive, oppressive reformation catapulted in rebellion. Islam,
which had gone underground, held the West responsible for such militant anti-Islamic rule and
found it pursuing double standards. The West proudly proclaimed democracy for its own people
but Muslims were expected to submit to cruel dictatorships. As a result, the stress and fear of
cultural and religious annihilation led to the development of an extreme and potentially violent
distortion of the faith. Thus, fundamentalism can be seen as a postmodern movement, which
rejects some of the tenets of modernity such as colonialism and individualism so much favoured
by the West.

Not quite unexpectedly, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia founded in 1932 was based on
Wahhabi ideal and the kings enforced conservative religious values. Women were veiled from
viewers and secluded (even though this had not been the case in the Prophet’s time), gambling
and alcohol were forbidden and traditional punishments, such as the mutilation of thieves, were
enshrined in the legal system. What followed was the birth of Pakistan (declared Islamic republic
in 1956) and rise of fundamentalists like Khomeini (1962-89) in Iran, and religious leaders like Mawdudi (founder of Jammat-i-Islami) who defied the whole secular ethos and called for a universal Jihad. Sayyad Qutb (1906-66), considered the real founder of Islamic fundamentalism, was greatly influenced by Mawdudi and distorted the message of the Koran and told the Muslims to segregate themselves from the mainstream society and then engage in the violent Jihad. Every Sunni fundamentalist movement has been influenced by Qutb. The Taliban (students of the madarsas) who came to power in Afghanistan in 1994 are also affected by this ideology. The Taliban are typical fundamentalists who use religion as a tool of oppression and of violence. Disgusted with this juggernaut of democracy, the disillusioned and sometimes, idle youths “gravitate to radical organizations that promise free food, purposeful activity, and a release valve for anger. Hence, the advent of terrorism” (Manji 179). The idea is more clearly explained by the Canadian Muslim feminist, journalist and activist Irshad Manji, who is also a well-known critic of orthodox Islam, in these words: “Fundamentalists expertly exploit the frustrations of people whose lives have been shocked by secularizing regimes” (190-91). Many scholars, along with Martin E. Marty, a professor at the University of Chicago, believe that “fundamentalism is also a useful form of religion in power relations because it organizes all the people’s energies in a holy cause” (607). However, it would be wrong to say that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, linguistically and culturally different. History is witness that even in its early stages of fervour, Islam was not able to unite all the Muslim countries in one state. East Pakistan, the Bangladesh of the present, separated itself from the West Pakistan.

Fundamentalism and communalism are almost synonymous terms though at their onset they had different meanings. M. J. Akbar, the well known Indian journalist, tries to define both the terms in context of each other. He says that a believer can only be true to his faith if he believes in its fundamentals. For example, a Muslim fasts during Ramadan, one of the five fundamental tenets of Islam. Can he be called a fundamentalist? No. “Fundamentalism has come to acquire a different meaning. The first symptom of fundamentalism is aggression. When the aggression is channelised through an organised section of a community, it becomes communalism” (“Fundamentalism”). Thus, communalism, the practical shape of fundamentalism, in its widest sense, means the common belief in a community. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jews etc are called religious communities. But communalism, in recent years, has come to mean antagonism between various communities because each
community believes in its own superiority and in turn aggressively denigrates other communities leading to hatred and clashes. In the beginning, the term communalism was associated with communism, but later quite paradoxically, both the terms assumed contradictory meanings.

Thus, communalism believes in extreme fundamental ideas about a religion and tries to further the cause of one religion at the expense of other religions. It invariably leads to social tension, communal clashes and riots. Communal riots are a colossal problem and take a very heavy toll in the subcontinent. According to The Times of India dated 7 Sep. 2008, in India alone, there were 4845 incidents of communal riots with 1947 dead and 16793 injured between 2006 and 2007. That is the official summary of communal violence.

The communal hatred is believed to have resurfaced after the merciless killings of people during the Partition riots, but the seeds were sown long before. Rajmohan Gandhi makes a very minute study of the roots of the communal hatred between the two communities. During the reign of Muhammad bin Qasim who conquered Sind in A D 712, Hindus were given a status inferior to Muslims and had to pay jizia. Between A D 1000 and 1026, Mahmud of Ghazni raided India seventeen times, broke idols of Hindu temples and took away the wealth. Historians like Al Baruni and Ibn Batutah have observed that the Hindus looked upon the invaders as outcastes and recoiled from the touch of the impure barbarian Muslims.

Rajmohan Gandhi goes into the depths of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and quotes Hafiz Malik in this regard, “Some students of History, Hindu and Muslim, have argued that though India has succeeded in integrating foreigners that had entered India before the Muslims (Greeks, Scythians, Kushans and others), she could not ‘Indianise’ the Muslims” (qtd. in Gandhi 4). A group of Hindu historians examining the Muslim Sultanate of Delhi (1206-1526) state that unlike the previous invaders the Muslims did not merge themselves with the Hindus and thus for the first time the population of India was divided into two separate units with marked distinctions. This was the historic beginning of the Hindu-Muslim rift that led after more than six hundred years to the creation of Pakistan. Before the Partition, presiding over a Hindu Mahasabha session in 1939, Savarkar said: “Let us bravely face the unpleasant facts. There are two nations in India, the Hindus and the Muslims” (qtd. in Gandhi 7). So why blame only Jinnah and his Muslim League for the two nation theory which became the basis of the Partition of the country and birth of Pakistan?
Taslima Nasreen’s most successful and provocative novel, *Lajja*, is a record of a Hindu family, the Duttas, persecuted from the beginning to the end by Muslim fundamentalists. Suranjan, his sister Nilanjana, lovingly called Maya, and their parents, Sudhamoy and Kironmoyee, all live under constant threat to their lives in a vitiating atmosphere of communal riots. Muslim fundamentalists are in a mood to teach a lesson to the members of Hindu community which has dared to harm the structure of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. Amid the incidents of inestimable loot and plundering, arson, desecrating of Hindu temples, large-scale killing of Hindus and dishonouring of Hindu girls and women, the Dutta family looks up to Suranjan for shifting them to a safe place. Suranjan, however, at this time is in a challenging mood and wonders why it is always he, a Hindu, who has to go into hiding every time when there is a riot, while his other friends, of course, Muslims, never have a reason to do so. With increasing numbers of communal attacks, it becomes difficult for Suranjan, the protagonist of *Lajja*, to believe that his Muslim friends were non-communal. Even his secular Muslim friends like Kaiser, Latif, Belal and Shahin do not remain immune to the malignant influence of communalism. The act of damaging the edifice of Babri Mosque seems to threaten their religious sentiments. In a frenzied state, instead of taking security measures for himself and his family, Suranjan keeps hanging around the whole town covering the long litany of destruction. He is confused, disoriented and depressed and feels isolated because of his Hindu identity. Sceptic about getting any security from the Muslims, Suranjan analyses the status of the minority community and concludes that he is a second rate citizen in his own country which is believed, for being a democracy, to maintain communal harmony. He realizes the futility of his efforts, in association with his secular Muslim friends, to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of his country by carrying out processions, long marches and human chains. Thus, in *Lajja*, Taslima Nasreen scrutinizes how communalism creates a sense of insecurity among various communities. Even long-time friends and acquaintances are forced to acquire religious identities which supersede all other identities. With the spread of communal violence there starts a psychological war with each other. The sense of fear is greater among the people of minority community and it culminates in utter hatred. That is why, Suranjan boils with impotent rage for his sheer helplessness. In fact, each community suffers from a phobia that the people of the other community are out to wipe out their identity. In his novel *Shahar Mein Curfew* (Curfew in the City) (1986), Vibhuti Narain Rai summarises this common fear that preoccupies the minds of the
majority that the minority is constantly receiving arms and ammunitions from the enemy country and that every Muslim has developed bunkers in their houses. Amitav Ghosh, one of the most sensitive authors on the Partition theme, too, handles this factor very subtly in his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988):

It is a fear that comes out of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly, and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flashflood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the sub-continent from the rest of the world—not language, not food, not music—it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between one’s self and one’s image in the mirror. (204)

Suranjan is scornful of the attitude of his sister, who has gone to her Muslim friend to seek refuge, “Why does she have so much faith in Muslims? How long will they let her live?” (*Lajja* 84). Thus, during riots the communities concerned lose faith in each other. Suranjan is a secular intellectual and patriotic youth of Bangladesh and is living up to the ideals of his father Sudhamoy, an ardent patriot, freedom-fighter and revolutionary, who has lived all his life beyond the identity of a Hindu; he has always prided himself on being a Bangladeshi. Being an intellectual of refined sensibilities and never infected by communal climate of the sub-continent, he tries to delink the question of widespread violence from that of religion which the fundamentalist forces try to put to the forefront. He simply rejects any religious association to the shameful act of the demolition of the Babri Mosque against the backdrop of which the whole story of *Lajja* revolves. While his Muslim friend is excited at the shocking act, and demands vehement condemnation on the part of Sudhamoy, he simply says, “Evil people have done evil work. All I can do is feel very sorry about the whole thing” (35).

