Writing the self: Taslima Nasrin's autobiography and the silent voices of Bengali feminism.

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Taslima Nasrin is arguably South Asia's most controversial writer, perhaps even more so than Salman Rushdie, to whom she has often been compared: a comparison unfair to both, for this forcible yoking together at once flattens their very different aims and achievements into Western stereotypes about Islam and South Asia and, like the colonial discourses on sati (the practice of Hindu widows burning themselves to death on their husbands' funeral pyres) that had ignored what women themselves thought, deprives Nasrin of the legitimacy to speak in her own voice. Certainly, of course, both Rushdie and Nasrin are South Asian Muslim in origin, live in the West, and have had to face death threats and Islamic fatwas. But the similarities end there. Not only did Rushdie recant, no matter how fleetingly, his apparently anti-Islamic stance, which Nasrin never did; he writes, for what Nasrin has somewhat dismissively described as 'aesthetic' reasons, from the safety nets of State protection and a self-chosen geographical and temporal distance from his attackers, while she has dared to speak out against the oppressiveness of the patriarchal system while living in that society itself, and without State or institutional sympathy. Indeed, Nasrin prefers to think of herself primarily as a social activist, not simply a writer, who has been driven out of her country because of her continuing protest against the exploitation of women in contemporary patriarchal society: her homepage on the Web quotes her as declaring: 'Come what may, I will continue my fight for equality and justice without any compromise until my death. Come what may, I will never be silenced. My pen is my weapon.' Perhaps she is the only South Asian whose strongly and unambiguously expressed views on unequal gender relationships in society have exiled her from her homeland; certainly she is the only contemporary writer anywhere in the world whose autobiography, the two-volume Amar Meyebela ('My Girlhood', with Utol Hawa, 'The Wild Wind', being the title of the second), (1) has been banned in her own country, on grounds of blasphemy and pornography.

I believe that the violence of the response to Nasrin's autobiography is due not so much to its perceived attacks upon Islam but, rather, to the discomfort and the fear caused by the way she asserts her right to construct her selfhood herself, by her refusal to accept the patriarchal norms of a society unable and unwilling to accept a woman who with searing honesty exposes male exploitation and oppression in everyday familial relationships in her own life. Other Bangladeshi Muslim writers within and outside the country have also been vocal about the way religion, and Islam in particular, have been used to reinforce the power divide in society, especially in gender relationships; although their opinions have been attacked they themselves have not been subjected to the same kind of personal abuse and vilification, nor have they had to flee the land for personal safety. When her

opponents (almost always men) vehemently reject her views about the way the women in Bangladesh (and in Islamic societies) are abused, instead of answering her arguments they assault her personally as 'shameless', her three failed marriages as proof of her 'unwomanliness', and her writing as market-driven soft-pornography. Nasrin herself says she is a 'fallen' woman ('nashta meye') because she is unfeminine enough to claim her rights as a human being, to reject male protection as oppressive and exploitative, and to demand social transformation: 'Unless a woman becomes 'fallen' there is no way she can liberate herself from the dutch of this society.' (2) Nasrin does not in fact blaspheme Islam, because she does not believe. Neither does she write pornography; she merely articulates what convention dictates modest women should hide. What she has done in her autobiography is to transgress the norms of expression and representation that the Bengali bhadralok tradition--that of the educated Bengali middle class with its strongly held beliefs in 'gentility' and decorum in everyday social relationships--has always upheld, by revealing what lies beneath the family values so clear to the South Asian patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal ethos: the subterranean and ambiguous sexual experiences and feelings, mostly violent and abusive, that permeates the apparently solid edifice of the South Asian family. By naming actual, living people instead of fictionalising and distancing herself from her personal experiences, she has explicitly demanded her right to narrate herself into existence, not simply as daughter, sister, wife, but as person and woman. Perhaps only two other South Asian women, the Indian poet. Kamala Das in My Story and the Pakistani aristocrat Tehmina Durrani in My Feudal Lord, have examined their lives with the same openness as Nasrin. Significantly, both chose to write in English, which allowed them an upper-class, Westernised audience, prepared to accept their ideas more readily than the more traditional-minded middle-class readers of Nasrin's native Bengal.

