

# THE PAST IS NOT ANOTHER COUNTRY

**Taslima Nasrin**

## **Growing Up**

I was born in 1962 in a small town called Mymensingh in what then was East Pakistan. After it gained its independence, the country was called Bangladesh. Before I was born, India partitioned Bengal based on its people's religion - East Bengal became East Pakistan, which was 1000 miles away from West Pakistan. Also, before I was born, the language-movement orchestrated by the Bengali people with the demand of establishing Bengali as the state language of East Pakistan, led to the death of some protesters who were killed by West Pakistani rulers. When I was six, I became aware in 1969 of the uprising of Bengali people, and when nine I witnessed a war to get freedom of the land on the basis of a great spirit of secularism.

My childhood was not much different from that of other girls of my generation. I was sent to a school like other girls. Girls typically attended school, but they frequently dropped out when they were fifteen or sixteen, ages at which they often were given into marriage by their parents. Few girls had a chance to continue their studies, for after an arranged marriage they were not allowed to continue studying nor could they take a job. They became totally dependent upon their husbands. I observed that all girls or women had to have male masters. When they are young, the father is their guardian, after marriage it is their husband, and during old age it is their son.

It was usual for us children to read the Qur'an in Arabic early in the morning, and like all other children in Bangladesh I did this. But I found myself asking questions. I wanted to know what I was reading, what the meaning of the Qur'anic verses were. Our language is Bengali, not Arabic, and it was impossible to know the meaning of the verses that we read. We simply read, without comprehending what we were reading. When I asked my mother to tell me the meaning of what I was reading, she explained that the meaning was not important. What was important is that Allah will be happy that I am reading the Qur'an in its original language. However, I was not satisfied with the answer my mother gave me.

When I was thirteen years old, I found a book that translated the Qur'an into Bengali. To my surprise, I found Allah saying that men are superior to women. Men could have up to four wives. Men could divorce their wives any time they want. Men

are allowed to beat women. Women are not allowed to give testimony in some legal cases. Women are not allowed to inherit the property of their father equally with their brothers. I was definitely in shock to discover such injustices and inequalities in a *holy* book.

I realized that Islam does not consider woman full human being. Man was the original creation and womankind was created secondarily for the pleasure of man. Islam considers woman nothing more than slaves or sexual object. The woman's role is to stay at home and to obey her husband, for this is her religious duty. Women are considered weak, so they should be taken care of, their body and mind, their desire and wishes, their rights and freedom must be controlled by men. Islam treats women as being intellectually, morally, and physically inferior. In marriage, Islam protects the rights of men and men only. The Qu'ran gave total freedom to men saying, "*Your women are as your field, go unto them as you will.*" (2.223) And Allah says very clearly that men have authority over women: "*Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them. Then, if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely Allah is all-knowing and wise.*" (4.34)

Women are ordered by Allah to run to their husbands wherever they are, whatever they do. The Hadith says that two prayers that never reach the heavens are (1) those of the escaping slaves and (2) those of the reluctant woman who frustrates her husband at night.

Islam considers women psychologically inferior. Women's testimony is not allowed in cases of marriage, divorce, and Hudud. Hudud are the punishments of Islamic law for adultery, fornication, adultery against a married person, apostasy, theft, robbery, and so forth. If any woman is raped, she has to produce four male witnesses to the court. If she cannot, there is no charge against the rapist. In Islamic law, the testimony of two women is worth that of one man. In any case in which a man suspects his wife of adultery or denies the legitimacy of the offspring, his testimony is worth that of four witnesses. A woman does not have the right to charge her husband in a similar manner.

Women are not allowed to inherit the property equally with their brothers. In the case of inheritance, Allah says, "*A male shall inherit twice as much as a female.*" (4.11-12)

And after all the rights and freedom, after getting all the sexual pleasure and pleasure of being the master, Allah will reward the men with wine, food, and seventy-two virgins in Paradise, including their wives of the earth. Allah said, "*They relax on luxurious furnishings, and we match them with beautiful virgins.*" (52.19-20). "*Near them, shall be blushing virgins with large beautiful eyes who will be like hidden pearls.*" (37.48-49) And what is the reward for the pious woman? Nothing but the very husband that caused her suffering throughout her life on earth.

I was a student of science, so it was hard to accept that the sun moves around the earth, that the moon has its own light, and that the purpose of mountains is to support the earth so it will not fall down somewhere (31.10, 41.10). I came to suspect

that the Qur'an was not written by Allah but, rather, by a selfish greedy man who wanted only his own comfort. Then I read the Hadith, the words of Muhammad. I found different events of Prophet Muhammad's life in which, when he had problems, Allah solved them immediately. For example, when he was sexually aroused by seeing his daughter-in-law, Allah sent him a message saying he could marry her because his son Zaid was adopted. Since Zaid was not his real son, so the marriage was therefore justified. Further, he created a new rule, that Muslims would not be allowed to adopt any child.

I was so shocked to see that Allah, who is considered the judge of everything, gave Muhammad a blank cheque saying, *"Prophet, we have made lawful for you the wives to whom you have granted dowries and the slave-girls whom Allah has given you as booty, the daughters of your paternal and maternal uncles and of your paternal and maternal aunts who fled with you, and any believing woman who gives herself to the prophet and whom the prophet wishes to take in marriage. This privilege is yours alone, being granted to no other believer."* (33.50)

Muhammad married thirteen times, one of his brides being six-year-old Ayesha. Allah, he said, told him that he was allowed to enjoy his wives, his female slaves, and all the the captive women he had. He put his beautiful young wife Ayesha behind the curtain because he did not want his friends looking admiringly at her. Allah, he said, told his friends that they should not go to the Prophet's house any time they want but if they go, they should not look at any of his wives or ask any of them for something. He was so jealous that he introduced the veil for his wives and, ultimately, for all Muslim women.

To support Muhammad, the Qu'ran, the holy book says, *"O wives of the prophet, you are not the same as other women, if you keep your duty, you shall not speak too softly, lest he whose heart is a disease aspire to you, but utter customary speech."* (33.32). *"You shall settle down in your homes and not mingle with the people excessively, the way you used to do in the old days of ignorance. You shall observe prayers, and give the obligatory charity, and obey Allah and his messenger. Allah wishes to remove unholiness from you."* (33.33)

And Allah asked the friends of Muhammad, *"O you who believe, do not enter the prophets' homes unless you are given permission to eat, nor shall you force such an invitation in any manner. If you are invited, you may enter. When you finish eating, you shall leave, do not engage him in lengthy conversations. This used to hurt the prophet, and he was too shy to tell you. But Allah does not shy away from the truth. If you have to ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a curtain. This is purer for your hearts and their hearts. You are not to hurt the messenger of Allah. You shall not marry his wives after him, for this would be gross offence in the sight of Allah."* (33.53)

Even though widow-marriage was legal, Muhammad made his wives illegal to be married even after his death.

Allah is also concerned about the veil, saying in the Qu'ran, *"O prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the women of other believers that they shall lengthen their clothes. Thus, they will be recognized (as righteous women) and not annoyed."* (33.59)

So, women have to cover themselves from head to toe because otherwise men might see them and start having sexual urges. In numerous hadiths, which are based on the Islamic laws, I have found that the woman's role is to stay at home and to obey her husband, for this is her religious duty. *"The women who die and with whom the husband is satisfied will go to heaven. A wife should never refuse herself to her husband's call for sex even if it is on the saddle of a camel or she is on the top of the burning oven."*

A hadith collected by Bukhari quotes Muhammad as saying, on the occasion of his night trip for the heavenly summit, that he had noticed that Hell was populated above all by women, and he confessed in the same vein according to a different hadith that *"if it had been given to me to order someone to be submissive to someone other than Allah, I would certainly have ordered women to be submissive to their husbands, so great are a husband's rights over his wife."*

Inasmuch as most of these traditions are invented, what matters here is not whether these words were actually spoken by the prophet. What matters is that they are believed to have been spoken and so are part of Islamic culture. Omar, the second Islamic Caliph, said, *"Prevent the women from learning to write, say no to their capricious ways."* Ali, the fourth Caliph, said, *"Woman is an evil and what is worse is that it is a necessary evil."*

There are still more bits of advice about how to be a good Muslim. For example:

1. *You should never ask a woman her advice because her advice is worthless. Hide them so that they cannot see other men! Do not spend too much time in their company for they will lead you to your downfall.*

2. *Men, never ever obey your women. Never let them advise you on any matter concerning your daily life. If you let them advise you they will squander all your possessions and disobey all your orders and desires. When alone they forget religion and think only of themselves, and as soon as it concerns their carnal desires they are without pity or virtue. It is easy to get pleasure from them but they give you big headaches too.*

After I read what was written about the women in the Qu'ran, it became clear to me that the Qu'ran was not written by Allah, but rather that some selfish greedy man had written the Qu'ran for his own self-interest. So I stopped believing in Islam. I threw off the veil, the sign of oppression, which my mother wanted me to wear. I tried to convince other women not to wear the veil and to read the Qu'ran in order to understand its stated meaning, so that they could understand that Islam is patriarchal and oppresses women. There is no way to attain freedom and the right to live as human beings other than to cross the barrier of religion and patriarchy. When I studied other religions, I found that they also oppressed women. All religions are oppressive to women. Women are oppressed not only by religion, by traditions, and by customs but also by cultures too. All religions were created by men for their own interest, for their own comfort, for their own fun. Women have no significant role in any of the major world religion. Gradually, however, secularism has been bringing changes, but Islam

still remains in the dark. I believe that education is a candle in the dark. A secular education is important - no, it is a *requirement* - for changing society. It is important for the peaceful evolving of what a society is and should be. It is imperative that children receive a secular education. All the children of this Earth deserve to learn about all the religions, but they also deserve the right of freedom *from* religion, to learn about the alternatives of atheism and humanism or just plain ethical living. If children are taught humanistically, society will evolve in a progressive, positive way. If women have any wish to live with dignity and honor, the traditional family structure absolutely has to change. The new society I envision is one in which love, not religion and patriarchy, rules.

As I grew up, I kept observing the condition of women in our society. My mother, for example, was a perfect example of a woman oppressed. She had been given into marriage when she was but a child. Although she excelled as a student in school, but she was not allowed to continue her studies. My grandfather and my father did not want her to study, for what they wanted was for her to be a good housewife, a good mother, a good caretaker. My father, a physician, had a scientific outlook but was very domineering. He did not allow me the freedom to play, to go outside, to meet friends, to go to the cinema or theatre, or to read any book that was not in a syllabus. He wanted me to earn a medical degree so he could say that one of his children followed his path. On the one hand, he wanted me to be independent, but on the other hand he wanted to find a good match for me inasmuch as educated men often desire an educated wife. In our house, I grew up with much fear, having to keep inside my heart all my desire for freedom and curiosity for the outside world. I was not allowed to step outside the house except to go to my school. As a result, I developed a passion for reading practically anything I could get my hands on, including: books, fiction, poetry, essays. And I had another passion: to write poetry.

Growing up, I naturally had the belief that girls surely must be inferior to boys, for boys could play in a big field whereas girls had to play with their dolls in a corner of the house. My brothers were free to go anywhere they wanted, and could watch any games, could play anything they wanted to play. I could not. My sister could not. I was told that girls were not made for such, that their role was to stay home, learn how to cook, make beds, and clean the house. My mother was not the only woman who was oppressed, for I saw my aunts, my female neighbors, and other female acquaintances who were playing the same roles, that of being oppressed. In our minds, torture of women was not oppression but, rather, was tradition. We become accustomed to tradition. As I grew, I realized that I was a part of the tradition but also that I was being oppressed the same as other women. I realized that whether women are poor or rich, beautiful or ugly, have blue or black or brown eyes, have white, black or brown skin, are unmarried or married, illiterate or literate, clever or stupid, *all* are oppressed. Everywhere women are oppressed. And all because of male-devised patriarchy, religion, tradition, culture, and customs.