Suranjan, however, a youth with a relatively immature outlook and prone to the contamination of communal violence is bitter and denounces the act as well as the political forces that did not have the slightest consideration of the Hindus living in other countries in minorities when he reads the news in a paper whose report says:

Did the devout Hindus, who were intending to look after the interests of their religion and their community, realise that there were almost twenty five million Hindus living in Bangladesh too? Not only in Bangladesh, almost in every
country in West Asia, there is a fair scattering of Hindus. Did the Hindu fanatics ever consider what severe adversities they might have to face? (3)

_Lajja_ discusses in detail how an insensible act of hurting the sentiments of one religious community anywhere has its repercussions in every part of the world and the whole atmosphere is vitiated. It is a reflection of how ugly the face of humanity becomes when fear grips it. A minority community is supported and sheltered by the secular members of the minority community as long as they do not feel threatened by it. The so-called protectors of religious harmony relish the idea that they are the patrons of secular ideas in their country. But, at the first instance, when their religious sentiments are aroused, this façade disappears. Suranjan and his family were safeguarded whenever there were riots in Bangladesh. But when it is the fault of Suranjan’s community, true demeanour begins to show. They line up Suranjan along with the Hindu fanatics and blame Suranjan for the communal killings that took place in India. They, at the same time, try to justify their anger by juxtaposing the comparatively lesser number of casualties in their own country. Belal asks the shattered Suranjan: “In India, until the present time, there have been at least six thousand riots. Thousands of Muslims have died in the process. Tell me, how many Hindus have died here?” (172). The first blow from the weaker side is too hard to bear: “When they get such news from India, these people naturally lose their heads. Whom can you blame? We are dying there and you here” (171). Thus, _Lajja_ may well be called a case in psychological insecurities of the majority community that change their outlook towards the people of minority community with whom they had formerly lived in near harmony. On each side, a suspicion of being targeted keeps growing. Suranjan who has all his life, grown up and matured with a secular stance, is flabbergasted at Belal’s wild accusation: “Why did you break our Babri Masjid?” Quite puzzled, he is still not prepared to accept the hard-edged reality, he bursts out, shouting, “After all these years of non-believing you bracket me with Hindus?” and frowns:

    Was Belal looking at the Hindus in India and those in Bangladesh in the same light? Just because the Hindus had brought down the mosque, did it necessarily follow that Suranjan had destroyed it? Was Suranjan to be identified with the Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhaya? (176)

In the light of such blame games, the question that one tends to ask, with the author is: “Do these attacks on humanity have any justification in religion?” Perhaps, no. But in the
arguments of religious practitioners, certainly, yes. Belal absolves the communal Muslims of Bangladesh of all blame saying:

What was the point in breaking up the mosque? Such an ancient mosque as that. The Indians have dug up a mosque in order to find out the birth place of Rama, an epic character! Some days later, they might say Hanuman was born at the Taj Mahal. So why not break the Taj Mahal too? (171)

As a counter-point, the line of thinking of the Hindu fundamentalists on the Ram Temple-Babri Mosque dispute is worth quoting. Parekh ji, in Chetan Bhagat’s novel, *The Three Mistakes of my Life* (2008), argues:

Hindus asked for the resurrection of one temple, not any temple, a temple where one of our most revered gods was born. But they won’t give it to us. We said, we will move the mosque respectfully round the corner. But no, that was considered unreasonable. We tried to submit proof but that was suppressed. Is this just?

Should we keep bearing? (43)

Regarding the demolition, Peter Priskil, in his book, *Taslima Nasrin—the Death Order and its Background* (1997) gives an upper hand to the Hindus making it a point that the Babri Mosque erected by the first Mughal monarch, Babar, is a symbol of defeat at the hands of Mughals. Whatever logic these arguments may have, any instance of provocation is sure to become a tool in the hands of frenzied fanatics who fail to realize that Ram and Allah do not need material edifices made of brick and mortar to justify their existence. Rather it is man’s ego, which, in its extreme, makes him forget the maxims of humanity. Both the above quoted arguments offer no plausible solution to pacify the searing hearts of the communal people. The reason is quite clear and can be explained well in the words of Muhammad Ali, who was addressing the Congress’s annual session (1923-24) as its President, “Each community remembers only that which it has itself suffered, retaining in its memory no record of the sufferings it had itself caused to others” (qtd. in Gandhi 108). These attacks and counter attacks fail to solve the problems of religion which instead of guiding humanity towards sublimation, has come out as a vitiating force.

In modern times, religion has become a tool to be used against humanity, hence the denunciation of religion on the part of the author, Taslima Nasreen who has studied all the major religions of the world and feels that the Koran, the Vedas, the Bible and such religious texts as
direct the lives of the followers are no longer valid. They might have had their relevance only in the times in which they were written. Just like Taslima Nasreen, all her protagonists are either egalitarians or atheists. Quite truly, they believe that those who spread hatred in the name of religion are not really religious persons. Suranjan, the protagonist of Lajja, is warned by Kaiser not to come out of his house. “...you know these swine ...all this talk about religion. Tell me, do they really believe in religion?”(29). Taslima Nasreen, through her characters, emphasizes the fact that peace and not destruction ought to be the ultimate aim of every religion. But religion often creates conflicts and disturbs harmony. There can be no better vocation than to let mankind live in peace. But peace is currently threatened by fundamentalist forces operating in various parts of the world, not to speak of the Indian sub-continent alone as inflicting violence in the name of religion is the easiest weapon to legitimize their savage acts among ignorant masses. Sudhamoy of Lajja says:

Ironically, all religions point towards one goal peace. Yet it is in the name of religion that there has been so much unrest and lack of peace. So much blood has been shed and so many people have suffered. It is indeed a pity that even at the close of twentieth century, we’ve had to witness such atrocities, all in the name of religion. Flying the flag of religion has always proved the easiest way to crush to nothingness human beings, as well as the spirit of humanity. (35-36)

Hence, religion in Taslima Nasreen’s view is an evil force per se. She is dead against the oppressor who oppresses in the name of religion. She understands that religious fundamentalists are such people as take the sword in the name of God but certainly not with God’s approval. They are bent upon imposing their extreme ideas upon others without caring for the basic human values that are the essence of all religions. Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl in his Foreword to Amina Wadud’s book, Inside the Gender Jihad, refers to the fundamentalists and their activities: “From a theological point of view, the worst forms [of despotism and oppression] are when human beings usurp the role of God, and exploit the name of the Divine in the process of erasing the autonomy and will of other human beings” (xi).

Here, the perspective of religious fundamentalists on brutal killings of the people of the minority community needs to be illustrated. Before East Bengal became Bangladesh, the Pakistan army inflicted cruelties on its innocent people. Religious fanatics at that time acclaimed their savagery in the name of religion. Dr. Anwar Hossain, a Professor of History at Dhaka
university and an authority on Islamic revival and fanaticism, has condemned the role of ‘Mullahs’ thus, “When over 40,000 women were raped and three million innocent people were massacred by the Pakistan army, these Mullahs were chanting ‘Allah-o-Akbar’ (God is Great)” (qtd. in Samad)

Taslima Nasreen believes that religion has become a weapon in the hands of the crafty politicians. Taslima Nasreen’s view is supported by Mark Sedgwick in Islam and Muslims (2006), “Political movements all aim at taking power—if they did not, they would not be political Islamists, but merely non-political groups of Muslims. The means Islamists use to this end vary widely from country to country, depending on local circumstances” (197). Sedgwick comments further:

In the end, the tactics of Islamist insurgents differ little from the tactics of any other type of insurgent (for example, nationalist or communist), and really have little to do with Islam. The tactics of Islamist political parties also differ little from those used by other political parties in similar circumstances. What is ‘Islamic’ is the inspiration for the utopias such parties seek to construct. (198)

Taslima Nasreen observes how the socio-political situation in Bangladesh worsened when the nexus between religion and politics was established and the opponents of the war for independence came to wield power. It has worsened the situation in South Asia where communal riots break out at the slightest provocation.

