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A shocker from Taslima

Taslima Nasreen's new book causes a furore in the literary circles of Dhaka and Kolkata.

HAROON HABIB

in Dhaka

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in Kolkata

I may disagree with what you have to say, but I shall defend, to the death, your right to say it.

— Voltaire

THE controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, who had in the 1990s angered Islamic fundamentalists with what they considered was blasphemous writings, has caused a fresh furore, this time earning the wrath of progressive writers of both her native land and West Bengal, India, who had supported her freedom of expression. *Ka* (a letter of the Bengali alphabet), the third volume of Taslima's autobiography (the first two were entitled *Amar Meyebela* and *Utal Hawa*), has been banned by a Dhaka court and its copies have been confiscated following a defamation suit moved by a senior Bengali poet and novelist, Syed Shamsul Haq, against the writer, the publisher and some others for 10 crore taka (Rs.7.7 crores). Ironically, Haq had defended Taslima when she was under attack by the *mullahs* for her

bold criticism of the Quran and certain Islamic practices.

The same book, published in West Bengal under the title *Dwikhondito*, with a few new chapters, was banned subsequently by a ruling of the Kolkata High Court on November 18 following an appeal by the poet Hasmat Jalal. The court passed an interim injunction stalling the publication and sale of the book until the next hearing, which is slated for early December. It appointed a receiver to take into custody all copies of the book wherever they may be available. Jalal filed a defamation suit for Rs.11 crores against Taslima for what he claimed to be false statements about him. Literary circles in Kolkata have reportedly rallied round the "aggrieved" poet. The raunchy read did brisk sales before the ban. Now it seems to have triggered immense interest, particularly among teenagers, in both countries.

Taslima fled to the West in 1994 in the wake of a *fatwa* by Muslim religious leaders demanding her execution for insulting Islam and arrest warrants issued by the government on the charge of blasphemy after the publication of her novel *Lajja* (Shame) in 1993. She is now in the United States as a fellow at the prestigious Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy of Harvard University, conducting research on "Secularisation of Islamic countries".

What has enraged the writers is the lucid description of her amorous relationships with senior writers and journalists. Syed Shamsul Haq, who has more than half a century's standing as a writer, is naturally enraged by the "character assassination". Taslima mentions in the book that Haq admitted to her of having a relationship with his sister-in-law. The narrative reads like a good piece of fiction writing but for the characters whose names are real. Had the names been imaginary, Taslima's work would have deserved literary applause, said one of her admirers.

Several intellectuals feel that Haq, who is fully equipped to fight his case directly rather than seek refuge and remedy in law, could have given a befitting reply in writing or told the other side of



Taslima Nasreen.

the story, since Taslima has opened a Pandora's box.

Taslima defended the incidents depicted in the book as part of her life. In a media interview to the Bengali Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Taslima said: "I tried to see them as human beings, and are they not? A man is a mixture of good and evil. Whatever I said about my own doings — there were misdoings as well as good doings; there were mistakes and wrongs."

Syed Shamsul Haq, however, contested Taslima's claims. He said: "My fame has been hurt, my family honour has been belittled, and above all she has axed my elevated social position that I earned through my writings for more than 52 years. This is not just simple character assassination. There must be some motive, a deep-rooted evil objective. Otherwise, why should she write such a book involving so many important persons." Syed Haq said he came to know Taslima at the dinner after her wedding with Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, a talented young poet.

The 70-year-old writer said, "I addressed Taslima as 'bouma' (an affectionate term used for the daughter-in-law in Bengali) from the very first day. She was affectionate to me as a young poet. But when I felt that she was after fame, and wanted to earn it by any means, I think from that moment I withdrew my affection for her."