## Rising Islamic Fundamentalism in the 1990's

### A Chronology of Relevant Events

1947	India was divided. When the British withdrew, the Islamic majority areas of India became self-governing. Pakistan was born and was divided into two sections, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, areas that were nearly one thousand miles apart on opposite sides of India. The partition was based upon religion
1952	A language movement started in East Pakistan and demanded that the state language should be Bengali, not Urdu. West Pakistan rulers killed protesters.
1969	An uprising occurred against the West Pakistan ruler.
1971	War began between West and East Pakistan, proving that Muslim unity was a myth. This also proved that the partition of India into two nations was wrong. Bangladesh was born.
1975	Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh was killed in a military coup. The military, using their power, legitimized their power by using religion.
1984	The secular Bangladesh Constitution was changed. The Jamat e Islami, which collaborated with the Pakistani Army during the war of 1971, got the license to be political, based on religion - this had been banned following independence.
1988	Islam was introduced as the state religion. Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists automatically became second-class citizens.
1990	Muslim fundamentalists began attacking Hindus in Bangladesh. Democracy was re-established.
1992	After the Babri Mosque was demolished by Hindu fundamentalists in India, the Muslim fundamentalists began attacking Hindus, leading to their exodus to India.
1990s	Islamic fundamentalist gained strength because of Bangladesh rulers and political parties that used religion for their own interest and for short-term gains in order to obtain votes from the ignorant masses. The fundamentalists' Islam Party became the third largest political party within a short period of time. The fundamentalist movement that turned against me started in the early 1990s.

Humankind is facing an uncertain future. The probability of new kinds of rivalry and conflict loom large - in particular, the conflict between two different ideas: secularism and fundamentalism. I do not 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. Likewise, I do not agree with those people who think that the crusades of the Middle Ages are going to be repeated soon. Nor do I think that this is a conflict between East and West. To me, this conflict is basically between irrational blind faith and the modern rational, logical mind. To me, this is a conflict between modernity and anti-modernism. While some people want to go forward, others are trying to go back. It is a conflict between the future and the

past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not.

The basic argument of the fundamentalists is this: the idea of secularism is Western in origin. The imperialistic West sold its idea of secularism to the nationalist leaders of the newly independent states so that the West could dominate the indigenous culture and religion by proxy. After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the failure of the West to solve all the problems of humankind - because the West is basically a-religious and devoid of morality - there was a renewed challenge to the Western value system. A belief grew among the majority people of western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa that Islam should go back to its roots to find an alternative to Western life, culture, values, and institutions. There are, of course, many other reasons for the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, but these are the primary ones.

In Bangladesh, Islamic fundamentalism has been on a rise since the beginning of the 1980's. I have difficulty in accepting fundamentalism as an alternative to secular ideas. The reasons are many: 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. Group loyalty over individual rights and personal achievements is a peculiar feature of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in their particular straitjacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life - everything is to be determined by fundamentalist authority. Fundamentalists do not believe in individualism, liberty of personal choice, or plurality of thought. Moreover, as they are believers in a particular faith, they believe in propagating only their own ideas, the same as autocrats generally do. They do not encourage or entertain free debate, they deny others the right to express their own views freely, and they cannot tolerate anything that they perceive as going against their faith. They do not believe in an open society and, though they proclaim themselves a moral force, their language is that of hatred and violence. As true believers, they are out to "save the souls" of the people of their country by force of arms if necessary.

True, the imperialist West did not establish and rule over its colonies by peaceful means. It did not colonize the countries with idealism, enlightenment, and democratic values. So when the fundamentalists argue that they are paying back their old adversaries in the same coin, they may find some sympathetic listeners even in the West. But, and it is incontrovertible, the fight is not between the former colonial powers and newly independent nations. The war is between two ideas of our time: secularism vs. fundamentalism. So the doctrine of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . burning for burning, wound for wound" is totally irrelevant here. The fundamentalists want to replace democracy with theocracy and to impose old theocratic laws instead of modern secular laws on the members of their own society, not on other distant powerful states that they consider their enemies. Though it has a global dimension, Islamic fundamentalism is also a local phenomenon. In reality, there is no such thing as an "Islamic front" embracing all the states of the world that have a

Muslim majority. It has been proved time and again that pan-Islam is just an aspiration. There is no end of fighting between different Muslim states. The war between Iraq and Iran and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait are examples of the animosity between states run by Muslims. The civil war in Afghanistan is also a reminder of this. In fact, even if we assume that the first loyalty of a Muslim is to his or her religion, that person is first and foremost a member of a nation state.

All the various Islamic groups are actually artificially constituted by the rulers of different countries to buttress their own position. Often, these groups are initiated by despotic rulers who use Islam to perpetuate their despotic rule. For example, my country of Bangladesh was once a part of Pakistan. Pakistan regarded it simply as a colony and exploited its people the same way a colonial power would, even though most of the population consisted of fellow Muslims. It tried to impose its own language and culture on our people. When the war of liberation began, Pakistani soldiers brutally murdered the freedom fighters. Like an occupation army, they burnt village after village, raped women, and committed all sorts of crimes against our people. The liberation war of Bangladesh proved that religious unity among Muslims was a myth. It was Bengali culture that unified the Muslims and Hindus of the land and gave them their real identity.

In Bangladesh, the basis of nationalism was Bengali culture. No doubt religion plays an important role in the lives of Bengalese whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Christian. But it was the Bengali language and culture that shaped our nationalism. Thus, the founding fathers declared Bangladesh a secular, democratic country. But successive military generals who usurped power gave up secularism and declared the country an Islamic state in order to make themselves popular among the ignorant masses. When, after more than a decade, democracy was finally restored in 1990, the elected leaders did not restore secularism as the guiding spirit of the constitution. They, too, felt that, because religion is important to the ignorant, illiterate masses, it is a useful tool for control. Even the opposition is hesitant to disturb the fundamentalists for fear of losing political support. In short, when almost all the political parties make political hay out of religious sentiments, there is no reason why the situation would not be favorable for the fundamentalists.

Bangladesh is not yet governed by mullahs, however. Political power is still not in the hands of any religious fundamentalist party. When the mullahs issue a fatwa from time to time, their fatwas have no constitutional legitimacy or legal sanction. But seldom is any action taken against them. A disinterested observer might say that this indicates a compromise with fundamentalism, and the question then follows as to how to rectify such a situation. I do not think the government or the other democratic parties are really worried about this development in Bangladesh. The Hindu minority has suffered inasmuch as they are considered second-class citizens. Some day the political leaders conceivably might have to pay a high price for today's small gains. In the meantime, common people will continue suffering because of the activities of the fundamentalists. If only there were faster economic growth, less unemployment, and better access to education, I think the situation would be different. Until such miracles happen, democrats will have to bear the brunt of fundamentalism in my



country. Women will have to suffer not only discrimination but also ignominy and violence, and human rights will remain but a dream for many.

Women's suffering is increasing at an alarmingly rate because of the rise of fundamentalism. The panic is felt in the villages where women are sometimes stoned to death, the girls' schools are shut down and burnt by the fundamentalists, and girls are not allowed to study. Female workers are forced to quit their jobs - otherwise, they are rejected by the society or their husbands and are forced to divorce them. Writers and intellectuals at one time wrote against the fundamentalists. I did, also. In addition, I wrote something that others failed to write: I wrote that the root of fundamentalism is religion itself. So long as religion remains, fundamentalism will remain. To remove fundamentalism we have to replace religion with something rational. First, I emphasized that the state should be separate from religion. In my poetry, fiction, and non-fiction as well as in newspaper columns, I tried to make people understand that religion in no way gives freedom or equality or justice.

The fundamentalists talk about morality, alleging that being religious guarantees that people will be good, will be moral. I certainly believe in morality, for certain, but my belief is not religion-based. My belief was, like that of the ancient Indian philosophy, of not doing anything to others that you don't want done to you. That was all, and that was enough. Such an outlook became part of my conscience, and it made me an honest person. The biggest tragedy of mankind is that morality is hijacked by religion. Actually, morality has nothing to do with religion.

The fundamentalists became angry upon hearing my views. They got furious when I said, *Let the pavilions of religion be ground to bits, let the bricks of temples, mosques, churches be burned in blind fire, and upon those heaps of destruction let lovely flower gardens grow, spreading their fragrance. Let children's schools and study halls grow. For the welfare of humanity, let prayer halls be turned into hospitals, orphanages, schools, universities. Let prayer halls become academies of art, fine arts centers, scientific research institutes. Let prayer halls be turned to golden rice fields in the radiant dawn, open fields, rivers, restless seas. From now on let religion's other name be humanity.*

## Protest

Nobody told me to protest, but I naturally developed a strong feeling that it was important to fight oppression. Nobody asked me to shed a tear, but I did. I started writing against oppression of women. I found my protests got the attention of readers and that people either hated me or they loved me.

However, those who hated what I wrote organized demonstrations against me, and people began protesting by marching through the streets of Bangladesh. The religionists assaulted me publicly. They burned my books, burned me in effigy, and broke into the bookshops where my books were kept. They filed blasphemy cases against me, they issued a fatwa against me, and even set a price on my head. The

government then confiscated my passport, asking me not to write any more if I hoped to keep my job as a medical doctor in a public hospital. In protest, I quit my job.

I continued writing. I continued defending women. I demanded loudly for equality and justice, justice for all people whatever their religion or gender. I spoke loudly in defense of secularism. I spoke against any religious laws in which women are oppressed. Women continue to be flogged, stoned to death, raped. Even more alarming is the fact that women are blamed for their own rape, while they rapists go free. Women have been suffering from trafficking, from slavery, from all sorts of discrimination. Men have thrown acid on women's faces and walked away as happy men. Women are not considered as human beings, not by religion, not by so-called tradition. For a couple, the most unwanted thing is a female baby. If a female baby is born, either the wife gets a divorce for her crime of having given birth of a female, or the wife must spend her life with disgrace. By writing books, I wanted to do something constructive, I wanted to help women understand that they are oppressed but do not need to be. I wanted to encourage them to fight for their rights and freedom. I wanted to make women realize the conspiracy of state, society and religion to prevent women from living like human beings. My voice, however, gave women the chance to think differently. Some things started to change. Some girls, who had to quit their study, started studying again. The battered and oppressed wives started raising their voices and said NO MORE.

That, however, did not make the religionists or the male chauvinists happy. As a result, the fundamentalists took the stand of *absolutely* not tolerating any of my views. They objected to women breaking their oppressive chains and becoming free, and they could not tolerate my saying that the Qu'ran is out of place, out of time, and that secular law with a uniform civil code for women is a necessity. Extremists broke into newspaper offices, sued my editors, publishers, and me. They demanded my execution by hanging. Hundreds of thousands of angry people demonstrated on the street. They called general strikes all over the country for months and months, insisting that I be killed. After the demolition of Babri Mosque in India by the Hindu fundamentalist group in December 1992, the revolt broke out in Bangladesh and the Muslim fundamentalists started destroying Hindu households and shops run by Hindus. Atrocities were committed against the Hindu community, forcing many to leave the country in a dramatic exodus. I wrote a documentary novel called *Shame*, in which I criticized the government for not giving security to the people.

I defended the oppressed, the poor, the women, and the various ethnic and religious minorities. For the sake of humanity, I have endeavored to stand beside them.

## **The Fundamentalists' Movement:**

### **1. Smash Taslima Committee 1992**

In 1992, a Smash Taslima Committee was established. Their intent was that, wherever they found me, they would smash me. Male students of universities with right-wing and conservative ideas led the movement. They marched in the book fair with a banner proclaiming that I was damaging society, that I was making girls and women into filthy people, and that therefore I should be smashed. They burned my books in the middle of the national book fair as well as threatened the bookshops if they did not remove my books. Fortunately, a book fair committee rescued me, and I was sent home by the police. Because of the ongoing protests, the book fair group became intimidated and it became too dangerous for me to attend the book fair. I was blacklisted, unable to visit my favorite place, the book fair.