After independence, the reactionaries who had been against the very spirit of independence had gained power, changed the face of constitution and revived the evils of communalism and unbending fundamentalism that had been rejected during the war of independence. Religion was used as a political weapon and a large number of people were forced to follow the dictates of Islam. (43)

In Lajja, Taslima Nasreen clearly illustrates how the communal political parties in India as well as in Bangladesh were responsible for the riots that erupted after the Babri Mosque demolition and unambiguously states, “The purpose of both the groups was the same—the establishment of what might be called fundamentalism” (133). Bitter in her denunciation of religious fanatics, Taslima Nasreen bristles with rage at the impotent law and order machinery, “These fanatics should be whipped. These fake religionists are imposters who provoke in the name of religion” (33).
In fact, since the British encountered the first armed revolt in 1857, they discovered that it was near impossible for them to keep the revolutionary freedom fighters in check unless they divided the Indian subjects on the basis of religion and as everybody knows, they followed the policy of divide and rule. They sympathized with the Muslim leaders of the country and convinced them of an unequal treatment at the hands of the Hindus once they came to rule the country. Bhishm Sahni’s *Tamas* (1973) is a highly sensitized documentation on the unscrupulous practices of the politicians who use various communities against each other. It is also an expression of ire and satire against such divisive practices of power-hungry rulers. In the novel, an English officer Richard’s wife, Liza, cynically tells her husband that the people fight with the British in the name of their country and they in turn make them fight among themselves.

The British were quite successful in their strategy, and the Partition of India was the outcome of communal disharmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. The consequence of all this was the communal killing on an unprecedented scale and has left an indelible scar on the face of humanity. Rajmohan Gandhi at the very beginning of his book, *Understanding the Muslim Mind* (1986), gives this view of the Partition:

> We think of 1947, accurately, as the year of our independence from British rule but that is not quite how the future will look upon it. Unless I am greatly mistaken, our descendants will regard the transfer of power as less significant than the inhumanity to which many Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs allowed themselves to sink that year. It is a year of shame, not the year of achievement. (1)

Taslima Nasreen, too, denounces the riots that erupted as a reaction to the damage to the Babri Mosque and subsequent violence in India as a national shame. Instead of indulging in theoretical discussion on the theme of communalism, Taslima Nasreen prefers to take a practical approach and openly castigates forces that foment riots among the people of their own country. Since Independence, massive damage has been done in the Indian sub-continent because of communal violence which is spread by crafty politicians and religious fanatics, most of the times, to save their own skin and to divert general public’s attention from the burning issues of the times. Deabrata, one of Suranjan’s friends, says, “Actually all this hue and cry about Babri Masjid is to communalise politics and thereby boost their flagging fortunes. At the same time, it is meant to divert attention from the anti-Gholam Azam campaign”(168). It is to be remembered that Gholam Azam had aided and abetted the atrocious Pakistani army during the Liberation War
of Bangladesh and after independence he had become a leader by playing upon the religious sentiments of people. Those who knew about his anti-national role demanded his prosecution for the crimes he had committed. Lajja also exposes how, instead of taking effective steps to save the innocent, the government machinery looked the other way while the rioters had savage fun. It happened because the religious dons had much clout with the government. The radicals who had conspired to engineer violence gloated over the horrendous sight with satisfaction. Torching the temples went on for days. More blood had been shed than was reported in the papers. Most killings were not reflected in the official figures with families unable to furnish proof of alleged murders. In Lajja the barbaric acts of religious zealots are reported in a very sensitive manner. However, the novel would have been more successful as a work of art, had it incorporated the long list of litany in the main plot of the novel. For example, Chaman Nahal in his Azadi (1975) gives long records of loot and killing of the migrating Hindus at the hands of the Muslims. In every attack, some of the characters of the novel are among the worst sufferers. In the first report of train attack, it is Arun’s sister Madhu and her husband, who are killed, then, there is Niranjan Singh’s self-immolation in the refugee camp, after that there is attack on the convoy and when the attackers leave, Lala Kanshi Ram sees the body of Dr. Chander Bhan. In the next chapter, Arun sees Chander Bhan’s daughter among the Hindu girls being paraded naked in the market place. On their next stay, Arun’s beloved Chandni is abducted. Hence, the reader is able to empathise with the victims while a newspaper report is hardly able to evoke such feelings in the reader.

During the liberation war, Bangladesh, too, like Hitler’s Nazi Germany, became a land of internment camps where innocent people were stashed in the name of religion and left to die the death of humiliation. Fundamentalists, supported by the government and the army, inflicted cruelties on the believers of other faiths. Either the person was killed or his reproductive organ was mutilated, if he refused to convert. Sudhamoy, who was later freed to live a life of sexual deprivation, recounts his experience:

They had then suspended him from a wooden beam and thrashed him. With each blow they had told him to become a Muslim; to read the kalma and announce he had converted to Islam. But Sudhamoy had held firm. Just like Kunta Kinte, the black boy in Alex Haley’s Roots, who was mercilessly whipped for refusing to accept he was a Toby, so too did Sudhamoy refuse to call himself a Muslim. His
enraged tormentors finally said that whether he accepted or not, they’d make a Muslim out of him. One day, after Sudhamoy had again thwarted their efforts, they jerked up his lungi, and mutilated his penis. Sudhamoy had seen the blood and the severed foreskin and heard the harsh laughter before he had lost consciousness. (66)

Sudhamoy underwent untold misery and pain in internment camp at the hands of Pak Army for nine long months. His one leg and three ribs were broken and his reproductive organ was mutilated. His life was spared but he never recovered of the scars of incarcerations that he bore on his heart. He had to abandon his religious identity and go into hiding. For seven years, he and his family lived away from home in a distant village under the assumed Muslim names. He returned home only after independence, with new hopes that were never realised. Even after Liberation, in an attempt to melt in the mainstream population of the capital city Dhaka, Sudhamoy has to forsake his dhuti, a symbol of his Hindu identity. Even in the educational institutions, least regard is shown to the sentiments of the members of minority community. Maya is taught verses from Koran at school. Sudhamoy’s request to the school authorities to look into the matters and replace the Koranic teachings with secular teachings is not paid any attention. Suranjan is made to eat beef and ridiculed for his Hindu identity by his school mates. Kironmoyee has to abandon her singing after she hears sly remarks from other women, “It is only because Hindu women are shameless that they learn how to sing; that is why they sit in public in front of unknown men and sing for everyone” (37). Suranjan, who is on the verge of nervous break-down because his Muslim friends have left him, analyses the situation with his Hindu friend Pulok:

You know something, Pulok? Those whom you think as non-communal, or as our own people, and as our friends, are highly communal deep down. We have mixed and mingled so much with the Muslims of this country, that we never hesitate to say Assalaam Aleikum, Khuda Hafiz, paani instead of jal, and gosol instead of snan. We respect their religious practices, and avoid drinking tea or smoking in public during the month of Ramzan. In fact, we do not even go to their restaurants on those days. But how close are they to us actually? For whom do we make these sacrifices? How many holidays do we get for the Pujas? Yet, Hindus are pushed, are expected to work long hours in the hospitals, while they enjoy two Id
holidays….They are all the same, Pulok….all the same. The only option left to us now is either suicide or migration. (107)

Thus, Taslima Nasreen explores how the people of the minority community are made to suffer at socio-cultural level. They have to lead a life of cultural evasion and humiliation and are made to live a cultural life quite different from theirs.

