

I believe in human rights, women's rights, the freedom of speech and thought and expression, gender equality, secular humanism, and scientific rationality. These are unshakable beliefs. Inasmuch as I believe in my right to express my thoughts and opinions, I also believe in the rights of those who oppose my thoughts and expressions. They must individually have the right to express their thoughts freely, and so must I.

I am opposed to male oppression, religious fundamentalism, superstition, economic disparity, misogyny, ignorance, inequalities, injustices, and much else. Since my earliest childhood, I have opposed all this. No one taught me - it came from within. Again, from my earliest childhood I practised what I thought and felt. This has moulded me in a different way.

When I was asked to memorize verses from the Qur'an, I first wanted to know what they meant. The Qur'an is in Arabic, whereas I read and speak Bengali. My mother said that it would please Allah if I read the Qur'an in the original Arabic. Merely reading it was one thing - I wished to know its meaning. Even my mother could not tell me what it was saying or meant to say. Eventually, this did not matter very much as at the age of twelve or thirteen. I managed to get hold of Bengali translations of both the Qur'an and the Hadith. With the exception of my mother, no one at home seemed to be interested in or dabbled in religious affairs. And a great deal of my mother's religiosity sprang from her disapproval of my father's activities; also, it kept her mind occupied. Even then, she could

never fully immerse herself in religion. I do not think I ever had the slightest belief in religion. My father, my brother, my uncles – those I grew up with – none of them was drawn to religion. I will not say they were all atheists, but they were all opposed to praying. This is the family I was born into and the environment I grew up in. Thus, even in childhood it did not take a major effort or struggle for me to free myself from the shackles of religion. But as a woman I had to struggle greatly to get human rights. One must realize that ours is a patriarchal society.

My father was a physician, a rationalist and man of science. He flouted convention when it came to educating his children. Most other fathers were obsessed about getting their daughters married almost as soon as they reached puberty. My father did nothing of the kind. He wanted me to get an education and be independent. It was my father who made it all possible.

When I first started writing on women's rights, it was only natural for me to speak out against patriarchy. I strongly believe that patriarchy and religion cannot co-exist with women's rights. I can't exploit people. If I could, I would have said that women's rights and human rights are compatible with religion. This has been said by politicians and the many who have been exploiting humankind for far too long. I had to oppose religion as well as traditions and customs that are based on inequality, for all of these are the very instruments that patriarchy uses to deny the rights of women. I have never believed in the use of force to achieve anything

but, if I had, I could have told the world how since time immemorial the institutions of the patriarchal state have oppressed the rights of women. It is not just religious fundamentalists but also society's women-haters, established institutions, and even governments that have fought against me. It is these very people, these regressive misogynists, who have made it their mission to destroy my life and all that I hold dear.

Most people have no concept whatsoever of human rights. The basic concepts of democracy, human rights, and women's rights simply do not figure in quite a few nations' list of priorities.

A sick society is one in which any woman is treated as an inferior being. This transcends mere social laws, mores, and conventions. Be it Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism or Christianity, they are united in their oppression of women. I have opposed this for as long as I can remember. The trouble, however, is that whenever I have spoken out about Islam's oppression of women, Muslim fundamentalists, or even some non-Muslim secular forces, have branded me a Jewish or Christian or Hindu propagandist. This conspiracy to defame and slander is not new. Naturally, there are those who believe this kind of slander and find it impossible to believe that anything I write could possibly have any nobility of intention. I feel nothing but pity for such people. What such people fail to acknowledge is that without the right to disagree, no society can progress.

If one is murdered for daring to disagree, how is society to progress? How can women expect equality of rights and opportunity when the upholders of faith are determined to protect and preserve the laws that are sanctioned by religion, thereby keeping their patriarchy in place? It is no easy matter to stand up to this monolith of darkness. It is no easy matter to risk one's life to make the case for upholding justice, fairness, equality, human rights, and the rights of women. Even then, I am not free from slander. Those who have never read a word I have written claim that I am a bad writer. Such allegations are made every time the fundamentalists put a fatwa on me and start baying for my blood. It is alleged that I am not an author of merit, that I choose to defame Islam in order to gain prominence. This amounts to saying that, since I am not a very good writer, it does not matter if I am murdered by religious fundamentalists.

Apparently but erroneously, their thinking is that my sole reason for opposing Islamic religious orthodoxy is to make a name for myself. Can fame ever be procured in this fashion? Infamy can, for I am ostracized from society, even driven away from my country. So-called progressive political parties are no better, either. Even individuals famous for their progressive views turn away. They say that fame of the kind I seek can only be procured in the West where the anti-Islamists give me much greater importance than I merit. But they lie . I challenge anyone to point out a single instance where my host or the sponsor of an event I have attended is known to be anti-Islamic. I also challenge anyone to point to a single award I have received from an organization that is anti-Islamic. All the awards I have received have been from secular humanist and human

rights' organizations or unaffiliated literary bodies. I usually do not look to defend myself from the slander and abuse hurled at me by my opponents, inasmuch as this necessarily implies giving that slander and abuse far more importance than it deserves. But when my readers and well-wishers are confused about the state of affairs, I think it best to clarify matters and spell out the truth. My opponents carry on about the sales of my books. For those whose books do not sell, this argument could possibly be a valid one; but my books sell very well regardless of whether I take on Islam or not. Most of my books are pirated. Therefore, these sales do not translate into any great commercial success for me. I am surprised to note that if, when I oppose Islamic fundamentalism, I am supported by non-Muslim fundamentalists. Then those that oppose them launch attacks upon me. They feel that I am being supported, that I belong to the Hindu or Christian or Jewish fundamentalists. They erroneously feel that I am being supported by them because I tacitly support those non-Muslim fundamentalists.

