

Friday, Feb 28, 2025

**NEWAGE**

## Attack on bookstall: Revisiting the Taslima Nasrin affair

Md Mahmudul Hasan  21 February, 2025, 00:00



IN 2009-2010, I was on research leave from the University of Dhaka to do a postdoctoral stint at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. I was going to work on a project titled 'From Rokeya to Taslima: Trends in Muslim Feminism in South Asia' — a topic related to my doctoral research completed at the University of Portsmouth, UK, in 2007 under the supervision of Dr Bronwen Price and Dr Alex Tickell (now Professor of Global Literatures in English at the Open University, UK).

I arrived in Heidelberg in late July 2009 and in about a month received an email from Professor Tickell. He asked me if I would be interested in presenting a paper on Taslima Nasrin's work at my alma mater. I was delighted by this opportunity. Finally, the Centre for Studies in Literature at Portsmouth organised a seminar (scheduled for November 10, 2009) at which I spoke on Taslima Nasrin's feminism.

As I was preparing for the Portsmouth seminar, on October 3, 2009, Professor Tickell informed me that he was editing a special issue of the prestigious *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and that its theme was literature and the law. He asked me if I would be able to contribute an article to it on the censorship of Taslima Nasrin's books.

I felt honoured that my PhD supervisor trusted me with this important writing project. I was thrilled about the prospect of publishing in such a reputed journal; I also knew very well that my essay would make it to the special issue only if it reached the quality expected by the journal.

I kept reading Taslima Nasrin's work and went to great lengths to explore censorship and other issues in relation to her writings. I spent months researching censorship laws in Bangladesh and how they played out in the case of Taslima Nasrin. I finally wrote 'Free speech, ban and "fatwa": A study of the Taslima Nasrin affair' (*Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.5: 2010, 540-552). I was in the early phase of my publication career, and it took me an enormous amount of time and effort to produce the article.

I continued researching Nasrin's work intermittently for years. In May 2011, thanks to a travel grant from International Islamic University Malaysia, I presented a paper on Nasrin's criticisms of Islam at a conference in Osaka, Japan. I worked more on the topic and later published my second journal article on Nasrin's work: 'Nasrin gone global: A critique of Taslima Nasrin's criticism of Islam and her feminist strategy' (*South Asia Research* 36.2: 2016, 167-185).

At the Ekushey Boi Mela in Dhaka this year, a group of people sought to take the law into their own hands by attempting to prevent a bookstall from selling a book by Nasrin. An altercation that ensued needed police intervention, which eventually led to the closure of the bookstall. It received considerable media attention.

The unfortunate Boi Mela incident brought my research on Nasrin's work to my recollection. I have mentioned the anecdotes of my research on her writing partly to assure readers that the deliberation that follows comes from an informed source. I am familiar with controversies and public debates about Nasrin's work.

The Taslima Nasrin affair came to the fore after her fictional work *Lajja* was published in 1993, whilst the historic Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India was demolished on December 6, 1992. Was there a link between the levelling of the historic mosque and the publication of the book? The following discussion will shed some light on the question.

In the novel, Nasrin exaggerated — though fictionally — the oppression of Hindus in Bangladesh. However, commentators do not regard the novel purely as an artistic endeavour. Many consider it a political ploy to distract global attention from India's horrendous communal violence against Muslims epitomised by the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The ban on the book, lawsuit against its author, her flight from Bangladesh and other incidents that followed presented Bangladesh — not India — as a country plagued by religious animosities and intolerance.

Nasrin's *Lajja* had six chapters but Indian publishers expanded it to thirteen. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) distributed free of charge its Hindi version that contained 'sections not in the original novel.' The entire affair was optimally used to put Bangladesh under a negative media spotlight. *Lajja* and subsequently some other books by Nasrin were banned in Bangladesh. As a result, Bangladesh and Bangladeshis — majority of whom are Muslim — as well as their religion came to be portrayed as antagonistic to freedom of expression.

There are a couple of aspects that need to be considered in this respect. First, censorship and proscription of books are generally unnecessary and counterproductive and can also work as a promotion tool. They increase the curiosity of readers who somehow find ways to get access to banned books, as one observer says that 'nothing sparks more interest in a book than mentioning it's been banned.'

It is alleged that many writers and (visual) content producers include offensive or objectionable materials or images as 'publicity stunts.' As William Mazzarella and Rabinder Kaur state in an essay titled 'Between Sedition and Seduction: Thinking censorship in South Asia' (2009):

'We are all familiar with this compulsive dependency from the drama of legal process, in which the forbidden word must be spoken again and again precisely to establish its unspeakability. We recognise it in marketing strategies: court bans often heighten the desirability of a product by marking it as controversial.'

Second, the genealogy of censorship laws in Bangladesh shows that section 295-A of the Penal Code of 1860 that was used to proscribe Nasrin's books was introduced in this region by British colonial rulers. In other words, books are censored in our country in light of the (colonial) British government strategy and administrative practice.

It should also be noted that while the ban on *Lajja* was sparked by people who often present themselves as custodians of Islam, the ban on Nasrin's *Ka* (2003) in Bangladesh and on its West Bengal version *Dwikhandita* in India was instigated by secularly oriented people the likes of whom were opposed to the ban on *Lajja*. Even though Nasrin's offensive remarks about Islam and its prophet were harped on to ban her books, religion was not always the reason for proscribing her work.

The West Bengal authorities banned *Dwikhandita* stating that the book made distasteful remarks about the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. But they had not banned an earlier book by Nasrin — *Aamar Meyebela* (My Girlhood, 1999) — which made more virulent attacks on Islam and Muslims. On the contrary, the literary establishment in West Bengal gave Nasrin the Ananda Award in 2000 for the book. What is more, many of those commentators and media outlets that were critical of the ban on *Lajja* maintained a strategic silence after the ban on *Ka/Dwikhandita* in both Bangladesh and India.

What I have attempted to highlight through the above discussion is that Nasrin's literary career and controversies about her writings are complex, and many players — local and international — are involved in highlighting them. Religious considerations or the putative Islam-free speech dualism were not the principal reason for banning her books. In many cases, writers and artists caricature Islam and its prophet (peace be upon him) for reasons that go beyond freedom of expression.

However, attacks on bookstalls/bookshops for what they sell or shouting and burning books in the streets are a sign of poor taste and intellectual impotence of the protesters. That is a topic for a separate investigation, which I have addressed in 'What's wrong with Muslim response to Rushdie affair?' (2009).

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Editor: Nurul Kabir, Published by the Chairman, Editorial Board ASM Shahidullah Khan on behalf of Media New Age Ltd.

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