In a minority community, women are always the worst sufferers. In her childhood, Maya had been abducted and she returned home after two days in a mentally deranged and physically broken state. She could not recover from the traumatic state for many days. Her house in Mymensingh was sometimes pelted by hooligans and it was mainly for her security that her father Sudhamoy shifts to Dhaka. During the post Babri Mosque demolition riots too, Maya is most concerned about her own as well as the whole family’s security. Frustrated and disgusted at the seeming disinterestedness and apathy of her brother Suranj, Maya, takes the initiative and without waiting for anybody else’s advice or guidance in the matter, goes to her Muslim friend, Parul’s house to seek refuge. But Maya returns home when she learns about her father’s illness. Her ebullience is lost as she sees her father lying feebly on his bed. Both mother and daughter are busy attending to the gradually recovering Sudhamoy when there is a knock at the door. Expecting that Suranj has returned, Kironmoyee opens the door when seven Muslim youths, armed with rods, barge into the house. Shattering everything to splinters, tearing the fabrics to shreds and accomplishing their ghastly acts, they grab Maya and run away with the prize. It is the last blow to the crumbling edifice of the Duttas’ faith in the secular character of the country. Suranj, along with his friend Haider, tries to search for Maya at every possible place. But he is all the more disillusioned when he finds lack of sincerity on the part of Haider in tracing Maya. Hopeless and desperate, Suranj who has now taken to drinking too, leaves the house, taking a ride in a rickshaw, amid the celebrations of the Victory Day of Bangladesh and jubilations of ‘Joi Bangla, Bangla’r Joi’, he takes home a Muslim prostitute, Shamima, and rapes her most savagely. But due to the inequality of effect produced, even this attack on the honour of the opposite community does not help tranquillize his seething vengeance. The next day a neighbour informs the family of the swollen body of a girl resembling Maya floating in the river. Suranj pleads with his father to migrate to India, but uncompromising as ever, Sudhamoy is not prepared to give up his ideals as well as his country. Emotionally shaken and cringing with fear,
Suranjan is caught in a nightmare when Sudhamoy, painfully smothering his love for his native land Bangladesh, comes to his son’s rescue by assuring him that they will leave for India.

Once the communal violence erupts, it acts like a spark in a stack of hay and spreads like wild-fire. It gives rise to a situation in which communal feelings become uncontrollable, humans become inhuman and indulge in an orgy of killing and destruction. Cruelty to fellow beings crosses all limits. In Lajja Taslima Nasreen shows the impact of communal hatred and violence at various levels of human consciousness—the hero’s sulking nature, his withdrawal from everything including the affairs of the family, and looking after his invalid father, and last but not the least, the raping of a Muslim prostitute as a revenge of his sister’s abduction. It is a sad commentary on the degradation of human life. Taslima Nasreen observes, “The worst and the most poisonous aspect of man surfaces during a riot. Riots are not natural calamities, nor disasters, so to speak. They are simply perversion of humanity” (165). The author also comments that during the riots, “Only the dogs which had no fear of bigotry or communalism, seemed to be running about for the sheer joy of it” (28).

In her novel, Lajja, Taslima Nasreen also stresses the fact that economic factors contribute a great deal to the ordeal of the minority people during riots because on the one hand, anti-social elements mint money by looting people without any fear while on the other hand, local people also take pleasure in the prospect of easily getting hold of the property abandoned by the people migrating to other places. They also make good profit by purchasing their lands and other possessions at cheap costs. In Lajja, Sudhamoy had to face litigation on his own land and was forced to sell a property worth lakhs for some thousands. At the outbreak of riots, Sudhamoy says, “Actually, do you know what the truth is? Those who are causing these riots are not doing so for the love of any particular religion. Their main aim is to loot and plunder….the riots are quite clearly the result of hooliganism” (60).

People belonging to majority community get hold over the property of the minority community. Taslima Nasreen takes up the case of such people in her novels—Shodh, Phera and Lajja. Enemy Property Act is another death blow to the propriety rights of the minority as even the immediate relatives cannot inherit the property of those who have left the country. In 1965, an Enemy Property Act was incorporated in the Constitution of Pakistan to take over the immovable property of the minorities:
...the property of those Hindus who had left the country for India during the mass exodus of 1947 and after the riots of 1950 and 1954 was listed as enemy property... Apart from them those Hindus who had left for India, but had gone outside the subcontinent with temporary residence in India had also had their property enlisted as enemy property... According to the rules of the Hindu joint family system, after the demise of the Karta (or head of the family), the surviving members would enjoy the property. However, the government ignored all these traditions and laws and usurped such properties. (129)

Thus, Lajja, which made Taslima Nasreen a literary celebrity, is a story of severe persecution of the Duttas, a Hindu family, at the hands of Muslim fundamentalists. Lajja is a long tale of woe in which the Muslim fundamentalists play the villain. From page one to the last it presents the devil-dance of death and destruction enacted by the Muslim fundamentalists of Bangladesh. But the case of the Duttas is not an isolated one. Actually, this Hindu family stands for a large number of Hindu families similarly victimised for their religion. Hence, we can say that Taslima Nasreen successfully explores the theme of fundamentalism and communalism in her novel. In fact, riots have been a theme much discussed by the writers with humanitarian concerns. In A Bend in the Ganges (1964), Manohar Malgonkar presents Muslims in a bad light and blames them for perpetrating atrocities on Hindus. Khushwant Singh blames anti-social elements among both Hindus and Muslims and gives a balanced view of the events in Train to Pakistan (1956). Chaman Nahal in Azadi (1975) describes the attacks by Muslims on Hindu men and women. Hindi novel Tamas (1973), by Bhishm Sahni, is also a masterpiece on the theme and accuses the British administrators for using the two communities against each other for their selfish ends. While all these novels mainly deal with the communal violence that erupts at the spur of the moment, Taslima Nasreen records in her works how the venom of communal hatred has seeped through the hearts of the two communities with disastrous consequences. Sadat Hasan Manto, a story-writer has also shown deep insight in the communal differences among the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Manto’s short stories like Toba Tek Singh, Khol Do and and Thanda Gosht, to name only a few, are poignant portrayals of the sufferers of the Partition. In Toba Tek Singh, the Partition is focused through the vision of a lunatic. Toba Tek Singh screams and collapses on no man’s land signifying his rejection of the Partition. The story questions the insane division of a common culture and human consciousness. Khol Do does not deal with the
details of the Partition, rather, it delineates the trauma of the victims of aftermath of the Partition so caustically that the inhuman character of the Partition is brought to the front. Manto’s *Syah Hashiye*, a collection of some very short stories, satirises circumstances produced by the Partition and highlights the inhuman character of man. In all these stories women are a soft target irrespective of their religious identities. Amitav Ghosh depicts the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh in his novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Taslima Nasreen does the same, also putting the people of her own community in the dock in the fictionalised horrendous story, *Lajja*, she describes the persecution of a Hindu family at the hands of Muslim fanatics to which she herself was a witness. A question is often asked by people not only in Bangladesh but also in India, “Will India ever have her own Taslima documenting in a fictional work the tragedy of the Indian Muslims who have long been the silent victims of Hindu Taliban depravity aided and abetted by their criminal godfathers in the state?” The works like *Shahar Mein Curfew* (1986) written by Vibhuti Narayan Rai and *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008) by Chetan Bhagat are an appropriate answer. In *Shahar Mein Curfew*, Vibhuti Narain Rai describes the hell let loose on the minority community (read Muslims) by the Hindu rioters and policemen during the Allahabad riots in 1980. Being an I.P.S. officer, Mr. Rai narrates what he saw and dealt with while on duty. Hindu fundamentalists called the novel anti-Hindu and absolutely prejudiced, and clamoured for a ban on it. Muslims both in India and Pakistan acclaimed it for taking the case of Muslims. Though published earlier (in 1986) than *Lajja* (1993), it may legitimately be called *Lajja Inverted*. However, *Shahar Mein Curfew* has its weaknesses as a literary piece of writing as it takes up only one aspect of fundamentalism, that is, communal hatred of the majority community toward the members of the minority community and their oppression. Taslima Nasreen at one and the same time encompasses all the aspects of fundamentalism—religious, political, socio-cultural and economic—in her stance. In *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, Chetan Bhagat describes how three Hindu boys try to rescue a Muslim boy, Ali, a cricketer, at the risk of their own lives. One of them dies in the process. A professor who taught zoology in college had explained to them that male chimpanzees fight violently, after the fight they kiss each other and are reconciled. The protagonist laments the absence of this reconciliatory factor between the two communities. Thus, in *The Three Mistakes of my Life*, it is the triumph of good over evil and Ali is saved for being a national talent. But in Taslima Nasreen’s *Lajja*, Suranjan, also a representative of progressive values of his country is ruined and falls apart. In Mahesh Dattani’s
play *Final Solutions* (1993), too, the protagonist, a Hindu businessman Ramnik Gandhi provides shelter to two Muslim boys Javed and Bobby when there is communal violence in the city. For that he is called a traitor by his co-religionists. In *Lajja*, too, Maya is given shelter by her Muslim friend Parul, and she, too, fears that her relatives would indict her of giving refuge to a Hindu. Like all her literary counter-parts in India and the world over, Taslima Nasreen has successfully evaluated in her works the issue of religious fundamentalism which completely lacks in human element.