The reasons for the oppositions to my writings included that I had written on behalf of women's rights, that women should not shut their mouths, they should swim if they liked to swim, they should go out of the house if they liked to, they should break their chains and make themselves free. Also, they should not fall into the negativistic male views concerning virginity, chastity, and motherhood. Females, in short, should have the right to enjoy life. It was such a rational thing that I wrote about!

In traditional societies, a long legacy has existed of men controlling the bodies and minds of women. Such societies have valorized motherhood and fabricated concepts like chastity. For thousands of years, women have been the victims of such notions. Men are allowed to have multiple relationships and affairs and to talk about them, but if a woman writes about love and her sexuality, she is immediately defiled and called treacherous as well as abominable. In times of darkness, the female who speaks out against patriarchy, speaks for emancipation, and tries to break free from her chains is called a "fallen woman." In one of the prefaces to my book, *A Fallen Woman's Fallen Prose*, I wrote about how delighted I was to call myself a fallen woman. I knew I would be called a whore, but I believe that in this world, for a woman to be pure and to be true to herself, she must become a fallen woman. Only then, when called a "whore," can she know that she is free from the coils of society's dictates. The "fallen" woman actually is a pure and pristine human being. I truly believe that if a woman wants to earn her freedom and be a human, she has to be willing to earn the label that is unreasonably uttered by a fallen, degenerate society. She will then be accorded the honor of being free.

## **2. The Physical Attack on Me at the National Book Fair, February 1993**

At the National Book Fair, February 1993, I was physically attacked by the fundamentalists. Even though I was not supposed to go to the book fair any more, as per last year's warning, I went. At the book stall where I sat and signed autographs, I noticed that suddenly I was being surrounded by hundreds of men who began throwing stones at me and shouting abuse. They broke lights bulbs, made the stall dark, and pushed hard to come inside the stall. Clearly, they intended to kill me. Fortunately, the people who worked at the book stall and the police saved my life. The book fair committee warned me to never again return to the book fair.

After a few months, the Government on 11 July 1993 announced that it had banned my book, the printing, selling, distributing and keeping of my book was therefore punishable by law, claiming that the ban was necessary in order to avoid communal disturbances. Actually, the Government banned the book because I had criticized the Government. The ban gave a kind of legitimacy to the Muslim fundamentalists, who demanded in demonstrations that I be executed. I was called an agent of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), India's foreign intelligence agency (India's equivalent of CIA). Moreover, I have not gotten the support that I should have received from my fellow writers in Bangladesh who were expected to believe in freedom of expression. Worse, some writers and intellectuals insulted me, saying I was given an award by India because I wrote against Islam. They even claimed that I used BJP, the Hindu fundamentalists' political party's money with which to buy a house. All these lies, perpetuated by the media, legitimized my being physically attacked in public.

### 3. Books and Articles Written Against Me

Daily, I found articles in their newspapers written by the fundamentalists against me. In several different ways, they tried to prove that I was an immoral writer and a poor role model. The fundamentalists insisted that I was no more than an apostate, and that I should be dumped or killed. Numerous books and articles were written to tell just how bad, how nasty, how idiotic, how cunning, how filthy, how atheistic I am. *How Taslima Should be Punished by Islamic Rule* was one, on the back cover of which was the verse of the Qur'an to the effect that if anyone rejected Islam that person's right hand and left leg should be cut off, and then the left hand and the right leg should also be cut off. My crime was extreme because I was born into a Muslim family, was considered Muslim, rejected Islam, and I was therefore *murtad*. The following punishments from the Qur'an they suggested for me.

Apostasy in Islam is punishable by death:

Make no excuse; you have disbelieved after you had believed. If we pardon some of you, we will punish others amongst you because they were criminals. [Qur'an 9:66]

Verily, those who disbelieved after their belief and then went on increasing in their disbelief - never will their repentance be accepted [because they repent only by their tongues and not from their hearts]. And they are those who are astray. Verily, those who disbelieved, and died while they were disbelievers, the (whole) earth full of gold will not be accepted from anyone of them even if they offered it as a ransom. For them is a painful torment and they will have no helpers. [Qur'an 3:90-91]

O you who believe! Whoever from among you turns back from his religion, Allah will bring a people whom He will love and they will love Him; humble towards the believers, stern towards the disbelievers, fighting in the Way of Allah, and never afraid of the blame of the blamers. That is the Grace of Allah which He bestows on whom He wills. And Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knower. [Qu'ran 5:54]

O Prophet (Muhammad)! Strive hard against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh against them, their abode is Hell, - and worst indeed is that destination. They swear by Allah that they said nothing (bad), but really they said the word of disbelief, and they disbelieved after accepting Islam, and they resolved that which they were unable to carry out, and they could not find any cause to do so except that Allah and His Messenger had enriched them of His Bounty. If then they repent, it will be better for them, but if they turn away, Allah will punish them with a painful torment in this worldly life and in the Hereafter. And there is none for them on earth as a Walî (supporter, protector) or a helper. [Qu'ran 9:73-74]

The following verse is about the Meccans who, after accepting Islam, did not want to emigrate at Muhammad's behest or wanted to go back to Mecca, to their homes and lives. Muhammad ordered his followers to kill those who defect from the camp. This is a very harsh sentence against the Muslims who were tired and just wanted to go home. These verses were shown to me just as an example of what kind of punishment I deserve under Islam.

They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they for sake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever ye find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them. [Quran 4:89]

They swear by Allah that they said nothing (evil), but indeed they uttered blasphemy, and they did it after accepting Islam; and they meditated a plot which they were unable to carry out: this revenge of theirs was (their) only return for the bounty with which Allah and His Messenger had enriched them! If they repent, it will be best for them; but if they turn back (to their evil ways), Allah will punish them with a grievous penalty in this life and in the Hereafter: They shall have none on earth to protect or help them. (Qu'ran 9:74)

Also, many hadiths confirm what is in the Qu'ran about the harsh treatment of the apostates.

Some of the books written against me complained that I was a male-hater, that I was destroying the structure of the family, and that I promoted immorality and

impurity among the girls and women. Because I had rejected the idea that women should be submissive, that it was the natural character of females, therefore I should be punished, my mouth should be shut, and my pen should forever be taken away. I should not be allowed to destroy the society.

By writing against the patriarchal system, male chauvinists claimed that I really was showing my hatred for males. And the rumors flew, people became confused, and individuals questioned my motives. Was I really a man-hater? Did I have other reasons for thinking the way I did? Was I fighting against men for personal reasons?

#### **4. My Passport was Confiscated**

The Government confiscated my passport while I was in the airport and just before I boarded the airplane. I was going to India, having been invited to attend a poetry festival. Other poets who were with me were allowed to go, but not me. My passport, I was told, would be returned to me the next day. But I did not get it back the next day, not even after 6 months or 1 year later. I got back my passport when the human rights organizations outside Bangladesh's border successfully pressured their governments to pressure the Bangladesh government to give me back my passport. Because of PEN, Amnesty International, and some human rights organization movements, I received help from the government of the United States of America. Officials from the American Embassy came to my home to learn how my passport was confiscated. Because of their intervention, I got back my passport a year and a half after it was confiscated.

#### **5. I Was Forced to Quit My Job**

The Bangladesh government, in addition to confiscating my passport, demanded that I choose between my job as a medical doctor in a public hospital and having the right to publish books and write columns in the newspapers. I refused to be censored. Then the Government punished me by transferring me to the remote village in Bangladesh from the Anesthesia department of Dhaka Medical College Hospital where I had been working as a medical doctor. I wanted to protest against the unethical behavior of the Health Department. The Government is much more powerful than I am. I could not win the battle. But I showed my protest. In protest, I quit my job.

#### **6. The Fatwa and Demonstrations**

The fundamentalists were not the ones responsible for the banning of my book *Lajja* (Shame). It was the Bangladesh government. Fundamentalists asked the

Government to ban selected columns I had written and *Fallen Prose of Fallen Women*, about the emancipation of women.

The Islamists were angry with me everywhere in the country. They spat at my name, showing their extreme hatred toward me. Now, whenever a female raises her voice, or protests oppression, she is called “a *Taslima*.” It became an everyday phenomenon for cheap tabloids and the fundamentalists’ newspapers and magazines to attack me. And it became commonplace to see leaflets and the posters against me.

One day on the wall next to my house, I found the first of many posters, others being on my father’s clinic, that proclaimed, “Taslima Nasrin is a filthy, nasty witch, a bitch, a sinner, a sex-lover, a prostitute, an antireligious and anti-Islam atheist! All are warned to stay far away from this filthy woman.”

On another day I found on the front page of a daily newspaper that at a public meeting in Sylhet a holy man, *Moulana* Habibur Rahman, had announced a price for my head. The price was 50,000 taka, a little more than \$1,000 but a huge amount of money in the poor country of Bangladesh. This made me shiver, for I knew that processions and demonstrations were being arranged against me. My name was being uttered abusively in every mosque in the country, particularly on Fridays. Posters and leaflets were printed and put up on walls, all saying bad things about me, all containing hateful statements. I was demonized daily in Islamic ceremonies, religious gatherings, and rituals.

Bangladesh is a democratic country, but who gave the holy man and his followers permission to aggressively offend me in such a fashion! Worse, they actually demanded my execution. *Moulana* Habibur Rahman called for a half-day *hartal*, or general strike, one that would close the city down, the schools, the offices, everything. Even vehicles were not to be allowed to operate. Because it was called by a fundamentalist group, I did not think it would be successful. Only if some political party’s leaders agreed would any such a *hartal* succeed. To my surprise, however, a half-day *hartal* was observed in Sylhet by *Sahaba Soinik Parishad* (Soldiers of Islam).

Now, when on the street I rode in a rickshaw, men who saw me shouted such things as, “Oh, look, look, it’s Taslima. Look at the bitch. Grab her. Grab this slut. Oh, look, the atheist, the whore, is here.” I could only cry out to my rickshaw puller to go faster, to get away from them. And I feared leaving my own house. One day, some bearded men tried to break into my place, for they knew that police security had been suddenly withdrawn by the government.

Upon the advice of friends, I asked for police protection. But only when human rights organizations outside Bangladesh’s border put pressure upon the government was I given some protection. That meant, however, that I was prisoner in my own house. It was not safe for me to leave, even to make necessary trips to any public places. The two security guards who stayed at my house’s door did not accompany me when I left. Meanwhile, I received many hateful phone calls from unknown people who threatened to kill me.

In their fight against me, The Mosques and the Mullahs were very active. The Imams, the men who lead the prayers in mosques, used mosques for political purposes, and leaflets that defiled me were delivered from the mosques. Everywhere,

Islamists organized people against me and encouraged the distribution of material such as the following, literally translated:

Allah is the greatest - Allah is all-knowing  
Insults to Islam - Muslims will never tolerate  
Insults to Prophet Muhammad - we can't stand  
The supporter of BJP - Taslima be aware  
The partner of Rushdie - Taslima you are in danger  
The infamous Taslima - punishment we need  
Atheist, apostate, betrayer - be aware be aware

Whose awful comments against the holy Qu'ran, the great Islam, and the prophet Muhammad and who is engaged in a conspiracy against the peace and freedom of the country, the infamous apostate, anti-Allah, the enemy of prophet Muhammad, the partner of Satan Rushdie, a toy of India's Hindu fanatic BJP and a shame of the whole generation of women apostate shameless Taslima Nasrin

1. Arrest 2. Hard punishment 3. And banning of all her objectionable writings

For this demand  
A BIG public demonstration  
Venue - Baitul Mokarram, The National Mosque, south gate  
Date - 18<sup>th</sup> November, Thursday 1993  
Time - 2 pm.

Please come to a procession with the Islamic consciousness and with the spirit of love  
of the country,  
the nation and the prophet

Invitation by  
on behalf of all kind of Ulama and Mashaiyekhs

Shaikhul Hadith Maulana) Azizul Haque and the Imans of Mosques in Bangladesh and  
the teachers of Madrases in Bangladesh, the Qu'ranic Schools.

Some intellectuals started writing in defense of my freedom to express myself, but they soon were astonished to see that some religionists dared to issue a fatwa against a writer and were more astonished to see that the government was silent on this issue.