When she learnt that Haq had filed a defamation suit, Taslima reacted by saying: "But Syed Haq knew what really happened on those occasions. I don't know how many critics have really read my book... I have not written anything against anyone with any motive. This book depicts the time when I was in close touch with those celebrities, we were together then in our fight against fundamentalism. The *mullahs* issued *fatwas* against me, that was the time I started writing against fundamentalism and fundamentalists. I wrote columns in newspapers, my books got published. Those were the times when I mixed with many writers, poets and men of cultural activities. Why should I not write about those important personalities? What is wrong in it? With a deep feeling of re-

spect, I wrote about Syed Haq. I don't know why he is doing this?"

When asked if she could prove the remarks, Taslima Nasreen said: "I have not written the book to do that. This is a story of my life, whatever happened in my life I tried to narrate faithfully. Some would be pleased, some would not. How can I help? Life is such. If the writers of Bangladesh think that they are saints, that they are gods, then what can I do? I tried to see them as human beings, and are they not?"

Taslima came under severe attack by several progressive writers and intellectuals who described *Ka* as a book written with the business aspect in mind. Describing the 400-page book as nothing but pornography or "autobiographical kamasutra", leading commentator and writer Masuda Bhatti wondered why

Taslima, who claims to having had bad experiences involving elderly and senior male writers, had holidayed with them in distant resorts, alone? "Was she a child not to know what could happen? Did she want to use them as ladders or did she have plans to write about her experiences, in future?" he asked.

Several poets and writers, both in Dhaka and Kolkata, say that she has written a "fictitious fantasy" about sexual encounters.

"I was shocked and surprised how anyone could write like this. I feel this is an invasion of someone's privacy. This is unethical, illegal, immoral," Hasmat Jalal, brother of the highly respected novelist Syed Mustafa Seraj, said in an interview.

Jalal has denied all claims made by Taslima Nasreen in the book about having a physical relationship with him when she was in Kolkata and that he had expressed his personal views to her about Muslims being discriminated against in West Bengal. In his suit, Jalal has referred specifically to pages 197, 198, 231 and 232 of *Dwikhondito*, which he claims paints a false picture of his moral character and religious opinions. (Taslima is reported to have dismissed Jalal's charges against her as a "pack of lies".)

Prominent writers in Kolkata have said that Taslima would "no more find Kolkata as welcoming as it was in the past". What has alarmed literary and

cultural circles, both in Dhaka and Kolkata, is an unconfirmed report that Taslima is planning two sequels to *Ka*, which, according to Taslima, will deal with her life and relationships during her exile.

Sunil Gangopadhyay, the widely read Bengali novelist, said in Kolkata that *Dwikhondito* "is not literature. It may be good to read if you are interested in scandals about some writers. But it is not literature".

Many poets and writers in Dhaka believe that Taslima has "gone too far" or has become "crazy". Senior poet Belal Chowdhury, who had defended Taslima all along as a promising writer, said: "She has nothing to lose now, she can do and say anything she likes, because she did not even hesitate to narrate the sexual relations of her father."

However, she has drawn support from several publishers and young writers at home and most important, earned the admiration of the country's fundamentalists. "I congratulate Taslima Nasreen on exposing the character of so-called secular intellectuals," Mufti Fazlul Haq Aminee, Member of Parliament and chief of the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), a partner of the Khaleda Zia-led four-party alliance, told journalists at an *iftar* party.

IN Kolkata, the police suspended the sale of the book as it was feared that certain references could ignite communal tension. But after the contents were examined, the book was allowed to be back on the shelves. However, Muslim intellectuals, in a written petition to West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, have requested the confiscation of copies of the book as it contains certain offensive passages on Islam and the Prophet, which could inflame communal passions. The signatories to the petition included renowned writer Syed Mustafa Siraj and State Planning Commission member and Islamic history scholar Osman Ghani.

Siraj told *Frontline*: "I am not a religious man and my objection to certain passages in the book have nothing to do with religion. Muslims generally do not react so much to attacks on Allah as they do to attacks on the Prophet."

These particular references to the Prophet have apparently been omitted in the Bangladeshi version of the book. "I am not saying that the book must be banned, just that certain pages must be omitted for the sake of communal harmony." ■