Though home and homelessness is the dominant theme of the novel, *Phera*, the theme of fundamentalism-cum-communalism keeps cropping up now and then. The novel touches upon the event of the Partition, both the result and cause of communal riots in the Indian sub-continent. At one place in the story, Harinarayan, the father of Kalyani, the protagonist of the novel, tells Sarlabala, Kalyani’s mother, “Sarla, a terrible thing has happened—it’s great tragedy. India has got rid of the British and fallen apart in the process” (36). As is obvious from the title of the novel, *Phera* is a comeback journey of the heroine Kalyani to Bangladesh, her homeland that she had to leave in 1947 as a young girl. During the Partition when riots were wide-spread, and the honour of the girls of minority community was in danger, Kalyani’s father Harinarayan Rai, a district magistrate, decided to send her off to Kolkata where his brother Nanigopal stayed. Pained at the separation from her near and dear ones, looked down upon by her cousins and a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her aunt, she consents to the marriage proposal from Anirban, a bank manager. Even an economically sound and socially secure life with a well-settled husband and the love of her two children cannot fill up the vacuum created by the loss of her dear motherland. Long after her parents’ death, and discharging her major responsibilities she returns to Bangladesh to breathe its air, to meet her old friend Sharifa, to wander in her native town Mymensingh and, above all, to see her ancestral house. She finds no trace of it as it is reduced to a rubble having been taken over by the government under Enemy Property Act.

As she had promised at her departure, Kalyani decides to put up at her girlhood days close friend Sharifa’s house but finds the latter’s vision blurred by fundamentalism, partly owing to her husband’s dominance over her and partly owing to the changed circumstances subsequent upon the rise of communal forces. Her husband Athar, who is completely taken over by communal feelings and expresses them unabashedly before Kalyani, objects to Sharifa’s keeping a Hindu friend and allowing her to stay at their home. He questions Sharifa, “You’ve never told
me you had Hindu friends” (76). He unjustly accuses Kalyani of butchering the Muslims in her country, “But tell us about Babri Masjid—you are butchering us in your country, aren’t you?”(114). Kalyani, who has not in the least associated herself with the incident of the demolition of the mosque, is utterly shocked. She cannot understand how she can be accused of something that went wrong in India. Through the reference of Babri Mosque demolition, Taslima Nasreen explores how vastly the poison of communalism is spread. The Partition holocaust, which has the most horrid record of any riots recorded in history so far, erupted such hatred in the hearts of both the communities that the venom of communalism spreads across hundreds and thousands of miles at the slightest provocation. If riots occur in any part of India one finds oneself equally insecure in Pakistan and Bangladesh and in any other country where both the communities live together. As observed by Amitav Ghosh in The Shadow Lines:

The borders between India and Pakistan had been drawn by administrators who believed in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders on the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of Gondwanaland. But as the simultaneous riots show, there is profound historic irony at work. (282)

Whatever may be the motives, any communal attack in any part of the world is an attack on international harmony and collective consciousness of the people. This happened when Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of Prophet Muhammad himself, disappeared from its place in the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar on 27th Dec. 1963. Though there was not even one single recorded incident of animosity among Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, yet religious authorities in Pakistan spread a rumour that the theft of the relic was an attack upon the identity of Muslims. The incident has been graphically recorded by Amitav Ghosh in The Shadow Lines to emphasise that the distance between places as far as 2000 kilometres and a frontier marked upon the map after a bloody holocaust, cannot separate the fates of the two communities. There were riots in some parts of Bangladesh, and as a counter reaction, the mobs in Calcutta went on rampaging, killing Muslims, looting and burning their shops and houses. We, too, like grandmother in The Shadow Lines, wonder if the demarcations on the maps did not make any difference to the lot of two communities across the border, “What was it all for then, partition and all the killing and everything”(151).
Kalyani, a devout patriot, has never thought of Bangladesh as another country. She does not believe in man-made barriers and religious differences. She got a secular education from her parents. Her mother Sarlabala would say, "I’ve seen people totally unrelated becoming close as brothers and natural brothers gradually growing apart" (59). Now, Kalyani is shocked to see Sharifa’s children getting religious education from a fundamentalist. To her horror, Kalyani learns about Sharifa’s children killing red ants calling them ‘Hindu’. Their minds have been poisoned by the fundamentalist ‘Mullahs’ whose main thrust of teaching is to instil inveterate hatred for ‘Hindus’ in the pliable children. Riven with pain and disheartened by the sense of loss and decline in moral and human ideals of religious equality and tolerance, she wails loudly clasping the only black-berry tree left on the premises of her house. Unconcerned about the woman’s sense of loss, Muslims around her pass bitter remarks, sarcastically accusing the Hindus of running away to India, and then claiming their property in Bangladesh as well. Swapan, the only solacing element in the whole bitter experience, feeds and gives Kalyani a homely welcome and farewell. He tells Kalyani about Badal, Kalyani’s college days black-skinned lover who had fought for his country’s independence and lost his leg in the battle. Now, he is not taken care of by anybody. Swapan tells Kalyani that the patriots like Badal were sufferers in their country. The fundamentalists who were with the Pakistani army during the fight for freedom have now become so powerful that they even sit in the Parliament. The boy tells Kalyani, “The fundamentalists are raising their voices now although they had taken cover and remained underground all through the freedom struggle” (104). On her return to Bangladesh, Kalyani finds the atmosphere of her country vitiated with the virus of communalism—the abundance of beards and caps and mosques in place of temples, even small children chasing away Hindus, abusing them saying, “‘Hindus’, ‘Hindus’, tulsi leaves, they eat cow’s head” (108). The property of her Hindu acquaintances is seized by local Muslims after their migration. It is too late when Kalyani realizes that she had held a picture post-card image of her homeland that “had merely existed in her imagination” and that she was just an unsettled refugee in one country and a castaway in another. She realizes she neither completely belongs to Bangladesh nor to India and religious fundamentalism is at the root of this foul state of affairs. Thus, in Phera, Taslima Nasreen takes up the themes of religious fundamentalism, communal hatred and the problems of the people of the minority community who are threatened physically, socially, economically and culturally by the members of the majority community. The related themes of
secularism and patriotism are also explored through the characters of Kalyani, Swapan and Badal.

While fundamentalism is generally taken to be an issue related to religion, it has its shoots in patriarchy as well. In fact, there is a nefarious nexus between orthodox religion and society and the purpose of the alliance is to keep the flag of patriarchy flying. It also means suppression of half of the human population by declaring that males are the lords and the masters of the universe. It is a woman's job to serve the male sexually and also to remain a carrier of his seed so that the human race is sustained. In the process, religion has come as a handy tool in the hands of fundamentalists who, quoting and misquoting the religious scriptures ordain that a woman would always remain a second sex, a subaltern whose main job is to serve man. Thus, religious fundamentalism becomes instrumental in repression of women. Taslima Nasreen takes a bold stand against this tyranny and raises a war-cry in order to liberate women from the patriarchal structures in a society which is already a victim of religious fundamentalism and bigotry.