Indeed, when South Asian women speak out against what has happened to them in their own lives, they usually prefer the discreet indirection of fiction, whether they use English, like Arundhati Roy in The God of Small Things, or their mother-tongues, like Ashapurna Debi in Pratham Pratishruti ('The First Promise') in Bengali. The best-selling Shobhaa De--often dismissed as India's answer to Jackie Collins--is notoriously 'brazen' in her novels, which are clearly based on her own life, but her prim Selective Memories upholds conventional middle-class social and moral norms. When Nasrin attempts an autobiographical novel, however, as she does in Phorashi Premik (The French Lover), it becomes inauthentic, and her anger seems overdone and insincere. For one thing, she makes her protagonist a middle-class Hindu woman, a doctor's daughter, from Calcutta, rather than from the Mymensingh or Dhaka she is familiar with, imposing the conditions under which she herself grew up onto an unfamiliar social, intellectual and cultural ethos, presumably in order to point out that women's oppression is similar, if not identical, all over the world, or at least all over Bengal; that it is not a matter of religion alone. But her lack of awareness of the contemporary social and cultural ethos of Calcutta and Indian Bengal makes her story so improbable that it considerably undermines her thesis of 'we-are-all-sisters-in-trouble'. Whether in fact all women can be classed so nearly together 'as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions' (3) is of course highly contentious: there are at least as many kinds of feminism as there are cultures. It is only in her essays, which

give voice to her personal experiences, and in her autobiography, with its specificities and its often uncomfortable details, that the force and the rightness of her anger and her protest become validated.

Amar Meyebela is the only notable autobiography by a woman writer in contemporary Bengal, whether of the East or the West. Nasrin is not, however, the first Bengali woman to have written an autobiography in the Western sense of the term. This genre in Bengali writing emerged around the mid-nineteenth century, as the English-educated middle- and upper-middle classes became increasingly conscious of the new, Western, notions of individuality. Unlike in the West, however, what interested the earlier autobiographers, both men and women, was not the exploration of their own selfhood or the discovery of their personal voices but, rather, the way their world was changing around them. But there was a difference between the way men and women did it. The men wrote what they called atmacharit, 'self-introductions'; their use of the phrase charit related their efforts to the long-established hagiographical tradition of charit literature that narrated the lives of important men. Male autobiographers, that is, regarded their own lives as the epitome of their times. Women did not feel that what happened to them was important enough for charits. They wrote as wives, mothers, and occasionally daughters, and they usually called their work smritikathas, 'stories from memory' of their experiences, which they linked together to show, not how they themselves had grown through the years, but how times had changed in everyday life, and to provide glimpses of the important men of their times whom they had had the good fortune to know. For example, Beena De's Smritikatha is about her meeting the painter Abanindranath Tagore and the poet Rabindranath Tagore; Kalyani Datta's Jiban Brittanto is a description of widows' lives, and Indira Debi Choudhurani's Atmakatha, 'stories of the self', is about the well-known Tagore family to which she belonged. Even as late as a decade ago Amiya Chaudhurani tiffed her autobiography Didimar Jug o Jiban ('Grandmother's Times and Life').

Nasrin, however, calls her autobiography Amar Meyebela, 'My Girlhood'. Bengali does not have any gender-neutral terms for childhood, child or people: the accepted words are chhelebela, boyhood--there are no words for girlhood--chhelemanush, little boy, chhelepile, boys/children, manush, man/humanity. The term for woman/women is meyemanush, the prefix meye, girl, attached to the normative manush, clearly underlining the irrevocable Otherness of women. Thus femininity/femaleness are missing from both Bengali vocabulary and traditional Bengali consciousness; as Wittgenstein says, the limits of our language are the limits of our world. (4) Not only does the amar, 'my', in Nasrin's title, therefore, unambiguously declare that this work is going to be about herself, that her self is important enough to be written about, the word that she coins for girlhood, 'meyebela', equally emphatically asserts her femaleness and underlines her conviction that her self is no less important than those of the eminent men whose boyhoods occupy so much attention in biographies and autobiographies--notably the Chhelebela of the iconic Bengali (male) poet Tagore. In her autobiography, then, Nasrin uses language to free herself from external enslavement. She declares forcefully that she rejects English. This compulsory subject in schools throughout South Asia, when first introduced into the educational curriculum in India was inevitably associated with the coloniser; it was therefore considered unsafe and unsuitable for women, the natural