The newspapers, whether they wrote good or bad, positive or negative, comments, sold like hotcakes. Dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies, and quarterlies: all began gossiping about my personal life. My marriage was criticized, my writing against Islam was bad, my making fun of the fatwa was bad. I came across as a really bad



woman. Meanwhile, Habibur Rahman began to be famous. Foreign journalists came to Bangladesh to arrange interviews. Local journalists quoted him. Fundamentalist newspapers highlighted his anti-Taslima campaign. The Soldiers of Islam came from Sylhet to Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka, to hold press conferences. On behalf of all Islamic scholars and pundits, Habibur Rahman exclaimed that 'all of Taslima's writing absolutely had to be banned, she had to be arrested, she had to be given exemplary punishment.' At the press conference, statements such as the following were made:

'Taslima sounds like a very Muslim name, but her belief, her *ak-ida* or devotion, her mentality is totally different. She is engaged in doing crimes against Allah by saying offensive remarks about the Holy Qu'ran, Prophet Muhammad, and Sharia law. Because of Taslima's shamelessly daring, extremely objectionable writings, vulgarity, obscenity, illicit ideas, and adultery are spreading like an epidemic in the country and abroad. This is leading to damage not only to the Prophet's reputation but also to Islam itself. She has teased and criticized the law of Allah. She has criticized verses of the Qu'ran: *sura Emran*, *sura Nisa*, *sura Bakara*, *sura Huzrat*, *sura Wakia*, *sura Arrahman*. Also, she has used offensive language in criticizing Muhammad. She has said that religious faith is a false faith, that all religions are fairy tales, and that religion makes people inhumane. She has written that religion has made women ugly, inferior, slaves, and sexual objects, thereby insulting women. She has blamed Allah and his prophet Muhammad for the oppression of women and the inequalities between men and woman. She claims religion has led to injustices against women, has discriminated against women, and has led to society's instability. She has made obscene comments about believers, saying, "Shame on you who believe and follow the orders of the Hadith of Muhammad." She encourages nudity, adultery, illicit relationships, vulgarity, and obscenity, saying, "I believe that one woman can be chaste after having sexual relations with ten men if the word *chaste* has anything to do with honesty." It is dangerous for people like her to spread such statements. If it is proved that a person is against the state, has openly conspired against the state, then the punishment must be death. Similarly, if any Muslim says anything bad against Islam, the Qu'ran, or the Holy Prophet, the punishment under Sharia law is that of death!'

The leaders of Soldiers of Islam declared that 'they were ready to have successful public demonstrations, processions, and general strikes or *hartal*, and they had three demands to the Government: (1) the immediate arrest of Taslima Nasrin; (2) the banning of all her writings; and (3) giving her exemplary punishment. These demands, they asserted, came from the hearts of all religious people. They declared that the government was bound to fulfill the public's demands. The government had banned her *Lajja* (Shame), but books a million times more objectionable had not yet been banned. The government must fulfill the demands of the Soldiers of Islam. Furthermore, a new law needed to be introduced to punish by death crimes of saying bad words against Islam, the Qu'ran, and the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).'

Demonstrations increased, and I saw them on the streets of Dhaka. Mobs came every Friday from the mosques towards my house in the Shantinagar District. They

carried banners: WE DEMAND TASLIMA'S EXECUTION BY HANGING. What started as 10,000 people soon became 50,000 by the time the procession reached my house. Some police vans stood in front of my house to prevent any entry. But it was really difficult to live everyday life. A life characterized by a moment by moment fear of death.

A new organization, a committee to prevent actions against state and religion, was formed. Sheikh ul Hadith (a religious title, Hadith referring to a teacher who instructs about the words of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings) Maulana Azizur Rahman led a large procession of the committee to the office of the Speaker of the Parliament, submitting the following petition:

The Honorable Speaker  
Bangladesh National Assembly  
Parliament House  
Sere Bangla Nagar  
Dhaka.

Dear Sir:

With due respect I am informing you that

1. Everybody knows that people of Bangladesh are deeply religious- minded and are very careful and conscientious about keeping the communal harmony between different religious communities. But some groups of derailed people have been trying to become so-called progressive by destroying the communal harmony and by attacking the religious feelings of the people. It is not even necessary to prove any more that they are being supported by enemy-groups who are engaged in conspiring against Islam and the independence of Bangladesh.

2. An infamous writer called Taslima Nasrin has been attacking the religious feeling of the people of Bangladesh by continually writing books, novels, and columns in the newspapers and magazines on the one hand, and on the other she is cunningly planning to cause disturbing problems between different communities in the society.

3. Taslima Nasrin has destroyed the reputation of Bangladesh, which formerly was known as a country of peaceful people of different religions. Taslima has internationally blackened the face of the country. And she has encouraged the anti-religious people inside and outside the country to hate Muslims in Bangladesh. But the government has only banned the book, failing to file any case against her despite clear examples of her anti-state activities. The patriots of this country are very much disappointed and angry about the government's inactivity.

4. Even though it is punishable under the law of the land by the Constitution to hurt religious feelings of the people and to create hostility between different communities, the government has not properly responded. Because there is no law against the anti-religious and anti-state people, the anti-state and anti-religious groups continue their heinous crimes without any hesitation or fear.

5. In Bangladesh, 90% of the people are Muslims. Taslima Nasrin is continuously writes negatively about the Holy Qu'ran, the Hadith of the Prophet (Pbuh), and Islamic Sharia, even though religious groups have been protesting against such. Unfortunately, the government has been totally unresponsive. As a result, the religious people of Bangladesh are getting sick and tired about a government upon which they cannot rely.

6. The writer Taslima Nasrin is not only attacking religion but also she is not showing any respect toward the existing societal system. She is trying to destroy the peace of the society by spreading stories that encourage adultery, sexual relations without wedlock, and sexual relationships before marriage. She also has called the patriarchal system barbarous, which of course encourages the devils. Her pornographic writings are conspiratorially destroying our youth, leading them to be immoral.

At this moment, we the patriots and religious people of this country, showing respect towards the feelings of the people, demand (1) a very hard punishment, including a death penalty, to be established for the anti-state and anti-religious people; (2) the immediate arrest of Taslima Nasrin in order to give her exemplary punishment; and (3) the banning of her writings.

Sheikh ul Hadith Mauland Azizul Haque  
Convener  
Committee to Prevent the Activities Against Religion and State  
Sat Masjid, Muhammadpur, Dhaka

The same letter also was given to the Interior Minister.

International organizations like PEN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others outside Bangladesh took the case seriously and started protesting against the fatwa. They sent urgent appeals to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. But nothing happened. Their requests and appeals ended up in waste paper baskets.

Meanwhile, the streets all over Bangladesh filled with fundamentalists. It became obvious that political change was happening. Knowing the weakness of the government, Islamists skillfully used Islam to attack. Journalists from Australia, Canada, France, England, Germany, USA and elsewhere came to interview me, and a few documentary films were made on me. I kept myself busy writing books and columns in the newspapers, continuing to state the facts as I saw them.

However, I found myself becoming a victim of censorship. Newspapers and magazine editors, becoming scared, began to cut out parts of what I wrote about religion. Readers, who in the past had supported me for fighting oppression against women, began to criticize me. I began to lose friends. On the streets of Dhaka, the slogan that was continuously repeated on a daily basis was: *Kill Taslima*.

At the same time that hostility was increasing at home, support and solidarity for my cause was increasing abroad. I was asked to write op-ed on my struggle from the newspapers like *The New York Times*. The western media wrote a lot about me, referring to me as the female Salman Rushdie.

## **7. Turmoil, April - May 1994**

In April 1994 I went to France, having been invited by *Reporters San Frontiers* and by ARTE Television to attend a TV show for press freedom. In Paris I received support from French feminists, humanists, and ordinary French people.

I went to Kolkata from Paris before returning to Dhaka. In Kolkata my interview was published in *The Statesman*, where I was misquoted as having said that I wanted to revise the Qu'ran. The next day *The Statesman* published my rejoinder, in which I insisted that there is no need to revise Qu'ranic verses, because I don't believe in the Qu'ran. The religious scriptures, I believe, are out of time and out of place. After I returned to Dhaka, one newspaper republished my interview in *The Statesman*. That sparked the explosion. All of Bangladesh appeared to have gone mad. The fundamentalists got furious. They organized themselves and started having campaigns all over the country, this time more vigorously. The demonstrations against me demanded my execution by hanging and became the talk of the country. Posters against me were placed up on city walls but also those of small towns and remote villages. The fundamentalist movement reached a historic peak level for being publicized. They never had had so much support in the country before. They called for general strikes all over country for the support of their demand that I be killed, one that fortunately was unsuccessful. Every day the people came from houses, mosques, and madrasas (Qu'ranic schools) on the streets, all demanding my death. There were hundreds of different leaflets in people's hands. One of the leaflets read:

### **WHY THE MOVEMENT AGAINST TASLIMA**

The honorable people of the country,  
Assalamu al aikum

Why is the movement against Taslima? The anti-Islam forces, Taslima's supporters, are asking this question to confuse the people. All walks of people of this country demand her death. For this demand the peaceful *hartal* made history. There are court cases against her. She for a long time has been staying in foreign countries in the shelter of international Jewish and Christian lobbyists, campaigning and conspiring against Islam.

Recently she returned to our country, so it is very natural that the patriotic people of this country got very upset. This time the anti-Islam forces at home and abroad are really trying to become a monster. Their anti-religious and anti-state activities are encouraged by the recent comments of our prime minister, who said, “Taslima’s enemies are going extreme.” But Taslima is continuously abusing and insulting Allah, the Prophet, and the Holy Qu’ran. Taslima will not be satisfied until she puts the borders of Bangladesh into the map of another country. She is openly encouraging women to have illegal sexual relationships, she is encouraging women to break the wedding lock which she thinks is a chain that needs to come off, and she is using abusive words that continuously insult the religious *Alem, Ulema, Peer, Mashaiyekh*, and *Imams* of mosques. She says that the mosques are the symbol of injustice. She wants to commit suicide when she sees that Sheikh Hasina uses the veil. This anti-state and anti-religious woman is getting support and encouragement from groups who have bad intentions. How can one who came from a decent family and was once a proud citizen of an independent country tolerate this? Who gave her the right to insult the beliefs and values of religion! The honorable people of the country have read some of Taslima’s numerous and offensive writings.

1. ‘I am not for a small change. We will not get anything by this. We need total revision of the Qu’ran.’ (Taslima’s comment published in an interview in *The Statesman*, 09/05/94, Kolkata) Taslima protested against that interview, and her protest letter was published in *The Statesman* on 11/05/94. This one is more dangerous and horrifying than the previous comment. Taslima says, “I am very clear and clean on this issue. I believe that all the religious scriptures - the Qu’ran, the Vedas, and the Bible - are out of place and out of time. We already passed the time when those were written. So we don’t need them to be our guide. Revision or changes in the whole or the part is totally irrelevant here. If we want to have any success, then we have to go ahead, leaving these scriptures behind.’