In Shodh, Jhumur, a beautiful educated girl with liberal consciousness, is thrust into an early marriage with her suitor, Haroon, as her father does not want her to be jilted like his elder daughter. Haroon is a narrow-minded possessive husband and does not let her have anything to do with her former friends, boys and girls and does not allow her to visit her parents. Haroon forces Jhumur in religious practices like praying five times, keeping away from sacred things while menstruating, and following other orthodox rituals that gradually have an oppressive effect on her hitherto indomitable personality. Haroon suppresses his wife in various ways and suppression of women is one of the professed policies of the fundamentalists who allow woman no freedom. Then the events take a new turn and an early pregnancy creates suspicion in Haroon’s mind. He taunts her of tricking him into marriage because she had someone else's baby in her womb. Jhumur tries to assure him that she married because she loved him and that the baby in her womb is no one else's but his. But Haroon does not believe that a woman can become pregnant just after one and a half months of marriage. This pregnancy, according to him, is the result of pre-marital relationship with Subhash or Arju, both her close friends. So he forces Jhumur to abort the baby. Her pleadings for not killing the child have no effect on Haroon. She sighs and cries and in this traumatized state of mind, she decides to take revenge on Haroon by getting pregnant by Afzal, the younger brother of Anwar who is the husband of Dr. Sebati, a
tenant downstairs, and passing off the baby as Haroon’s. Thus, in *Shodh*, the theme of fundamentalism is explored from the feminist point of view where orthodox fundamentalists condemn women to inequality, subordination and oppression.

Though *Shodh* mainly hinges on the theme of feminism, the theme of communalism versus secularism is also introduced. Jhumur, who is free from religious bigotry and upholder of secular values, has a good friend in Subhash, a Hindu. This friendship started long before she was married to Haroon. It was a part of family relation as their families were on the best of terms, not letting religion come in their way. Jhumur’s upbringing took place in an enlightened atmosphere and she does not subscribe to worthless man-made barriers in society, prejudices and superstitions. She knows that the roots of her friendship with Subhash are very deep. Her parents supported Subhash’s family when there were riots during Liberation War. In a hurry, Subhash’s father, whom Jhumur calls Nitunkaka, sold his property very cheap. But he could not bear the pangs of being separated from his dear motherland and died of a heart attack. Jhumur’s father helped Kakima rent a place near theirs and took on the guardianship of the family. Secular values are upheld not only by Jhumur but also by her other friend Arju, who loves and helps Subhash cutting across the barriers of community and class.

The novel does not remain untouched by the issues of communal riots and migration of minority community to safer havens. Though Kakima had stayed back after Nitunkaka’s death, she and Subhash are now thinking of leaving the country after the death of Sujit, Subhash’s younger brother. He was only sixteen or seventeen years old when some boys, appearing familiar, took him to a mosque. Jhumur remembers what her Baba had told her:

> When Sujit asked, ‘Why have you brought me here?’ the two boys had said in one voice, ‘To convert you.’ Sujit grew frightened and started to run. He shouted, ‘I won’t be converted.’ 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. (*Shodh* 220-21)

Jhumur, a sensible and sensitive soul, bears the burden of the sorrow of Sujit’s death on her heart. Hence, in *Shodh*, Taslima Nasreen raises the issue of the persecution of the people of minority community at the hands of majority community. She also explores how the members of the majority community do not spare any chance to grab the property of the minorities at very low prices, threaten and attack their religious identity and ultimately leave them hopeless and
helpless. At the same time, she does not spare orthodox religiosity in Haroon and his family who can kiss the feet of clerics for their material gains.

Next to fundamentalism and communalism, Taslima Nasreen whips narrow nationalism and racism. The unrelenting sufferings heaped upon minority by the communal forces compel them to cross the borders but only to be victimized by other more discriminating powers of nationalism and racism. Thus racism is communalism in a wider sense. The novel *French Lover* opens on a note of racism at Charles de Gaulle airport. The newly-wed Nilanjana has the first experience of racism when she is detained by the airport authorities. It would not be incorrect to say that the whole novel *French Lover* smacks of an extended racism all along. On the first page of the novel, two characters are introduced by their racist identities: the Black and the White. Nila, a newly-married Bengali girl, has come from Kolkata to Paris to be united with her Punjabi husband Kishanlal, a restaurant owner. Nila does not know any language other than Bengali and English and this handicap lands her in trouble. But once she is out of it, the trouble is not between two cultures but two genders—man and wife. Nila is not able to put up with her conservative and utterly unromantic husband who wants Nila to live on his terms. Ultimately, Nila leaves him to live independently with a friend. Her mother’s illness lands her in Indian scene where her father and brother are seen performing the last rites of her mother mechanically and unemotionally. Here, Taslima Nasreen whips the irrational religiosity which is meant only to torture human beings physically and mentally. On her return to France, she meets a handsome Frenchman, Benoir Dupont, and goes with him. However, outwardly very progressive and open-minded, he, too, ultimately turns out to be racist to the core. Nila realises she is a woman without a country. She is doubly cursed—she is a woman; she is black. She belongs nowhere. Penniless, jobless, friendless and aimless, she sets out on a new journey, without any destination, but still hopeful because of her mature vision.

Racism has many facets; one is revealed in the use of one’s language and dislike for the languages of others. Such a reference is found in Taslima Nasreen’s autobiographical work *Wei Andhere Din* (Those Dark Days) (2004). In Paris, a woman came to interview Taslima Nasreen and requested her to speak in Bengali. The French people do not like English. Even if they know it they do not want to speak it. They will engage an interpreter but could not let her speak in English. Taslima Nasreen fictionalises her own experience of racism in European countries in *French Lover*. In halting English an officer at the Paris airport asks Nilanjana:
“Do you know French?”

“No.”

“What do you know?”

“English.”

“That won’t do.” (3)

Nila had no idea that there could be a place in this world where English would not work. Later on, she asks Chaitali, the wife of her husband’s friend Sunil, if they at the airport do not know English very well. She replies, “Of course, they know English but won’t speak it—wait a while and see how racists these people are” (11). From time to time, all the characters are shown as deeply sunk in the mire of racism. Paradoxically enough, Chaitali, who speaks against racism, herself, along with her husband Sunil and Nilanjana’s husband Kishanlal, practises racism. Kishanlal, Sunil and Chaitali—all hate the black people (African Negroes) whom they consider the root cause of all misery: “They just sat idle and took the government’s dole and indulged in anti-social activities. Because of them the almost whole like them had to suffer” (10). Nila joins a procession in Paris. When she comes back, her friend Danielle says to her, “These are racist Lippens. They want to banish all non-whites from their country and Joan of Arc is their idol” (107). Once, Nila boarded a bus. The ticket inspector came to her and asked for the ticket. After searching all her pockets, she found it and showed it to the inspector. He did not ask the other passengers for their tickets. Through her experiences, Nila learns in due course that the western people hold the easterners to be law evaders, undisciplined and suspicious characters.

The French swell with a cultural pride and consider the Orientals barbaric. On Nila’s insistence to have lunch, Benoïr sneers at her, “Eating is no big deal to me, it may be to you. There’s nothing more valuable to you than rice because half your country starves to death” (229). When Nila eats rice with hands, Benoïr calls this a barbaric practice that could be traced in his country only a thousand years back. Benoïr can call Madame Curie the pride of France though she was born in Poland, Picasso is theirs though he belonged to Spain. Very soon, “Nila realized she was from the East, the exact opposite of the West” (269).