repositories and guardians of native culture, for whom familiarity with English would be a corrupting influence. By choosing Bengali as her medium of self-discovery and self-expression, then, she effectively turns the patriarchal denial to women of the language of 'modernity' into a kind of ecriture feminine. (5) Moreover, she ignores male norms of acceptable 'literary' language by writing her dialogues in her own Mymensingh dialect, not in standard Bengali, and she uses sexually explicit terms from colloquial Bengali in her accounts of her sexual experiences. Both experiences and phraseology belong to the realm of the self-censorship that South Asian women are always expected to exercise when they write, especially in relation to their own lives. Nice girls don't think like this, much less say these things; if men do, as they do sometimes, the rules are always different for them. (5) So when Nasrin examines society it is not to show how times have changed but, rather, to inscribe her irreducible self within a wider social praxis; to resist and to reject the victim's role that Bengali literature and society have in the past allotted to women. By reconstructing and rearticulating her own and other women's experiences of humiliation, abuse, and discrimination, she connects her personal and social identity to the larger context of social relations. Thus her autobiography belongs to the tradition not of the educated middle-class woman, the class to which she may be said to belong, but to one established by another 'fallen woman', Binodini, the famous early-twentieth-century Bengali actress, whose profession was in those days synonymous with immorality and prostitution. Hoping to achieve the ideal of the 'new woman' to which she had been exposed by the plays in which she performed, Binodini was forced to realise that the respectability that she longed for and the trust that she had placed in her male protectors would always be denied her; bitter and angry, she 'blacken[ed] white sheets of paper with the stigma of [her] heart'. (6) While her mentor, the nationalist leader Girishehandra Ghosh, praised what he called 'the great moral lesson in the insignificant life of an ordinary prostitute' in his foreword to her book, he also added, much to Binodini's dissatisfaction, that she had not managed to 'conceal' the personal, 'which is the essence of the technique of writing an autobiography'. She would, he thought, only antagonise her readers by her bitterness, instead of arousing their compassion. This is what many readers complain in relation to Nasrin too. Obviously, therefore, Nasrin's is not the first Bengali 'feminist' autobiography; indeed, Bengali women have always protested, often stridently, against the subduing of their voices by male appropriation of their stories. In fact (as I will suggest later), they have tried to write/project their selves into existence long before Western notions of individuality entered their lives.

The conventional autobiography is a linear narrative that follows a temporal sequence whose logic is retrospective. The autobiographer always tells the story of a past, and within that past the linear development of her own existence, her individual life and the history of her personality. But the narrative pattern of Amar Meyebela, especially the first volume, is a looping one--which Annis Pratt has told us is the archetypal woman's plot--shifting seamlessly in ever-widening circles between her own life and those of her parents and grandparents, between personal memories and twice-told tales. It begins, moreover, not with Nasrin's birth or with her family history, but with the freedom struggle in Bangladesh, when she was only nine years old, for this was the moment that she first became aware of her selfhood, and of her identity as a female. The movement for political Independence, fought out by adults, was thus replicated in her own life, and her

continuous personal and female struggle for emotional and intellectual independence. Her family's flight from the violent city into the villages of Bangladesh was the beginning of a series of traumatic childhood experiences that shook her childhood acceptance of things as they are and opened her eyes to a new consciousness of the reality behind social and interpersonal relationships; the differences between the city and the countryside underlined for her not the pastoral simplicity of rural life that Bengali male poets and novelists had celebrated but, rather, the burden of the social, emotional and psychological oppression which women everywhere have to bear. The first volume is written from a child's point of view or, rather, from the point of view of the adult who relives the pain and the horrors that the child experiences as she represents them several years later, ending, appropriately enough, with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (the charismatic founder of the state of Bangladesh), the end of the age of political innocence for Bangladesh, and the entry of Nasrin into adolescence: 'Ami boro hote thaki' ('I grow older'). The second is an account of the 'wild wind' of youth (hence the title of this part of the autobiography). It ends with her painful rejection of the 'nesha', addiction, of her relationship with her husband and fellow-poet Rudra (his full name, Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, is never mentioned, and he is not clearly identified as the other characters in the autobiography who people her world), and her realisation that she could no longer sacrifice her life and her selfhood for anyone else. There is no overt comment from the adult narrator, who simultaneously relives the past and looks back at it with the cool detachment of an observer. Narrating the past becomes an act of interpreting the present, and the autobiography a kind of endless prelude, a beginning without middle or end.