2. Here from Hasan and Hussain to Muhammad none is a holy person. Everybody is a human being of the Dark Ages, like Yajid and Maabia. (Book: *Choto Choto dukkho Kotha*)

3. I don’t believe in prayers and the holy Qu’ran. When I read the Qu’ran, I found that Qu’ran says that the sun revolves around the earth. Then I told my mother that I read in the science book that the earth is moving around the sun, so that means Allah is a liar. (Interview in *Savvy*, published in Bombay, India. November 1992)

4. I feel Rabindranath Tagore is a God. Whenever I picture God, the picture I get, with his blood and flesh and with his art, he is Rabindranath Tagore. This is my religion. Only this god defeats me. I don’t have any other natural or supernatural attractions. I don’t

have any other destination than Rabindranath. (Book: *Nosto Meyer Nosto Godyo*, page 80)

5. I don't believe in the after life, Hell, Heaven. What is this ALLAH? Everything is just made up. (Book: *Nimontron*, page 29)

6. Yes, I attack Islam. Because Islam does not give any freedom to women. *Savvy*, November 92)

7. Israfil has fever/Gabriel has cough/Munkar and Nakir have gone to have dinner at Hurs/the angels are free flying on the seventh sky as they wish/Israfil has fever; who will blow the whistle?/the judge is crying alone, sitting on the final bridge/and the scale is falling apart. (Poem, "Israfil Has Fever." *Weekly Purnima*, 17<sup>th</sup> november 1993)

8. Why would Muhammad's wife - Khadija - be a character from whom girls of the country should learn to build their character? What good would you find in Khadija's character? What in the hell can school children learn from the biography of the 13 or 14 wives of Muhammad? And I want to know what kind of ideology they are getting. Why don't they get any opportunity to study or learn the biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, Joan of Arc, Begum Rokaya, Shorojini Naidoo, Leela Nag, or Ila Mitra's revolutionary life? (Book: *Nosto Meyer Nosto Godyo*, page 121)

9. There are many dishonest people in the country, among whom the peers are quite noticeable. The job of the *peers*( *religious gurus*) is that of cheating - they are greedy for money and women and act under the camouflage of long Arabic people's dress and a long beard and hair. Peers are not good and honest persons and are more like bad characters, pedophiles, promiscuous and sexy crazy men who want to be surrounded by young women. (Book: *Nirbachito Kolam*, page 27)

10. Women should never marry in a society like ours. Because then they become the slaves of men. As for sexual relationships, I believe if grownups want to have sex with each other they can easily do it. Marriage is not necessary for this relationship. (*Savvy*, November 92)

11. Women must have the freedom of their own uterus, whether or not they are prostitutes. (Interview, *Sonar Tori*, Dec 1993)

12. Women should learn how to rape. Women should learn to be adulterous. (Book: *Nirbachito Kolam*, page 118)

13. Son of a swine, this Bangladesh. (Book: *Lajja*, page 57)

14. The totalitarian government has selected a state religion for this country. By the attack of that religion the people are now suffering from anti-Indian feelings and a deep desire for Islamization of this country. (Book: *Jabo Na Keno?* page 49)

15. My country is the whole of Bengal. I don't believe in the west and east division of Bengal. I don't like to talk about them as being different from us. Today we see the wall of religion between us, but what is true like the sun over us is that this wall will be broken down and religion will disappear. Bengalis will get back their ancestors' homeland, their vast green fields of crops, the gardens of mangoes and jackfruits. Nobody would worship the idols made of clay, no sinners or guilty persons would bow their head five times in the mosque any more. One day, of course, Bengalis will walk hand in hand from Bonga to Benapole, from Rongpur to Kuchbihar, from Meghalay to Haluaghat, from Shilong to Tamabil - the boatmen will row their boats through the wavy waters of Padma and Ganges river by singing beautiful *vatiali* songs. I live with this dream in my heart. (Article: "Bondi ami: anandabazar patrika." 31 October 1993)

16. Look, the security I am getting is because the foreign countries have asked for this. (Interview in *Sonar Tori*, December 1993)

17. India was not a pile of waste paper that you had to tear down? I want to erase the number \*forty-seven/I don't want to swallow a bone called forty-seven/wanna take it out/want to get back my ancestors' land. (Poem: "Denial," published in *Desh*, 12 March 1994). [India was divided in 1947; then Bengal was divided.]

Respected brothers,

There is no pressure on anybody to accept Islam as his or her own religion. If they wish, they can get the citizenship of a different country. But by using a Muslim name and identity, nobody has the right to deny the faith, the main pillar of Islam. Enjoying the citizenship of Bangladesh and conspiring against the sovereignty of the country is not acceptable in any religious, national, and human law in this world. Blasphemy laws exist in many countries. Alas, there is no such a law in Bangladesh. But the state religion of Bangladesh is Islam, the faith in Allah, and belief in Islam is the main instrument of state system, which is in the Constitution. 90% of the people of this country are Muslims. Taslima publicly smashed these under her feet, using ugly, indecent, and unthinkable bad words. All her works are against Islam and the independence of the country. But despite all the bad

she has done, the government is giving her shelter and security. Does it mean that we cannot live with dignity and honor in this country with our Muslim identity? We cannot compromise with our faith and independence of the country. The prophet (Pbuh) said, Prevent with your force and strength when you see any wrong thing. The condition is now like this, for Taslima's audacity and anti-Islam activities have gone too far - only, our words from the mouth and hatred from the heart is not enough, so we have to go to direct action now. This is the time.

Let's go, O patriotic, religious brothers! To save our Islam and the country. Let's throw ourselves into the jihad and save the honor of Allah and the prophet Muhammad (Pbuh). Let's shout loudly.

LET'S PASS THE ACT AGAINST BLASPHEMY  
TASLIMA'S DEATH PENALTY IS DUE, LET'S KILL HER.

**The united Islamic groups ( Islamic oikkojot)**  
Temporary office: Published and distributed from 44/1 Purana Paltan,  
Dhaka 1000

The Islamists are getting more furious every day. The situation for me is getting scary and dangerous.

## **8. Hiding, June - July 1994**

After returning from France, where I attended the press freedom conference, I stopped at Kolkata for a few days before arriving at Dhaka. In Kolkata, the crowd of journalists was huge. I was already renowned for having received the most prestigious Bengali literary award, *Ananda puroshkar*, and my books were best-sellers there for a year. I had an interview with *The Statesman*, which misquoted me. It said that I asked to revise the Qur'an thoroughly. I immediately sent a rejoinder the same day, which was published the next day. I wrote that 'I did not ask for any kind of revision to the Qu'ran, because I don't believe in the Qu'ran. My view on this issue is clear and categorical. I hold the Qu'ran, the Vedas, the Bible and all such religious texts determining the lives of the followers as out of place and out of time. We live in a different socio-historical contexts than that in which these texts were written and therefore we should not be guided by their precepts. We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we have to make progress. In order to respond to our need let humanism, not religion, be the guiding force.



When I came back to Dhaka, instead of taking action against the fundamentalists who issued fatwa and who declared openly that they would punish me by killing me which is against the law of the land, the government took action against me. The Government filed a case against me: "Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of Bangladesh, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with a fine, or both." An offence under Section 295A of the Bangladeshi Penal Code.

I had no clue why the government filed the case against me, for it was supposed to give me security to save my life from the Islamic fundamentalists. I was informed by unknown fans or well-wishers of mine that an arrest warrant had been issued against me. I talked with my lawyers, left my house, and immediately went into hiding. The advice given by my lawyers was to go into hiding because prison was not safe for me. Religious sentiment is a very dangerous sentiment, and if police or prisoners had such feelings they could kill me at any moment. I learned that the law was a 150 years old British law, one which was the first used against me in the history of Bangladesh. The British no longer use this law in their land, but some of the ex-colonies still do. Once this 295A penal code was used against someone in India, the accused was killed. I wanted to turn myself in to the police, for police were looking for me all over the country. However, some of the people who were risking their lives to hide me, did not buy the idea that I should surrender. They advised me to remain in hiding, because they believed that I would be killed by anyone who had strong religious feelings out of anger or greed, believing that by killing an apostate they might get to Paradise. The rescue team suggested, when they found that my lawyers questioned my being granted bail, suggested that I should be smuggled out of the country if I wanted to survive. The situation had gotten completely out of control.

If I were to be convicted, I could be sentenced to two years in prison. My case provoked clashes between fundamentalists and defenders of secularism. Millions died for the secular tradition inherent in Bangladeshi statehood which was established after the victory against Pakistan in 1971. In 1978, however, signs of creeping anti-secularism began to show when the Constitution of Bangladesh, which had enshrined secularism as one of its main principles, was modified to make Islam the state religion. My case, it was stated, is being used by religious fundamentalists to demand the enactment of a blasphemy law, like the one currently in operation in Pakistan where the penalties are much higher - life imprisonment or death. This brings Bangladesh a step closer to being a repressive Islamic state, one in which individual and minority rights will be further curbed, particularly for women.

I went into hiding on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, but not to any friend's or relatives' house. I was given shelter by people who were not my close friends - some I knew, some I did not know. It was very hard to get any shelter, but several good-hearted people worked hard on my behalf. In the middle of the night I, covered with a burkha, had been taken by the small group of people and dropped into storage room of some houses, where I went without food for several days. I was in total darkness, not allowed to

make any sound. It was not safe to stay in one hiding place, so I had to move from one house to another. It was getting very hard to get any shelter. Nobody dared speak about me or even think about me. It was dangerous to give me shelter, for if I were discovered the host would be killed for supporting me. Also, it was against the law of the land to keep a fugitive in hiding. The Muslim fundamentalists became totally furious in their efforts to kill me. Their demonstrations and procession were getting more ferocious day by day. Police searched everywhere in order to arrest me.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of hiding, I called an officer of the American Embassy who had previously helped me to get back my passport. In desperation I requested shelter in the Embassy for I had no other safe place to hide. The officer said it was impossible for him to help me, so I was unable to get shelter there. But the officer promised that he would contact my lawyers to find what legal matters were involved. He even suggested that it would be better for me to leave the country immediately. But I told him that all the borders were closed for me, a fact reported in the newspapers. My rescuers repeatedly advised me to leave the country illegally after they realized that it would be hard for me to get bail and that the country was moving quickly into the grip of fundamentalists. I did not like the idea of leaving the country illegally. Every day, everywhere in the country, cities, towns, villages, and remote villages, people were demanding my death. Political as well as non-political Islamic groups came together under one umbrella. The situation changed quickly. The roads were all under the control of religionists. The anti-fundamentalist groups did not know how to strike back against the fundamentalists. They could not go to the streets, because it would look as if they supported me. No political or non-political party that was against the fundamentalists wanted to be known as having fought for me. I was branded as being antireligious. So it took a long time for them to turn to the streets in protest. But no big political party actually did take a stand against the fundamentalists. All were too afraid to support me, not the person, not even the cause. No intellectual or writer who supported freedom of expression dared to support me or utter my name. For me, it was really a strange situation. A few days after the government filed the case against me, it filed charges against four journalists of a daily newspaper because the fundamentalists demanded banning of that particular journal because one article was published there which criticised the religionists. The article criticized those who exploit innocent villagers in the name of religion. They really did not criticize religion. Whenever the four journalists were accused by the government the same way I was, the interesting thing was that the media, the writers, the intellectuals all gave statements against the government action against those journalists, including all the political parties except the Jamat e Islami and BNP ( Bangladesh Nationalist Party), and the hundreds of non-political cultural and professional organizations. But no one pointed out that I should have freedom of expression like the others, and that the government should not have filed case against me. All my writer friends gave statements saying that those journalists should be free, that the government must withdraw all the charges from them. Although they were my friends, they did not say that the government should do the same thing to me, also. I felt alone, abandoned, and afraid. Nobody, it seemed, was supporting me. Those who previously had

supported me now were dangerously silent. The people who gave me shelter were not the people who were my friends - some were acquaintances and some were totally new to me. But my secular friends, they were now the ones who denied me support. I was in a hopeless, helpless desperate situation. My lawyers needed statements supporting my freedom of expression to defend me. But no one was there to make a statement for me. Every day the statement of support for those four journalists got published in the newspapers. Afterwards two of my friends worked hard to obtain names of important people who would speak out on my behalf, but few were willing to sign such a statement. I became deeply depressed.

The biggest Islamic political party, Jamat e Islami, joined the anti-Taslina rally. And the United Islamic Party became stronger. Not only the Islamic political and non-political parties joined the coalition but also other political parties that were not based on religion joined the coalition also - the Freedom Party, the National Democratic Party, and the People's National Party. The streets were never before so full of protesters. A variety of professional people joined the anti-Taslina organization. Big bamboos were in the protesters' hands during processions. Snake-charmers declared that they would release 1,000,000 poisonous snakes in the city of Dhaka if the government failed to arrest me. Protesters came from all classes, rich or poor, from bearers of patriarchy, the professionals and the non-professionals, the young and the old, the religious and not so religious.