But notions of racial superiority are not confined to the West only; they are deeply ingrained in Indians, too, facing a never ending caste-ridden conflict. Nila is ditched by her lover Sushanta because she belongs to a lower caste while Sushanta’s parents, swelling in their pride that they are Brahmans, flatly refuse to accept her as their daughter-in-law.
Though the main theme of *French Lover* is racism, besides love and marriage, yet Taslima Nasreen cannot help bringing in the themes of fundamentalism, communalism and religion. Kishanlal exhibits fundamentalists’ tendency in keeping his woman imprisoned in the house, confined to domestic chores. Next, there is a passing reference to the problem of communalism in Bangladesh. Mojammel, a worker in Kishanlal’s restaurant confides in Nila that he is living in Paris on the fake passport with a Hindu name. He told the authorities that he could not return to Bangladesh because Hindus were on the hit-list of Bangladeshi Muslim communalists. Taslima Nasreen is dead against the oppressor who oppresses in the name of Islam. So there are constant threats to her life from the so-called religious people. They want to hurl her into the flames of hell in exchange for seventy two virgins for each one of them in heaven. But it is not true to say that Taslima Nasreen lashes out at only one kind of fundamentalism, that is, Islamic fundamentalism. She openly condemns the communal forces at work in India. While living in Kolkata, Taslima Nasreen herself had a taste of Hindu fundamentalism when she was defending the rights of artists. In *French Lover*, she reveals Christian hypocrisy. Standing near Voltaire’s Statue, Nila talks of Christian fundamentalists, “But so far as I know Christian fundamentalists stole his body, and dumped it in the rubbish. Of course, they preserved the heart in bibliotheque and the brain was auctioned many times over and his disappearance since” (234).

From the general discussion of the themes of major novels, it follows that the ideals that Taslima Nasreen has cherished and propagated through and through are the ideals of social justice and equality, freedom of speech and separation of religion and politics and opposition to fundamentalism. Her fiction offers a rich, virtually inexhaustible thematic plentitude encompassing religion, reason, atheism, communalism and communal riots, Partition of India and Bengal, fanaticism, racism, revenge, hatred, violence, tolerance, humanism and human rights, secularism and democracy and so on. Condemning barbaric practices, Taslima Nasreen asserts that she respects diversity because diversity is a fact of life. She holds the view that every culture has its own unique beauty that must be preserved without the concept of superiority or inferiority attached to it. She says:

I believe that the diversity of our world’s many languages, cultures and ethnicities is not a pretext for conflict but a treasure that enriches us all. Diversity is a treasure to be preserved and appreciated. There is no superior, no inferior culture
in the world, only various cultural patterns that make our beautiful multi-coloured mosaic. ("Speech")

Fundamentalism is a product of social, political, economic and psychological implications of religiosity. Nonetheless, there are some other reasons, too, why Taslima Nasreen is against religion. The first and foremost, she impugns God, and religion which does not teach people the gospel of universal love. On the contrary, it arouses hatred for the people of different faiths. Moreover, religion makes people dependent on fate evading the onus of their moral or immoral acts. It glorifies poverty and sacrifice, and thus serves the interests of the wealthy few.

Taslima Nasreen criticizes fundamentalists as well as religion in general. She does not find any difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalists. According to her, religion is the root and from the root, fundamentalism grows as a poisonous stem. In Taslima Nasreen’s view, all religions are out-dated. They provide comfort to a few and misery to many. They are the instruments of perpetuating slavery on the common people and more so on women. All communists are atheists and being a communist, Taslima Nasreen, too, quotes Karl Marx in support of her secular ideas in Lajja:

‘Problems relating to religion are actually a manifestation of practical shortcomings, as also a protest against them. Religion is the sigh of the tortured and the persecuted, the heart of the heartless world, just it is the soul of a soulless society. Religion is the opium of masses.’ (133-34)

All religious authorities, in all ages, denied common people the right to education because education develops independent thinking and rationality. They rule out every possibility of contradiction of and opposition to religion and enjoy unbridled power. All religions are based on blind faith and superstition and allow no questioning. Religion and reason are antonyms. So religion was bound to come into conflict with modern science. Bruno, the scientist, was burnt to death for questioning the Biblical theory of Creation and Galileo nearly escaped death at the hands of priests. For preaching and practicing rationality in all matters, Taslima Nasreen is persecuted by the religious fanatics for, being a science student, she, too, measures religion with the yardstick of reason. She analyses the present state of affairs beyond the religious contexts:

I don’t agree with those who think that the conflict is simply between two religions, namely, Christianity and Islam. After all there are fundamentalists in every religious community. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between East and
West. To me this conflict is basically between irrational blind faith and rational logical minds. While some people want to go forward, others are trying to go backwards. It is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who don't. *(Free Inquiry Magazine)*

In brief, the real conflict in the modern world is between secularism and fundamentalism. As the forces of fundamentalism are rising all over the world, the fight against it becomes all the more imperative. Taslima Nasreen herself argues why she rejects fundamentalism. As revealed in her various interviews, her reasons are: first, the insistence of fundamentalists on divine justification for human laws; second, the insistence of fundamentalists upon the superior authority of faith, as opposed to reason; third, the insistence of fundamentalists that the individual does not count, that the individual is immaterial. Thus, according to Taslima Nasreen, fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of the consciousness and undermines their personal rights. It insists on the divine justification for human laws and on the superior authority of faith as opposed to reason. Furthermore, it gives no importance to individual; group loyalty is everything. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in a straitjacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life. They do not believe in individualism, liberty of personal choice or plurality of thought, free debate and exchange of views. They view everything through the dark glasses of bigotry. They cannot tolerate any thing that goes against their faith. They are the messengers of hatred and violence. Thus, fundamentalists are treading in the footsteps of Hitler to Nazify the whole society.

In the present context, the only possible solution seems to be secularism which is the most essential tool to produce and promote peace among various religious groups living in a country. The Hindi and Bengali translation of secularism is ‘dharmanirpekshata’ which means ‘religious neutrality’ that is, separated from, indifferent to and independent of religion. In Indian context, by secularism is meant equal respect for all religions. But Taslima Nasreen does not believe in such secularism as she has no respect for any religion. Her secularism means abiding by no religion and having no state religion. In *Dwikhandit* (2003), she states:

*A country does not require any religion, a person may and a country is not a person. The country should protect all cultures and the people of all religions. If a*
country is not secular and favours one religion, it will lead to a conflict. Non-
Muslims will be marginalized. The country instead of going ahead will go
backwards to the dark ages when people following different religions were burnt
alive. In dark ages, people had no freedom of expression. (54)

Fundamentalism has fed many tragedies. That is why Taslima Nasreen insists that
secularism is the solitary hope for humanity. Her loyalty is to ideals and ideas and not to dogmas.
There can be no activity or progress in any field of life without the free flow of ideas. Hence,
tolerance is needed. The dangers of intolerance should be identified and removed. Fanaticism of
one kind is no answer to fanaticism of another kind. In Lajja, Taslima Nasreen says, "The state
of Bangladesh was founded on the basis of four major principles: nationalism, secularism,
democracy and socialism" (42). Here it will not be wrong to say that, in a way, Muhammad Ali
Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan was secular in his views. He had a non-Muslim wife
whom he loved very much. In his first speech as Governor General of Independent Pakistan he
exuded high hopes for the people:

You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques, or to any
other place of worship in the state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or
caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state. We are
starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens of one state. (qtd.
in Manji 138)

But after the death of Jinnah, Pakistan became an Islamic state under the rising tide of Islamism.
After some years, Bangladesh also followed suit.

Secularism of minority can take it nowhere until the majority is secular. The religious
identity of the weak is crushed and the section even loses the support of its own people. Sohan
lal in Tamas is butchered because of his secular ideas. His own people consider him an informer
while the opponents fling his body before the Gurudwara to mock his efforts to bring upon
reconciliation between the two communities during riots. The incident emphasises the grave fact
that even their humanism brings people no good. They are equally charred by the cinders of
communalism. Suranjan of Lajja bursts out with rage, "I used to call myself a human being, and
I believed in humanism. But these Muslims did not let me stay human. They made me a Hindu"
(163). Regarding the defeat of communal parties in the fourteenth Lok Sabha elections in India,
M. J. Akbar, a noted journalist, has made a very wise remark that India is a secular country not
because her Muslims are secular. India is a secular nation because her Hindus are secular ("BJP").

The depiction of brutalities in Lajja heaped upon the Hindus in Bangladesh raised a firestorm from the Muslim fundamentalists. For many of them slandering the author became a favoured pastime. They branded her the enemy of Islam and a stooge of the West and the Indian government. On the contrary, thoughtful intellectual community stood with her and praised her for her courageous attempt.