A much-wanted daughter after two sons, Nasrin was born into a middle-class Mymensingh family on 25 August 1962, on a Muslim holy day, which was supposed to portend good fortune and an exemplary life for the fair and beautiful little girl--the important qualities that a Bengali girl should traditionally have. As Nasrin narrates it, her father, Dr Rajab Ali, was the son of a poor farmer who had achieved wealth and respectability through ruthless determination and hard work. One of his first steps towards his goal was to win the patronage of a wealthy man of the city, a relationship he cemented by marrying his benefactor's daughter, Idulwara Begum (Idun). Dark, plain, and painfully conscious of her lack of education, which was denied her, first by her father and then by her husband, Idun always felt inferior to the fair and handsome Rajab Ali and, for many years of the marriage, tried to win his heart by running a well-organised household, plastering her face with make-up, and acting romantically like the heroines of Hindi movies. Whatever she tried didn't work; Rajab Ali did provide for his family, but otherwise ignored her. Nasrin is ruthless in her depiction of him as an inveterate womaniser, who did not spare even the maids who worked in the house, and as frequently abusive and physically violent when his wife or the children did not comply with his orders; she dispassionately shows how essential it was to his sense of self to control everything, from what and how much his children were studying to how much salt Idun was using in cooking. The children, too, knew where the power centre in the family structure lay; they made their demands on their mother, but ignored even the simplest of her wishes. Her brothers and their wives did not hesitate to use her as housekeeper, maid, and nanny but gave her no emotional support in return. Nasrin herself did much the same thing. She does not hesitate to show herself as being as greedy and insensitive as her

siblings; the daughter's relationship with the mother was obviously an ambiguous one, very much in keeping with traditional South Asian perceptions (see the novels of Shashi Deshpande, for example). South Asian family values, constantly celebrated in our literature and folklore, are shown up for what they really are; they are based on the woman's suffering and self-sacrifice.

But Nasrin does not see her mother only as a victim. Idun was as much of a tyrant as her husband when it came to the people whom she could dominate, the domestic help. Nor did she submit to her husband unless she was forced to, and that too under vociferous protest; she did not hesitate to remind him that he owed his position to the munificence of her father, and once she even left home, prepared for the stigma of divorce, returning only when her children called her back. Desperately unhappy in a marriage from which she could not break free, she finally turned to religion, to her sister's father-in-law, Pir Amanullah, a Bihari Muslim fanatic whose obscurantist ideas are characteristic of the brutality and the hypocrisies of all patriarchal religions. Forced by her mother to observe the practices she had learned from the Pit, Nasrin discovered instead that religion did not make for an equitable and just world: the Pir's notion of an ideal society meant financial, emotional, sexual and intellectual abuse of women. Nasrin's own aunt, the Pit's daughter-in-law, a bright and extroverted girl before her marriage to an unfaithful and abusive husband and her incarceration in the closed world of religious fundamentalism, had to undergo being exorcised of evil spirits said to possess her by being brutally thrashed by her father-in-law. The education the Pir declared was appropriate for women had no relevance to contemporary reality; Nasrin saw that it was her father's scientific knowledge of modern, Western, medicine that cured her of illness, not the Pit's so-called medication. Religion allowed men social and sexual freedom, but cut women off forcibly from the outside world without offering them a corresponding security. Young girls in the Pir's own family were preyed upon by his male disciples and by their own cousins, and died of failed abortions. Not that the traditional family outside the Pit's jurisdiction offered any protection either, in spite of the glorification of the sanctity of family ties in the patriarchal society of Bengal. If the child had learnt to read the lust in the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers who had peered through the mosquito nets enshrouding her at night, her family was little better. Nasrin was sexually molested by her mother's brother and raped by her father's brother (who was later to attempt a sexual relationship with her mother as well, and was perhaps not repulsed).Powerless to reveal what had happened to her, the child felt 'split in two'. While a part of her continued to live a 'normal' life, the other part became the silent watcher, the recorder of all that was done and said around her, the part that, finally, found its voice in autobiography. The fact that she does not hesitate to name the perpetrators, or to reveal family secrets about the less than perfect relationships within the circle, should largely explain the lack of support from her family after it was published.