## **9. Two More Fatwas and a Countrywide Demand for My Execution by Hanging**

I was in hiding for 2 months. My rescue team got exhausted, and my cause looked increasingly hopeless. The team could not bear the tension and risk anymore. I was living in constant darkness, felt hopeless and helpless, and was in constant fear of death as I heard every day that the fundamentalists had said they were going to search houses to find me. I was sure that I would be dead soon. It was almost like living in a coffin for months.

There were many hartals, many general strikes, hundreds of demonstrations, and processions were made all over the country for the purpose of killing me. An anti-fundamentalist group tried to stop them, but failed. Six people were killed in one of the many clashes when the anti-fundamentalist group wanted to prevent the Jamat e Islami leader Golam Azam's meeting in Chittagong. The government did not take any action against the fundamentalists, protecting them instead. The fundamentalists attacked many people whoever tried to prevent them, during the hartals. On the 29th of July, they arranged a long march during which 400,000 people gathered in Dhaka, having come from all over the country. On July 15th, they marched toward the United States Embassy, declaring they would obliterate the building by throwing bombs, complaining that the Clinton Administration had supported me, saying the extremists had to stop their attacks on my freedom of expression. The government, however, did not let the procession go near the Embassy, but matters clearly had gotten out of control. One suicide squad was formed with the express purpose of killing me. Two

more fatwas were issued against me. Two more religious leaders set a price on my head. The one of the monetary rewards was 100,000 takas, and the another was 50,000 takas. This amount of money is certainly huge in a poor country like Bangladesh.

The situation became desperate, the country was under the control of the Islamists, and I could no longer find a hiding place. The human rights and writers' organizations abroad demonstrated to show their solidarity toward me.

#### *Support That I Received*

The support I received from the fellow writers was really encouraging. Authors worldwide fought for the writers' right to freedom of expression. Some of the Nobel Laureates wrote open letters in the leading newspapers in Europe. One of the letters was by Salman Rushdie, who had previously suffered the same fate as I:

From Salman Rushdie To Taslima Nasrin

*I am sure you have become tired of being called "the female Salman Rushdie" - what a bizarre and comical creature that would be! - when all along you thought you were the female Taslima Nasrin. I am sorry my name has been hung around your neck, but please know that there are many people in many countries working to make sure that such sloganizing does not obscure your identity, the unique features of your situation, and the importance of fighting to defend you and your rights against those who would cheerfully see you dead.*

*In reality it is our adversaries who seem to have things in common, who seem to believe in divine sanction for lynching and terrorism. So instead of turning you into a female me, the headline writers should be describing your opponents as "the Bangladeshi Iranians." How sad it must be to believe in a God of blood! What an Islam they have made, these apostles of death, and how important it is to have the courage to dissent from it!*

*Great writers have agreed to lend their weight to the campaign on your behalf: Czeslaw Milosz, Mario Vargas Llosa, Milan Kundera, and more. When such campaigns were run on my behalf, I found them immensely cheering, and I know that they helped shape public opinion and government attitudes in many countries.*

*You have spoken out about the oppression of women under Islam, and what you said needed saying. In the West, there are too many eloquent apologists working to convince people of the fiction that women are not discriminated against in Muslim countries or that, if they are, it has nothing to do with religion. The sexual mutilation of women, according to this argument, has no basis in Islam. This may be true in theory, but in many countries where this goes on, the mullahs wholeheartedly support it. And then there are the countless crimes of violence within the home, the inequalities of legal systems that value women's evidence below that of men, the driving of women out of the workplace in all countries where Islamists have come to, or even near to, power.*

*You have spoken out about the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh after the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in India by Hindu extremists. Yet any fair-minded person would agree that a*

*religious attack by Muslims on innocent Hindus is as bad as an attack by Hindus on innocent Muslims. Such simple fairness is the target of the bigots' rage, and it is that fairness that, in defending you, we seek to defend.*

*You are accused of having said that the Qu'ran should be revised (though you have said that you were referring only to Islamic religious code). You may have seen that only last week the Turkish authorities have announced a project to revise these codes, so in that regard at least you are not alone. And even if you did say that the Qu'ran should be revised to remove its ambiguities about the rights of women, and even if every Muslim man in the world were to disagree with you, it would remain a perfectly legitimate opinion, and no society that wishes to jail or hang you for expression can call itself free.*

*Simplicity is what fundamentalists always say they are after, but in fact they are obscurantists in all things. What is simple is to agree that if one may say, "God exists" then another may also say, "God does not exist"; that if one may say "I loathe this book," then another may also say, "But I like it very much." What is not at all simple is to be asked to believe that there is only one truth, one way of expressing that truth, and one punishment (death) for those who say this isn't so.*

*As you know, Taslima, Bengali culture - and I mean the culture of Bangladesh as well as the Indian Bengal - has always prided itself on its openness, its freedom to think and argue, its lack of bigotry. It is a disgrace that your government has chosen to side with the religious extremists against their own history, their own civilization, their own values. It is the treasure-house of the intelligence, the imagination, and the word that your opponents are trying to loot.*

*I have seen and heard reports that you are all sorts of dreadful things - a difficult woman and an advocate (horror of horrors) of free love. Let me assure you that those of us who are working on your behalf are well aware that character assassination is normal in such situations and must be discounted. And simplicity again has something valuable to say on this issue: even difficult advocates of free love must be allowed to stay alive, otherwise we would be left only with those who believe that love is something for which there must be a price - perhaps a terrible price - to pay.*

*Taslima, I know that there must be a storm inside you now. One minute you feel weak and helpless, another strong and defiant. Now you will feel betrayed and alone, and now you will have the sense of standing for many who are standing silently for you. Perhaps in your darkest moments you will feel you did something wrong - that those demanding your death may have a point. This of all your goblins you must exorcise first. You have done nothing wrong. The wrong is committed by others against you. You have nothing wrong, and I am sure that one day soon you will be free.*

The European Parliament supported me and asked the Government of Bangladesh to let me leave the country. After long negotiations between the European and the Bangladesh Government, I was granted bail, after having been two months in hiding. But, also, I was forced to leave Bangladesh. In the middle of the night, with

police protection, on the 8th of August 1994, I had to leave my beloved country Bangladesh, without the assurance that I would ever be able to return.

### *Some Speculations*

As I see it, the reactions from the society in general and Islamists in particular were three fold: I was portrayed as being anti-religious, anti-Bangladesh, and anti-social order.

My writings were seen as a challenge to the existing interpretation of Islamic texts. Most people in Bangladesh, unfortunately, do not really understand the texts, so they were not particularly irked by anything I had written inasmuch as for them those texts are for memorizing, not understanding. What they did understand was the interpretation advanced by a section of half-educated mullahs through regular religious meetings, sermons of the local Imams, pirs - the religious gurus - and books like *Muksedul Momenin*, in which instructions were as to how to control women. These interpretations are misogynistic and reflect an inherent hierarchy within the society. Above all, they give the interpreter the power to define what religion is. When I questioned the validity of such interpretations from my non-religiocentric position, I wrote not from a point of view of what the holy books actually said but from the perspective of the popular interpretation of the books. I pointed to how the prevalent hierarchy was (ab)using its positions.

At stake are several points: firstly, there is the shift of power to a non-Mullah (who in their opinion has no rights to discuss the texts/interpretations; and secondly, there is a woman (who, according to their interpretation, is of an inferior gender). I was portrayed as someone who challenged the texts and questioned the legitimacy of those sacred texts. I did question the texts, but at no time on the level of contending any interpretations of the texts. Others may have done so, but to my knowledge nobody has ever challenged me on the ground that there can be a different interpretation to the one I have suggested. That is why there has been no debate, why there was the fatwa. That is why the Islamists have flexed their muscle on the street, why they insist upon silencing me.

Secondly, I have been portrayed as being anti-state. This is ironic, because all along my expressions have always been "poetic" rather than "political." I have expressed my opinions about the Bangladeshi state in reference to its historical connections with the Indian state of West Bengal. Even some who fought for an independent Bangladesh in 1971 accepted the paradox that the state is a de-facto recognition of the 1947 partition. Given the opportunity, they would return to the pre-partitioned Bengal. However, it is those who opposed the war of 1971 and collaborated with the Pakistanis who are the most vocal critic of my "Bengal dream," suggesting that it is unpatriotic to express my dream. For them, it is an opportunity to become the champion of patriotism. Also, they have a hidden agenda: having Bangladesh in its present form makes it possible to have their own dream, an "Islamic Bangladesh." Unfortunately, patriotism, whether in Bangladesh in 1994 or in the United States of America, has similar shortcomings: irrationality. Once the big "P" is uttered the world is divided into two segments: you are either with us or with "them."

The unknown "them" is the enemy, continually being redefined, always the "other." In the case of Bangladesh, the line between the real and the perceived threat of India has been blurred on many occasions. Thus, the Islamists' arguments have been bought by the population at large: who wants to be the "enemy" of his/her own "motherland"?

Thirdly, there is the social order. The Islamists, when they have read my writings on sexual issues, have appeared as the moral guardian of the social order. The Bangladeshi society cannot accept the fact that women can and do have desires, do want and deserve sexual pleasure. If and when they have desires, these need to be whispered, not discussed in public discourse. I, however, have not accepted that dictum. I broke the "socially structured silences." The silences, practiced and continued over ages, have helped men control women - including their sexuality. Now I have attacked patriarchy at its core. Did that only anger the Islamists? No, that angered the middle class, educated, even secular men, too. They read my book and found it amusing. But as for the meanings/implications of these writings, they were angry and irritated. They were happy with the way the world was, and here I was rocking their boat. Thus, they were looking for someone to stand up and say "enough is enough." But *they* didn't want to do it, because it would be a politically incorrect thing to do. Therefore, when the Islamists spoke out against me, many members of the educated secular middle class enjoyed it. The lack of their support for me causes bears my contention.

## **10. Banning of the Books and Loss of Freedom of Expression**

Because my freedom of expression has been continually violated by those with authority in power, I have been unable to reach readers in my own country. Even the series of my autobiographical writings has been banned. It tells the same story that thousands of women already know and have experienced. It documents how Muslim women suffer as they live in a patriarchal country with hundreds of archaic traditions. I have described my childhood days, what it was like to be a female child, how I was brought up, how I had privileges others did not have, how I became a medical doctor - all shown to reveal why I think differently, why I think there is hope for others to break away from patriarchy. It is important that women be inspired to have the strength to revolt against the oppressive system in which they and I have endured. I told the truth. I expressed what happened in my childhood. Although it is considered taboo to reveal having been raped, sometimes by a male member of one's family, I did so. Most girls shut their mouths, feeling ashamed. I did not, for it is the abusers who should be ashamed, not the abused. I am well aware that many others have experienced abuse and though they have not dared to admit it, reading about my experience has given them a new outlook.

We, the victims, must cry out and do so loudly. We must demand to be heard. We must protest loudly. We must demand basic freedom and basic human rights. We must demand to live in happiness.

If women do not fight against being oppressed by a shameful patriarchal and religious system, then shame on them! Shame on all of us if we do not protest, if we do not fight, if we do not object to a system that, if allowed to continue, will also affect our daughters.

Mine is not a unique story. My experiences, unfortunately, have been shared by millions. In my book, I cried for myself. I also cried for all those who have not been able to enjoy a productive life in which they could achieve happiness. Our cries must become universal, not stifled and done in lonely places.

Meanwhile, four of my books have already been banned in Bangladesh and steps are being taken to ban my other twenty three books. A Bangladesh court has sentenced me to one year in prison for writing what I did, all because of the authorities' religious bias. Because of religion, there is bloodshed, bloodshed everywhere. Because of religion there is hatred among people. Because of religion there is ignorance all over the world. Because of religion there is illiteracy, there is poverty. Because of religion there are injustices and inequalities. Because of religion millions of women suffer, are flogged, are burned, are stoned to death. Because of religion, my books are burned and banned. Because of religion I was thrown out of my country. An entire segment of society declares that I have no right to live, no right to speak!