Fundamentalists ignored the fact that Nasreen did not shed off her responsibility to give the details of the efforts made for communal harmony on the part of the educated and responsible citizens which saves the face of her country on the international front. In Lajja, Subhash tells Suranjan what he has done on his part:

I have sent a memorandum to the Home Minister with a proposal to rebuild the damaged temples, contribute towards the rebuilding of many homes that have been destroyed, compensate the losses of the homeless and the helpless, and most significantly, punish the guilty and ban communal politics altogether. (139)

Jhumur, the heroine of Shodh and a self-portrait of Taslima Nasreen is against communalism and believes in communal harmony like her creator. “Kakima was a great survivor. I had seen her pull through all kinds of situations, especially when the country broke apart” (79). She and Subhash had stayed at Jhumur’s place for almost two months. Nitun Kaka was thinking of leaving his homeland and sold his property. But he fell ill and died. Then Kakima rented a house near Jhumur’s. Jhumur expresses her fellow-feeling for the family: “Subhash and his family were not, therefore, merely neighbours, they were more like our family” (80). Jhumur does not discriminate people on the basis of religion. Subhash, a Hindu, is as good a friend of hers as is Arju, a Muslim. Taslima Nasreen feels for the Hindus not because they are Hindus but because they are sufferers, similarly Jhumur feels for Subhash because he is a sufferer at the hands of religious bigots.

Taslima Nasreen holds nationalism above religion and community. Her nationalism transcends narrow, aggressive and destructive nationalism. She thinks beyond a common religious identity and seeks political rapprochement of the two countries: India and Bangladesh just like the unification of the two Germanys. Kalyani, the heroine of Phera, on her visit to Bangladesh, her homeland, talks to Swapan, the Bangladeshi citizen,
‘What do you think—can we become one country again?’
‘And that means?’
‘We won’t require passports, there won’t be any wire barriers.’
‘How can the two countries come together again, the differences dissolve?’
‘But that has happened, the two Germanys have become one.’
‘Don’t compare Germany with Bangladesh, please. Religion is the chief obstacle in our doing away with the religious identities.’
‘What is the duration of any religion, and are we going to live our lives burdened with religion? We have the same language and same culture, those links are surely stronger than religion.’ (101)

Taslima Nasreen declares a war against discrimination of every kind and stresses that it should be fought at all fronts—in the realm of ideology, in the fields of education, on political platforms and in all spheres of daily life. Democracy and secularism should be applied in practice and not remain a mere play of words. Her characters believe—as does Suranjana of Lajja—in values like “honesty, simplicity, purity of thought and deed, love and above all, so strong a sense of secularism and dislike of communalism” (64-65). Karen Armstrong, too, confirms:

Thus the ideals of democracy, pluralism, toleration, human rights and secularism were not simply beautiful ideals, dreamed up by political scientists, but were at least, in part dictated by the need of the modern state. ‘It was found that in order to be efficient and productive, a modern nation had to be organized on a secular democratic basis.’ (143)

In order to realize her dreams of establishing a secular society, Taslima Nasreen stresses the need for education and scientific temperment which will rid the ignorant people of superstitions and distorted interpretations of scriptures. She is an apostle of scientific point of view. She has studied science, not just to obtain degrees, the highest being M.B.B.S., but to discover the truth behind the social and religious façade. She has come to the conclusion that reason has something to do with civilization, education and thought whereas instinct is animal-like. In Lajja, her spokesperson Suranjana wants all temples and mosques converted into temples of learning:
Let all those brick-built buildings of worship be smashed to smithereens. Let there be no mandirs, masjids, girijas and gurudwaras, and after they are all destroyed, we will build on their ruins beautiful flower gardens and schools for children. For the good of man, the places of worship should be hospitals, orphanages, schools and universities. From now onwards let the prayer homes be Art and Handicrafts Academies, Schools for Fine Arts, Halls for Scientific Discussions. Let our places of worship be converted into rich, green, sun-bathed paddy fields, vast rolling fields, gurgling blue rivers and wild unquiet oceans. Let the other name of Religion be Humanity. (163-64)

Taslima Nasreen’s views on religion and religious places tally with Nehru’s views. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru was not only a great leader and freedom fighter but also a great thinker and writer. Taslima Nasreen is an atheist; Nehru was an agnostic. Their views on religion are similar. This is what Nehru said about religion:

The spectacle of what is called religion or at any rate organized religion in India and elsewhere has filled me with horror, and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it... I have nothing to do with any religion concerned with keeping the masses satisfied to live in hunger, filth and ignorance. I want nothing to do with any order, religious or otherwise, which does not teach people that they are capable of becoming true man, master of his faith and captain of his soul. To attain this I would put priest to work also and turn the temples into schools.” (qtd. in Haught 308)

The secular practices of early reformers of Islam were barbaric but Taslima Nasreen believes in secular humanism. Humanism is the belief of those who care for the welfare of all humanity and not the privileged few. In Taslima Nasreen’s view humanism frees man from the fetters of religion and inculcates secularism. Unfortunately, humanism is under attack and this is seen as a dangerous trend.

In current times, humanism, a system of thought which is concerned with human matters rather than divine ones, is a way of solving human problems in a rational manner. It puts man at the centre of the stage and regards him as a responsible and progressive intellectual being. It is a belief in the dignity, independence, and potentialities of man. Pre-Christian humanism was revived in Renaissance period. In Renaissance humanism, man is distinguished from animals by
virtue of his reason and possession of ethical standards. Man stands as a free being but is prone to animalistic urges or egocentric expressions. It is man who is responsible for keeping these tendencies under control of reason. Freedom is not merely liberation from circumstances but is subjected to an inner law. The watchwords of early humanism are: Order, Control, Restraint and Discipline. In the early twentieth century, the Neo Humanist School was mainly concerned with the ends of literature as it affects man and shapes his ideas and attitudes with an objective to bring about a unison between moral earnestness and aesthetic sensibility.

Taslima Nasreen never bows down before any god but Rabindranath Tagore is a god of hers before whom she willingly bows down in great reverence. Tagore finds mention time and again in Taslima Nasreen’s all works –fictional and non-fictional. Tagore is a supreme artist. He is a symbol of all that is excellent and ideal. Though Tagore was a great painter, he is today better known for his poems, plays, novels and short stories. His innovation in music called Rabindrasangeet is played and enjoyed in both the Bengalis. Art ennobles man; it uplifts him above petty considerations of life and society and raises him to the stature of a god.

Fundamentalism makes its adherents devils. Art develops cosmopolitan outlook and considers all human beings equal and important. On the other hand, fundamentalists do not value life and are narrow-minded. Art is creative; fundamentalism is destructive. Art sustains life; fundamentalism snaps it. Art takes civilization forward whereas fundamentalists want to push humanity back to the barbaric age. Tagoreism, which stands for Tagore’s ideals: higher human values, freedom, dignity and universal love, signifying true art, is remedy for the malady of fundamentalism that culminates into terrorism. Thus Tagoreism is a spiritual force to fight the menace of terrorism. It is an antidote to fundamentalism and terrorism. At the end her talk to Humanist World Conference in Mexico City in 1988, Taslima Nasreen recited a Tagore poem: “Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high” (Gitanjali 1)— this can be a prayer for all the nations of the world. But Taslima Nasreen would not join the prayer even though she admires the poet’s ideals. She does not believe in prayers. She believes in work.

Taslima Nasreen everywhere lays great emphasis on practising humanism. The essence of her writings is the cultivation of the spirit of broad humanism and the eschewing of sectarianism. Taslima Nasreen’s message in her novels is clear: let there be peaceful co-existence of all people irrespective of their religious affiliations. Human beings should be considered human beings and nothing besides. Hatred, tyranny, and violence should not rule us in our
behaviour towards others. Thus, Taslima Nasreen’s works are lessons in humanism. *Lajja*, which is an outstanding example of fight against fundamentalism, unveiling its ugly face, has been rightly described as an oasis of sanity in the desert of barbarity. In a nutshell, it may be inferred that Taslima Nasreen suggests the promotion of humanism and secularism to counter the destructive forces of communalism, fanaticism and fundamentalism stemming from religion.
Works Cited


Kamath, M.V. *Constituent Assembly Debates*. vol. II. Govt. of India, Delhi. 1951. 825-26.


<br>