Throughout her autobiography Nasrin shows women resisting their marginalisation and victimisation in all the ways of which they were capable. Her mother took one way out; other women responded differently, usually having recourse to passive aggression or collusion with their oppressors. Nasrin herself stole money from her brother's pockets to pay for her books and magazines and for the letters she wrote to young fellow poets

whose work she came across; she met young men secretly in restaurants to talk about poetry, but when she discovered their interests lay in her as a sexual object she would pay her own share of the bill (something unthinkable in South Asian society) and walk out. Frequently, of course, feminine rebellion was sexual; their bodies were all that women could treat as their own. Nasrin describes her feeling for a young servant-girl, and later a schoolgirl crush she had when she became an older girl's 'favourite', in terms that obviously indicate a lesbian relationship. Some girls managed to engage in heterosexual premarital relationships by pretending to go out in groups, and unhappily married young women arranged to have sexual encounters with men with whom they may not have been in love. Nasrin and her friend Chandana Chakma (to whom the second volume is dedicated; the first is dedicated to her mother) at first decided that they were intellectually superior, and would never marry; but soon after Chandana turned down her father's choice of husband she eloped with an appropriately unsuitable boy and entered into a conventional husband-dominated marriage and a distancing from Nasrin. Chandana was dead to her family, and her Buddhist father performed her funeral rites. Evidently, therefore, as Nasrin points out, patriarchal oppression of women doesn't stop at only one religion or ethnic group.

Nasrin's family was what Bangladeshis describe as 'progressive'; her father believed in the importance of education and hard work for girls as much as for boys. But his paternalistic authoritarianism and his obsession with academic excellence led to his children's defying him in every way they could, from Nasrin wearing trousers to her brothers performing poorly in exams and choosing professions that embarrassed him. One of her brothers even married a Hindu girl (who converted to Islam nominally later); the elder brother left home for some time to set up his own establishment, and Yasmin, the younger sister, began a relationship with a boy which was swiftly and brutally broken up. Nasrin was the only one of the four who fulfilled his dreams by becoming a doctor, although her heart was not in it. She did obey him up to a point, yet her feelings about him remain ambivalent. She may have been his pride and joy as a baby, and especially when she entered medical college, but she has few memories of paternal warmth, many more of arrogance and brutality. But it is clear that she also recognises that it was his insistence on a modern education and upbringing that was responsible for making her what she is today: his refusal to treat her simply as a girl-child to be married off as soon as possible, and his belief that she had an important role to play in society formed the basis for her awareness of her self-worth. (This is something she plainly acknowledges in some of her essays in Nirbachito Column.) He did represent freedom and personal growth for his daughters. He would not allow their femaleness to stand in the way of their lives, even though he was not as considerate when it came to their mother. Nasrin's representation of her parents reads very much like Simone de Beauvoir's depiction of hers in Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter--this is perhaps why Bangladeshi critics have sometimes found it useful to declare that her 'feminism' is Western-inspired, and the Islamic website refers to Amar Meyebela as fiction.

There is one incident in her relationship with her father that I mast 'mention. Nasrin had begun writing and publishing poetry from childhood, and continued well into her teens, much to her father's anger; neither this nor her correspondence with pen-friends would

help her to get into medical college, he objected. When he finally realised that she would not be deterred, and that in fact her brothers were on her side, he stopped talking to her; instead, he wrote a long letter to her pointing out the child's duty to obey the father. As she did not reply he began to write to her in verse himself, leading to an exchange of poems that reopened the channel of communication between them. A literary talent, which she shared with her brothers, was also there in her peasant-turned-doctor father. Her poetry was in fact her discovery of her own voice, of a world in which her gender was no longer a problem, and the freedom it offered led her inexorably to Rudra, by whose poetry she was moved and to whom she began to write in secret. She fell in love with him even before they met, and soon after they did she let herself be emotionally blackmailed into a secret marriage with him, in spite of feeling no physical or sexual attraction towards him. She was in fact unprepared for a sexual relationship at all, for she was enough of her father's daughter to put her education and her career first. But once he had initiated her into sex she was overwhelmed by the demands of her own sexual nature. Perhaps it was the frankness of her admission in Utol Hawa of her pleasure in her sexual experiences, which she describes graphically, that made her male readers in Bangladesh feel uncomfortable, and decide it was pornographic; sexual pleasure is meant only for men, and woman's duty is to submit. The marriage was, however, short-lived. Nasrin discovered to her horror that Rudra did not intend to remain faithful to her, and in fact infected her repeatedly with venereal disease; he was frequently drunk and drugged and, above all, he demanded the same kind of control over her life, her money, her mind and her body that she had seen in her father. She continued to love him, but to be true to herself she had to break free of an abusive relationship that would in the end destroy her identity. If the first part of Amar Meyebela had ended with the child's realisation that she was growing up, Utol Hawa does so with the adult's discovery that her first duty is to her self.