After waiting six long years, I was allowed to enter India. But the moment I made comments about the Hindu religion, the political leaders there asked that I be arrested. Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists demonstrated against my visit to India, which led the Indian Government to forbid me from ever returning. But this is my life, and instead of being able to live in the area of the world in which I was born I am being given the alternative of living as an outsider in the West. This has led to my being a stranger in my own country as well as a stranger in the West.

As should be obvious, freedom of expression in Bangladesh is a myth. On 20 February 2004, the day before a grand Bengali language day celebration, my book called *Those Dark Days* was banned. At the very time when Bengali writers and their literature should have been a prime focus! And have the writers and intellectuals raised their voices in protest? Ironically, no!

The list of books banned in Bangladesh:

*Lajja* (Shame) 1992  
*Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) 1999  
*Utal Hawa* (The Wild Wind) 2002  
*Dwikhandito* (Split in Two) 2003  
*Sheishob Ondhokar* (Those Dark Days) 2004

### **My Return to Bangladesh in 1998**

In 1998, I returned to Bangladesh in 1998 to see my dying mother. It was like a miracle being able to have a chance to enter my country. I was desperate to be with



my mother in her last days. The government had said no to my request. I cried, begging for just a few days. I was told NO.

I decided to risk making the trip, thinking that I might be able not to draw the Immigration people's attention if I hid my face. I succeeded. But the next day the news broke out that I had entered and some people had recognized me. My return became a top news story, and the country appeared to have become panicked. My well-laid plans had not worked, and I immediately went into hiding and again found that the government was making my life impossible. A criminal case was filed for my previous writings, an arrest warrant was issued, and I was granted bail again, like I had been in 1994. I did not want to leave, but when a group of Bangladeshi Talibans were captured, a list showed that I was number one of four persons on the list that was to be killed. Asked by a European embassy to leave, I did so to save my life.

When my mother died, no Muslim man led the funeral ceremony. Nobody came from any mosque. My mother was a devout Muslim, her only crime being that she was my mother.

## **Ban in India**

From the time I left Bangladesh in 1994, I was not allowed to go to India. My visa was rejected for long six years. But when the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) came to power, they allowed me to visit India. But when in 2001 when the Muslim fundamentalists protested against my visit to Mumbai, a secular organization asked me to visit Mumbai as a challenge. The Government gave me the highest security and from then on it was not at all easy for me to get a visa for India. The Indian government restricted my visiting privileges. In Kolkata I made the Hindu fundamentalists angry when I defended the rights of artists. Film maker Deepa Mehta had been prevented from shooting her film by the Hindu fundamentalists, because it was about the women who suffered under the Hindu religion. I criticised the Hindu fundamentalists, saying I would not call a country civilised if it does not allow freedom of expression. The Hindu fundamentalists then demanded for my arrest. Now, I was facing opposition from all kinds of fundamentalists, for the very reason that I am against all kinds of fundamentalism, fanaticism, bigotry, and obscurantism.

In West Bengal, India, on 27 November 2003, the Left Front government banned my book *Dwikhandito* (Split in Two). Further, it justified the ban by claiming that, because the book is allegedly blasphemous, circulating the book could incite communal violence in the state and elsewhere. It has exposed the state government to the charge of appeasement of Muslim fanatics with an eye on the minority vote bank. India is the largest democracy in the world and a ban on books in the country is unjustified. Banning of books not only amounts to violation of the rights of the writer but also of the readers. In February 2004 when I visited Kolkata, the banning of my book gave the Muslim fundamentalists a license to do anything they wished. They

immediately issued a fatwa against me, offering to pay Rs 20,000 to anyone who could blacken my face and put a garland of shoes around my neck. They burned me in effigy several times, held a procession complaining about my visit to India, and they went so far as to say that I should be killed and that the killer would be rewarded. How ironic, in the secular state of West Bengal and the secular nation of India, fundamentalists can succeed in getting by with such action without being punished.

### **The Unique situation: the writers and intellectuals, the progressives who asked to ban my book in both Bangladesh and India 2003**

The third part of my book is called *Ko*, was published in Bangladesh, and was published in West Bengal, India as *Dwikhandito*. The book portrays my fight against the fundamentalists and tells of my confrontation with the patriarchal society where, as a woman, I suffered considerably. I honestly told the truth about my sufferings as well as how I was exploited and how I freed myself from the social rules that I found nonsensical. I did not hesitate to say that I had had a relationships with a man to whom I was not married.

*He used to give me deep sexual pleasure. Like all other men, he was not interested in finding out whether I was aroused or not. But I taught him to do so. I told him to arouse me by touching every inch of my body. He started to get pleasure by giving pleasure to me. Men always enjoy women. I was a victim of men's pleasure before. But this time it was different. It was me who enjoyed him.*

It is this kind of sexual narration in the book that has drawn the acerbic criticism. "This is not literature, this is pure pornography," some of the male critics said. My little story was big enough to make men oppose me and call me a whore. A big hatred campaign began, started by some of the mainstream media as well as tabloids, became of my having described my intimate relationships both in Bangladesh and in India.

Two writers who are considered to be progressive, one of whom is from Bangladesh and the other from India, filed a \$4,000,000 (four million dollar) libel suit against me. One literary magazine requested me to write something defending myself, and here i spoke my heart.

### **My answer to the patriarchal question**

"Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."

Rosa Luxemburg

When I look back, the years gone by appear dry, ashen. Suddenly, a half-forgotten dream tears itself from that inert grey mass and stands before me, iridescent, obtrusive. Odd memories tiptoe into my solitary room. Confronting me, they make me tremble, make me cry, drag me back towards the days left behind. I cannot help but walk down the serpentine, shadowy alleys of my life, foraging for remembered fragments. To what end? The past is past, irrevocably so. The dreams that are long dead are unrecognizably dead. What good can it do to dust the cobwebs off them with tender fingers? What is gone just isn't here anymore.

Although I am aware of this my life in exile makes me reach back into my past, again and again. I walk through the landscape of my memories like someone possessed. Each night brings with it nightmares, its own thick blanket of melancholy. It is then that I start telling the story of that girl. A shy, timid girl, who grew up in a strict family, uncomplaining, constantly humiliated. A girl encircled by boundaries, whose every desire, every whim was thrown away as garbage. A girl whose small, frail body was prey to many dark, hairy hands. I have narrated the story of that girl. A girl with modest adolescent dreams, who fell in love and married in secret, hoping to live the ordinary life of an ordinary woman. I have told her story. A woman betrayed by her dearly beloved husband, whose convictions came crashing down like a house of straw, a woman who knew sorrow, pain, mourning, and bereavement. A woman who was tempted to follow the terrible road to self-destruction. I have told her agonizing tale in simple words. A woman who then gathered up the broken pieces of her dreams and tried to live again, to make a little room of her own in the midst of a cruel, heartless society. A woman who surrendered to a guardian called "man" because society demanded it of her. But the hurt, the pain kept growing, the traumatic pain of losing an unborn child, wounds that left her bloodied and sore, onslaughts of malice, distrust and unbearable humiliation. All that I have done is to tell the story of that trampled and bruised girl.

That girl who, with whatever strength remained in her body and mind, stood up again, without anyone's help, turned away from all shelter, trying to be her own self once more, her own refuge; a woman who refused to renounce and retreat from the world that had deceived and rejected her, a woman who refused to heed people's taunts and sneers. I have narrated the story of this girl, of this woman standing upright. A woman who refused to obey society's diktats, its rituals and traditions. A woman whose constant stumbling, falling, being thrown, taught her to stand strong. Whose stumbling steps taught her to walk, whose wanderings showed her the way. Slowly, gradually, she witnessed the growth of a new consciousness within her, a simple thought took hold of her - "This life was her own and no one else's. She was the one who could rule over it, no one else." I have told the story of that girl, of the circumstances that shaped her. It is the story of a girl who came out of the furnace of patriarchy, not reduced to ashes, but as burnished steel.

Have I done wrong? Even if I don't think so, many people think today that it was wrong of me to tell this story. Today, I am standing in the prosecution box waiting for

the verdict. It wouldn't have been such a terrible crime if I had not disclosed the identity of that girl. The girl was I, Taslima. Had I used my imagination, I could have done whatever I pleased - written page after page of fancy and all would have been forgiven. But it is forbidden to stake my claim in this real world. To be a flesh and blood woman and announce audaciously - "I am that girl; after those turbulent years of sorrow I am standing up again; I have vowed to live my life as I see fit." Why would the world accept this bold stance? No woman should have this kind of courage. I am completely unfit for a patriarchal society. In my own country Bangladesh, in my very own West Bengal, I am a forbidden name, an outlawed woman with a banned book. Nobody can utter my name, touch me, read me; if they do so their tongues will rot, their hands will become soiled, a deep disgust will overwhelm them. This is the way I am. This is the way I have chosen to be.

Yet even if the publication of *Dwikhandito* (Split in Two) shatters me into a thousand pieces, I will still not confess to any wrongdoing. Is it wrong to write the story of one's life? Is it wrong to expose the deep, secret truths of life as you have lived it? The unwritten rule of every autobiography is - "Nothing will be hidden, everything shall be written about." An autobiography's subject is the unknown, the secrets of a human life. I have simply tried to follow this rule honestly. The first two volumes of my life story, *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) and *Utal Hawa* (Wild Winds) have not raised the kind of controversy *Dwikhandito* has. In any case, I have not started the controversy; others have. Many have said that I have deliberately chosen sensational subject matter, incapable of generating anything but controversy. This question should not be raised in the case of an autobiography. I have described the years of my childhood, my adolescence, my youth, living and growing through all kinds of experiences. I have spoken about my philosophy, my hopes and despairs, my beauty and my ugliness, my happiness and sorrow, my anger and tears, my own deviation from my ideals. I have not chosen a titillating or sensitive subject. I have simply chosen my own life to write about. If this life is a stimulating and exciting life, then how can I make it less so? I am told this volume has been written to raise a hue and cry. Does every conception have to have a petty motive? As if honesty, simplicity, cannot be adequate reasons. As if courage, something that I am told I have in abundance, cannot be a good enough reason.

Controversy about my writing is nothing new. I have been familiar with it from the very time I was being published. Actually, isn't the truth rather simple? It is just this: if you don't compromise with a patriarchal society, you will find yourself at the center of a storm? There are many different definitions of what constitutes an autobiography. Most of us easily accept those autobiographies that are idealistic and describe only good and happy events. Generally, great men write about their lives to inspire other lives, to reveal the truth and the path of righteousness. I am neither a sage, nor a great, erudite being, and I write not to show light to the blind. I am simply unmasking the wounds and blights of an ordinary human life.

Even though I am not a great litterateur or a remarkable personality, momentous things have happened in my life. Certainly mine is no ordinary life when, because of my beliefs and ideals, thousands take to the streets asking for my death; or when my books are banned because they carry my opinions; or when the state snatches away the right to live in my own land for speaking the truth! When it is all right for others to constantly describe my life, and add color to their portrayal, why shouldn't it be all right for me to take the responsibility to describe it myself, fully, truthfully? Surely no one else can know my life the way I know it. If I don't reveal myself, if I don't depict the whole of myself - especially those events that have shaken me - if I don't talk of all that is good and bad in me, of my weaknesses and my strengths, my happiness and sorrow, my generosity and cruelty, then I don't think I can stay true to the responsibility of writing an autobiography. For me, literature for literature's sake, or literary niceties for their own sake, cannot be the last word; I place a greater value on honesty. Whatever my life may be, however contemptible or despicable, I do not deceive myself when I sit down to write about it. If the reader is disgusted or appalled by my tale, so be it. At least I can be satisfied that I have not cheated my reader. I am not presenting a fictitious narrative in the guise of an autobiography. I narrate the truths of my life, the ugly as much as I do the beautiful, without hesitation. I can't change my past. The ugliness and the beauty must both be accepted. I won't lie and say, "It didn't happen."

