

SENTENCE ON A WOMAN

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"I am not the first artist to be accused of blasphemy and apostasy; these are, in fact, probably the most common weapons with which fundamentalism has sought to shackle creativity in the modern age..."

Salman Rushdie

The authorities confiscated her passport in January 1993 and the price on her head is 50,000 taka for anyone who would kill her.

At a time when writers in many parts of the world are being threatened with everything from the banning and burning of their books to the actual obliteration of their lives, a once little-known woman faces *fatwa*, (an authoritarian religious ruling) the ultimate penalty for a writer who dares to challenge established beliefs and social norms. *Fatwa* or not, she has achieved fame, as most writers who face such threats are destined to do.

The writer is Taslima Nasreen, Bangladeshi poet newspaper columnist, novelist and gynaecologist.

Haroon Habib in *Frontline* (November 5, 1993) points out that her articulation of man's sexual domination and the "oppression" of women in Muslim society and the historical subjugation of women under Islamic law "inevitably raised the mullahs' hackles". The orthodoxy demanded that her writings should be banned and that she should be hanged. Perhaps, as Habib says, this spurred her on to write more aggressively, more forcefully and to criticise more sensitive issues.

Her writings (six collections of poems, three compilations of columns, one of which won the Suresh Chandra Smriti Ananda Puraskar literary prize in 1992, and six novellas) portray men, particularly Muslims, as oppressive and exploitative. The following quotation — from one of her controversial columns— describes an incident of violence against her when she was 18 years old, when a "boy of 12 or 13 [pressed] the fiery end of his half-smoked cigarette on my arm":

Even at that age, I had realised that had I asked for help, the people around me would have looked at me with amusement, and enjoyed my pain, my anger, my helplessness. Some of them would have even come close to me to ask what happened.

Someone would have vowed to slap the boy. Someone else would have asked where my residence is and who my father is. In fact, they would all have enjoyed me, my helplessness, my insecurity. Under

the guise of inspecting my arm, they would have admired my grown up body.

Taslima Nasreen— in her work— questions not only religion and fundamentalism but patriarchy and gender oppression in Muslim society as well. Thus she is doubly vulnerable: A *woman* criticising the establishment? No way!

In another of her columns one detects an acute sense of disgust at the exclusion of women from mosques:

I have often seen sign boards outside mosques, and from a distance I thought they read: "Entry is restricted for goats and cows" But one day I saw that from up close that it actually said: "Entry is prohibited for women" Possibly restrictions are imposed only for animals and women.

Some of her columns strongly articulate her opinions on the double standards of chastity that exist in Bengali society, where (as in many South Asian societies) it is important for women to preserve their virginity before marriage. She is bold in her writing and refers explicitly to male-female relationships and sex. One of her columns goes thus:

A man has liberty to have sex with many women, but when he wants to get married, he would obviously look for a virgin. I even know of some 'progressive' men who used white bedcovers on their wedding night just to test if their wives were virgins. If they felt the covers were not adequately blood-stained, they questioned their wives' character.

Frontline quotes her as responding to the criticism against her that her use of sex and vulgarity in writing is a marketing gimmick, saying, "I am also a gynaecologist. I do not hesitate to describe male and female sex organs or their functions when they are necessary".

Her latest book *Lajja*, meaning shame (perhaps not so strangely, reminiscent of Rushdie) published in February 1993 was banned by the Government on the grounds that it would stir up communal violence. It is about how Hindus in Bangladesh were "subjugated" by Muslims and a Hindu family persecuted in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in the December of the previous year. Orthodox religious leaders have imposed the *fatwa* on her for "blaspheming Islam and the Prophet and for conspiring against the religion and the country".



Nasreen responds to the *fatwa* and writes in *The New York Times* (1 December, 1993) that she will not be silenced.

"Everywhere I look I see women being mistreated, and their oppression justified in the name of religion. Is it not my moral responsibility to protest? Some men would keep women in chains—veiled, illiterate, and in the kitchen. There are 60 million women in my country; not more than 15 percent of them can read and write. How can Bangladesh become a modern country and find its place in the world when it is dragged backward by reactionary attitudes toward half its people?"

She asks whether Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia is "afraid to stand up to fundamentalists" and predicts that the time will come when "they turn upon her too"

Nasreen holds the conviction that politics cannot be based on religion. "If our women are to be free, Bangladesh must become a modern secular state; family laws based on Islamic principles should be replaced by a uniform code insuring the equal rights of women". She relates a series of incidents of violence against women which have occurred in Bangladesh in the name of religion, and defines mullahs as "extremist interpreters of Islamic law". She describes her position as that of one

being condemned to death for "speaking out against such crimes".

Frontline reports that even "a progressive section of writers accused Taslima of authoring an 'irresponsible book [*Lajja*] which might set off yet another communal riot in India".

What a writer's responsibility is towards his/her society and whether it is in conflict with the freedom of expression is a matter open to debate; however, the fact remains that nobody should be exposed to that "ultimate form of censorship — assassination" for exercising the right of expression.

One is reminded of a verse by Emily Dickinson— who wrote far back in time and space from Taslima Nasreen— which, nevertheless describes her situation (as well as that of many women the world over) and conveys the message that she will "not be silenced":

They shut me up in prose
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet—
Because they liked me 'still'.

Still! could themself have peeped—
And seen my Brain — go round—
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For treason—in the Pound.

OF MAD HATTERS. MOCK-TURTLES AND POST-MODERNISTS

Tell me a story, said Alice.

A STORY, retorted the mock turtle, a STORY... there are no stories any more, only TEXTS.

So let's look for a book with pictures then, said Alice, jumping up in anticipation.

Who is talking of books? Take a look at the garden, that's a good enough TEXT, what can you see, what can you read? mumbled the mock-turtle in a derisive manner.

There's a bunny eating some grass, said Alice looking hard.

No, stupid, said the mock-turtle, the grass is eating the bunny. Don't be stupid, said Alice who did not like others calling her stupid.

It's my right to see what I wish. It's a question of interpretation, replied the mock turtle and then proceeded to get back inside his shell.

Alice was annoyed and decided to part company since the mock turtle was being so rude. She walked along the main road towards a house where in the distance an animated tea party was being held. A Hatter, seated at a table in the company of a pink-eyed rabbit was sipping tea. As he saw Alice, he invited her to join them.

Why are you drinking tea at this time, said Alice, its not tea time.

Time, time, there is no time, time is dead, I have killed it. So I can have tea when it pleases me, sang the Hatter.

You can't kill time replied Alice, time is not a person. And besides, if there is no time, what use is there of history books?

No use at all, agreed the Mad Hatter. Down here nothing is good, nothing is bad, there is no time, everyone's mad.

I am not mad, cried Alice.

That's what you think... I disagree fundamentally, so shut up now and drink your tea, said he Hatter standing on his head.

But I have no tea, said Alice who disliked being told what to do, and who by this time was nearly crying.

Tea or no tea is also a question of interpretation, said the Mad Hatter laughing furiously, throwing his hats up and down.

curiouser and curiouser, thought Alice as she walked away and left forever this place, where tea was a question of interpretation and gardens were texts.

But as the Mad Hatter had said, she had a right to think so.

IT WAS ALL A QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION.

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