Utol Hawa is perhaps unique in Bengali autobiographical writing in its frankness about sexual matters and its insistence that the individual must discover or, if necessary, construct her own self. But the freedom of expression and of discovery that Nasrin demands for a woman, the female protest, is not new, or unique: it has been a part of Bengali women's writing from its beginnings. Not only is it present in contemporary writers like Mahashweta Debi from Indian Bengal, or Rokeya Begum and Dilara Hashem from Bangladesh (the latter now part of the Bengali diasporic presence in the US), it is evident in the female Bildungsroman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (in novels like Kahake, Raibari, and so on), and even in popular sentimental fiction about self-sacrificing women by writers such as Anurupa Debi and Nirupama Debi, who in novels such as Didi and Ma seemed to valorise the South Asian patriarchal ideal of the woman as victim-heroine, but who can be read as pointing out that female bonding can empower the woman to repudiate the power of the male. I would like to suggest, in fact, that Nasrin's feminism is deeply rooted in the Bengali ethos; it might indeed be traced back at least to the fourteenth-century Chandrabati's version of the Ramayana and the anonymous medieval folksongs about Sita. The epic is the classic male story of conquest and subordination, with the woman as pawn and tool; if Rama, the hero, is what North Indians call 'maryada purushottam', the ideal man, the self-sacrificing and victimised Sita in Tulsidas's Hindi version in particular has become an icon for womanly submission and

wifely devotion. Bengali women, however, have thought differently. Sita was, after all, a princess of Mithila and effectively a daughter of Bengal herself; they would not wish a fate like Sita's on their daughters. Chandrabati, a poet herself like Nasrin--one who, moreover, refused to marry because she did not wish to submit to others--even retold the Ramayana from the woman's point of view, focusing not on Sita's feminine virtues but on the way she and the other women of the epic are exploited by those who are held up as heroic ideals. In the end she goes on even to query the validity of the patriarchal norm itself: Rama becomes a madman and a fool in her retelling, and Sita the voice of all wronged women. In the folk-songs of Bengal Rama is peripheral to Sita's life, which in its loneliness, its deprivations, its injustices, is the life of womankind itself for the Bengali audience; her story is the story through which women find their own voice as they examine the laws of patriarchy that demean and dehumanise them. Rama is certainly no ideal man in these songs; he is a harsh, uncaring and weak-willed husband, a pashanda, stonehearted, and papisthi, sinner, who cannot think for himself ('Ram, tomar buddhi hoilo nash', you don't have any brains). Sita is the wronged wife, the 'janam-dukhim', a woman condemned from birth to a life of sorrows because that is what patriarchal society demands of her. But she does not remain silent. She is the voice through which women describe their everyday existence, the persona through whom ordinary women retell their lives and regain their sense of self. Feminism, therefore, is not a Western import for the women of Bengal. Bengali women have always protested, but the sound of their voices has remained unheard under the blanket of the male canon: Chandrabati, for example, is dismissed as a minor and unaccomplished poet, while the songs of village women remain as marginalised as their lives. The force and anger of Nasrin's autobiography thrusts the weight of that burden aside, and, as it proceeds in the task of establishing her self, allows all those silenced voices to sing out.

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Notes

(1) Taslima Nasrin, Amar Meyebela. 2 vols. Amar Meyebela, 1999 (Kolkata: People's Book Society, 2002), and Utol Hawa: Amar Meyebela Dwitiya Khanda [part 2] (Kolkata: People's Book Society, 2002).

(2) Qtd in Ali Riaz, Voice and Silence: Contextualizing Taslima Nasrin (Dhaka: Ankur Prakashan, 1995), p. 39.

(3) Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, ed. Padmini Mongia (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), pp. 175-76.

(4) Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

(5) This is one reason why I prefer to discuss the text as Nasrin herself wrote it, in Bengali, rather than the more accessible English translations. One of these is an Indian one, that translates her title simply as My Girlhood, and thus glosses over the

implications of Nasrin's neologism. The American edition of one English translation has the unfortunate subtitle, My Bengali Girlhood: A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World, which suggests not merely that all Bengalis are Muslims, as one (Bengali) reviewer has complained but, even more perniciously, reinforces the anti-woman stereotype of the Orient in general and Islam in particular.

(6) Incidentally, a recent English translation of a Bengali novel by the popular male novelist Sunil Gangopadhyaya, which makes frequent use of sexually explicit terms, bowdlerizes it completely, adding occasionally in square brackets that a particular phrase has been deleted because it is 'uncouth'!

(7) Qtd by Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (N. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999), p. 153.

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