The sharp arrows of mockery come flying at me from every direction. The mud of slander and humiliation is flung to soil me. There is only one reason for this assault. I have spoken the truth. Not everyone can bear the truth. The truths of *Amar Meyebela* and *Utal Hawa* can be borne; *Dwikhandito's* is insupportable. In *Amar Meyebela*, when I described my ignoble childhood, people said sympathetically, "How terrible!" In *Utal Hawa*, when I described being cheated on by my husband, they expressed their sympathy. But in *Dwikhandito*, when I spoke openly of my relationships with various men, they began to point fingers at me. We can draw only one conclusion from this: As long as a woman is oppressed and defenseless, people like her and sympathize with her. But when she refuses to remain exploited or suppressed, when she stands up, when she straightens her spine, establishes her rights, breaks the rotten social systems that chain her so as to free her body and mind - she is no longer admirable, she becomes hateful. I knew this character of our society; even then I was not afraid to speak freely about myself.

One of the main reasons for the controversy regarding *Dwikhandito* is sexual freedom. Since most people are immersed neck-deep in the traditions of a patriarchal society, they are irritated, angry, and outraged at the open declaration of a woman's sexual autonomy. This freedom is not something that I simply talk about; rather, I have established it for myself, in and through my life. But this freedom is not license; men cannot touch me whenever they please. I decide. Our society is not yet ready for such freedom in a woman. It refuses to accept the fact that a woman can sexually engage with and enjoy any man she desires, and yet rigorously decide where to draw the line in any encounter.

Our renowned, famous, well-heeled writers delight in slandering me by calling me a fallen woman, a whore. In doing this they only prove themselves to be the figureheads of this disgusting, dirty patriarchal society! They first use "fallen women" for their enjoyment and then deploy the words "fallen woman" as a term for abuse! There is really nothing novel in the use of women as sexual slaves.

Although in this volume of my autobiography I have spoken about my personal struggle against patriarchy, spoken about the torture meted out by society on women and religious minorities, nobody talks of the fact that I have spoken of such things. They only notice my relationships with men. They notice the audacity that I have in opening my mouth about the deep, secret, ugly and repulsive subject of what happens to sexuality in a patriarchal society.

Whenever, in the history of the world, in times of darkness, a woman stands up against patriarchy, speaks about emancipation, tries to break free from her chains, she gets called a "fallen woman." Many years ago, in the preface to my book, *A Fallen Woman's Fallen Prose*, I wrote, ' I am delighted in calling myself a fallen woman. It is because I know that whenever a woman has protested against oppression by the state, by religion, or by society, whenever she has become aware of all her rights, society has called her a whore. I believe that in this world, for a woman to be pure, to be true to herself, she has to become a fallen woman. Only when a woman is called a whore can she know that she is free from the coils of society's diktats. The fallen woman is really a pure and pristine human being. I truly believe that if a woman wants to earn her freedom, be a human, she has to earn this label. This title, coming from a fallen, degenerate society, should be seen as an honor by every woman.' Till now, of all the prizes I have received, I consider this honor to be the greatest recognition of what I have done with my life. I have earned it because I have given a mortal blow to the decaying, rotten body of patriarchy. This is the true measure of the worth of my life as a writer, of my life as a woman and the long years of my struggle to be the person I am.

A writer in Bangladesh has sued me for defamation after *Dwikhandito* came out. Another in West Bengal has also followed suit. Not satisfied with simply filing a lawsuit, they have also demanded a ban on my book. I really cannot understand how a writer can demand that a fellow writer's work be banned. How can they fight for freedom of speech and thought and then behave like fundamentalists. I believe every word of what Voltaire said - "*Je ne suis absolument pas d'accord avec vos idées, mais je me battrais pour que vous puissiez les exprimer...*" - ("I do not agree with your ideas, but I will fight for your right to express them.") So many people have written about their lives. If it is a human life, it is full of errors, mistakes, black marks, and thorns, even when those in question are saints. St. Augustine (335-430 C.E.) wrote about his life, talked openly about his undisciplined, immoral, reckless youth in Algeria, his illegitimate son, his sexual exploits. Mahatma Gandhi spoken of how he tested his celibacy by making women sleep in the same bed with him. Jean Jacques

Rousseau (1712-1774) in his *Confessions* narrates every incident of his life, without holding back the ugly and the bad. Benjamin Franklin (1709-1790) confesses how he brought up his illegitimate son, William. Bertrand Russell and Leo Tolstoy have been equally frank about their lives. Why did these men talk about things they knew were unacceptable by society? It is because they wanted to let their readers know their real selves, and because they felt that these experiences were important in their lives. Does anyone call them names because they have been indiscreet? Rather, these admirable men remain exactly in the position of honor they have always occupied, and it is reinforced by their telling of the truths of their lives. Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (The sexual life of Catherine M) describes the sexual freedom of the sixties, her life with many men, and vivid descriptions of sex. Hasn't this book occupied a place among other literary works? Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *Vivir Para Contarla* talks of other women with whom he had relations. Will someone run to court to ban Marquez's book? In every country, biographies are written about famous men and women. Biographers conduct research for years to unearth some hidden aspects of the life under examination. Even innermost secrets no longer remain so, and we have seen this even in the case of Rabindranath Tagore's life. In spite of being a passionate spokesman against child marriage, why did he allow his daughter to marry so young? We now know the reason. But the question remains: Why does a reader need to know all this? Why do researchers spend years finding out the most intimate details of a person's life? It is because in the light of these hidden facts we can analyze and understand the writer and his work in a new way.

Many Bengali writers love playing games with women, and even if they hesitate to mention these escapades in their autobiographies, the characters they create boldly commit such acts. Nobody has ever questioned them, but if a woman talks of sexuality, in a fictional work or in her autobiography, eyebrows are raised. Sexuality is a man's prerogative, his "ancestral" patrilineal property. Being a woman, I could not possibly write like men. I must write more discreetly.

I am a woman after all. Only a man possesses the right to discuss a woman's body, her thighs, her breasts, her waist and her vagina. Why should a woman do it? This patriarchal society has not given me that right, but since I have thumbed my nose at this rule and have written about it, however sad or poignant my tale may be, I have crossed the limits. For a man, a playboy image is something to be proud of. When a woman writes about her love and sexuality with honesty, she becomes a suspect, a "characterless" woman. I have talked of certain things in my autobiography that I should not have. I have muckraked; I have crossed the limit allowed to me.

One should not discuss what happens inside the bedroom or between two individuals because such events are unimportant. But I consider them important because all those incidents have shaped the Taslima that I am today - this woman with her beliefs and disbeliefs, mores and thoughts, and her own sense of her self. The world around her has created her brick by brick, not as a chaste domesticated angel, but as an ardent, renegade, disobedient brat. Then they say: I can destroy my own

reputation, but why do I have to destroy the reputation of others? This question has come up, although I am writing about what is after all my own life. I fail to understand why those who are so self-consciously respectable do things that they consider contemptible? They say that I have broken their trust. But I never promised anyone my silence. People tell me there is an unwritten rule, but only those afraid my revelations will destroy their saintly images uphold this code of discretion. And then they try to intimidate me with their furious wrinkled brows! But what if I want to reveal whatever I consider important? What if I decide that what I am talking about is not obscene, at least to me? Who creates these definitions of obscenity and sets out the limits? I decide what I should write in my autobiography, how much to reveal, how much to conceal. Or should I not? Should I wait for instructions from X, Y, and Z, from some Maqsd Ali, some Keramat Mian, or from some Paritosh or Haridas Pal? Should I wait for them to tell me what to write, how much to write? Critics want to characterize my freedom as self-indulgent license. This is because our likes and dislikes, our sense of right and wrong, sin and virtue, beauty and ugliness are moulded by thousands of years of patriarchy. So, patriarchy has taught us that the true characteristics of a woman are her diffidence, her timidity, her chastity, her lowered head, and her patience. Therefore, the critic's habituated, controlled perceptions are afraid to face harsh truths, and quickly shut their ears in disgust. "Is she a real writer? Does she have the right to an autobiography?" they ask in anger. I think that everyone has a right to talk about their lives, even the pompous critic who regards a pen in my hands as an outrage! I have been called irresponsible. I may be irresponsible, I may be irrational, but I refuse to give up the right to be so. George Bernard Shaw once said, "A reasonable man adapts himself to the world. An unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man." Taslima Nasrin is one of those unreasonable human beings. I do not claim that progress depends upon me; I am simply an insignificant writer. In the eyes of the wise, I am happy to be labeled an unreasonable or imprudent person. It is because I am foolish that I have not kept my mouth shut, I have stood my ground even as an entire society has spat upon me. I have remained firm when patriarchy's ardent supporters have come to tram-ple me. My naïveté, my unreasonableness, my irrationality are my greatest assets.

The question of religion has also come up. Those who know me also know that I always speak out against religious conventions. Religion is thoroughly patriarchal. If I insult religion or religious texts, why should men tolerate it, especially when these same men use religion and religious texts to suppress others? It is these pious gentlemen who have forced me to leave my country. I have paid the price for truth with my own life. How much more should I pay? As is presently the case in West Bengal today, my books were initially banned in Bangladesh on the grounds that they may incite riots. The communal tension raging through South Asia is not caused by my books but by other reasons. The torture of Bangladesh's minorities, the killing of Muslims in Gujarat, the oppression of Biharis in Assam, the attacks against Christians, and the Shia-Sunni conflicts in Pakistan have all occurred without any contribution from me. Even if I am an insignificant writer, I write for humanity, I write with all my



heart that every human being is equal, and there must be no discrimination on the basis of gender, color, or religion. Everyone has the right to live. Riots don't break out because of what I write. But I am the one who is punished for what I write. Fires rage in my home. I am the one who has to suffer exile. I am the one who is homeless everywhere.

## Exile

While hiding in Bangladesh, I was fortunate in receiving the support of the western democratic governments, feminists, and human rights organizations. They literally helped save my life. Eventually, however, I had no other alternative than to leave my country. It has now been ten years that I have been trying to return to my country. But the doors have all been closed.

I had to leave my own family, my friends, my society, my country, my everything. The reason I am still not allowed to go back to my country? The reason is that I criticized religion because it is oppressive to women. I had spoken out, and am still speaking out, about the fact that women must not live under *any* religious system, because no religion gives woman the freedom to live as a human being. It is as simple as that. I have written twenty-seven books of poetry, prose, novels, and autobiography so far. In every book, I have been focusing more or less on the same issue, that we have to overcome religion in order to obtain a better family of values, to have a better society of equality and justice, to raise the standards to better humankind.

Well, I have not just been sitting around doing nothing while the religionists have rattled their swords. The sword I have chosen is my pen. Well, actually, my computer. My fight has been waged with words. With words I have challenged the religious teachings about patriarchy. With words, I have written to inspire men and women to respect human rights, to change old views that were never right. With words, I have struggled to change the human heart, the human mind.

Not only has my freedom of expression has been violated, but the Government of Bangladesh has violated my rights as a citizen. My father, deathly sick in 2002, wanted so much to see me in his last days. I tried, and cried, to return to my country to see him for the last time. But the government did not let me return home. My father died alone without me.

I now realize that in my lifetime I will not be able to return to the land where I was born. I have no home, no country. Instead of being able to live in the area of the world in which I was born, I am being given the alternative of living in the West where I feel like an outsider. I am a stranger in my own country and a stranger here in the West where I now live!

Where can I go? Nowhere. Exile, for me, is a bus stop where I am waiting for a bus to go home. I have been in exile for such a long time that I have the helpless feeling that I no longer feel any home is my home, any country my country.

Sometimes I ask myself, Is this true, do I have no home? No, it is not really true. I do have a home. My home is love. The love I receive from my many friends is my home. The love I receive from oppressed women all over the world is my home. The

love I receive from rationalists, freethinkers, secular humanists, and ethical humanists from all over the world is my home.

I do not regret doing anything I have done or writing anything I have written. It does not matter what happens, I will never be silenced. Come what may, I will continue to fight uncompromisingly against religious fundamentalism. I am all the more and determined, all the more committed to my cause.