I had written a book entitled *Lajja*, one that defended Bangladesh's Hindu minorities. The book, however, was an attack on religious fundamentalism per se and not on any particular group of religious fundamentalists. My purpose was to defend secular humanism. But not only was I blamed by Muslim fundamentalists for writing the book but also some liberals took issue with me. Such 'liberals' are, of course, no better than the fundamentalists. It is easy to escape the death threats of the fundamentalists. But when these threats are made by the allegedly liberal intelligentsia, not in the same crude manner but far more invidiously, it is

not so easy to escape. Still, I have managed to survive. For how long, I do not know. But I think less about my own survival than about the birth and survival of a progressive, healthy society, a society in which all people will live peacefully, and equality and justice between men and women will exist. This is a cherished dream. I do not think, however, that I will see such a society in my lifetime. But I live with the hope and dream that such a society will eventually become a reality.

I derive a great deal of solace from this dream, a great deal of solace indeed. In this wide world, I have no country to call my own. The country where I was born and raised, memories or whose land and people are intrinsic parts of my being, whose language and culture moulded me, has forsaken me. That country is Bangladesh. When I was forced to leave Bangladesh, freethinking intellectuals from all over the world stood by me. I moved to Europe , not out of choice but out of compulsion. I always wanted to return to my own land. I was not allowed to do so. Even when my mother was on her deathbed, the Bangladeshi government told me I could not return. A few years after that, when my father lay dying, I begged, pleaded, and cried to be allowed to see him if only for two days. The heartless and cruel Government of Bangladesh refused to allow me entry. They refused to renew my passport. This was not just an attack on my rights as a citizen. Not for one instant did they balk when behaving in this incredibly inhumane way.

For ten long years, I wandered from one European country to the next. I sought a home but found none. I felt like a foreigner everywhere, an alien in the truest sense. Not for one instant in the West did I feel like an individual of any value. How can one live in a society knowing that it is not one's own? I always wanted to return home, always. Since I knew that was not possible, I wanted to go to India. I would at least get a taste of home in India. But India kept her doors firmly shut for six years. When I finally was given permission, I did not waste a moment. I eagerly chose India's state of West Bengal as my new home.

Even though I dream of a utopia in which there will be peace and harmonious existence, I know there is no escaping those who wish to trap their fellow human beings, make them suffer, oppose human and women's rights, and keep from them the right to freedom of thought and expression. Such individuals cling to their own petty notions of religion, narrow mindedness, hatred, and superstition, believing it is necessary for their survival. That is why a group of fundamentalists shouted "Taslima Nasrin, go back!" and the government then asked me to pack my bags and leave. For four months I was kept under virtual house arrest by the Government of West Bengal, which sent emissary after emissary to ask me to leave the state and, preferably, the country. After four months of this, in November 2007, when some Muslim fundamentalists created disturbances on the streets of Kolkata and the police stood by and allowed this to happen, I was ordered to leave the city that had been my home. I was made the victim in this sordid affair. It is amazing that no action was taken against those who had indulged in this violence, who burned vehicles

on the streets, and who put a price on my head. On the other hand, it was the victim who was tortured. I was bundled out of the state. The state to which I was sent did not want me. When one is driven out of one state, one is not wanted in other states, either. Finally, the national government was forced to take charge of me. They placed me in an undisclosed location. I was forced to leave the country. But where was I to go? If I could have gone back to Bangladesh, I would have. I do not want to live in the Western countries. India, which prides itself on being the world's largest democracy, an allegedly secular state, could not shelter me. They could not give shelter to a person whose entire life has been spent in the cause of secular humanism, a person without a land or a home, who regarded India as her land and Kolkata as her home, who as a Bengali writer wanted to live in a Bengali environment, surrounded by her own language and culture: was this too much to ask for? I was amazed that not a single political party, organization, or institution protested against the way in which I had been treated. Not many individuals who are regarded as the standard-bearers of secularism spoke up for me.

Unfortunately in India, if one is to be secular one must be a little pro-Muslim or pro-Islam. One must not talk anything against Muslim fundamentalists even if they issue fatwas against women or writers and set a price on their head. A 'secular Indian' must not talk against a Muslim, because Muslims are a minority in that country and because a minority could be oppressed by the majority community, so all Muslims should be defended whatever their crime. If Muslim fundamentalists demand Muslim laws that are definitely anti-women, secular Indians appear to

appreciate it in the name of multiculturalism or in the name of defending Muslims. Such hypocrisy is mind-boggling.

As the door of Bangladesh is closed for me, my ‘home’ now is in India, in the West Bengal city of Kolkata. If, however, I am not allowed to return there, then it is back to the nomadic existence: without a land, without a home. Like a destitute orphan, I shall be forced to wander from place to place in search of shelter.

By speaking on behalf of justice, do I deserve to be a social pariah on an entire subcontinent? Chased out, made homeless everywhere, this is justice? Are there really multitudes of human beings who approve of such behaviour? Today, I am homeless everywhere. Why? If there is no complete freedom of speech in an Islamic society, is there any hope of progress? Should the right to oppose Islam not exist? If an Islamic society does not check fundamentalism within itself, are we to assume that the notion of moderate or progressive people in Muslim society is but a pretence? I heard that Islamic fundamentalists are just a minority. Most Muslims are moderate. How many ‘moderate Muslims’ have opposed the numerous fatwas that fundamentalists throughout the world are handing out? How many moderate Muslims have opposed the heinous acts of cruelty being perpetrated on women by fundamentalists? Where are the women – those on whose behalf and for whose sake I am writing – for whom I had to undergo so many traumas? One seldom sees them

opposing what is being done to me or taking a stance on my behalf. One wonders if conscience and truth have all but been obliterated.