

## Under the gaze of the state: policing literature and the case of Taslima Nasrin

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**ABSTRACT** *This article situates Taslima Nasrin, the controversial writer from Bangladesh, in a particular political and religious moment in the history of Bangladesh, to analyse the difficult relationship the postcolonial state shares with a writer whose work deliberately unsettles the issues of minority and of women and/in religion. The complex mosaic of Nasrin's work, comprising as varied genres as newspaper columns, poetry and popular novels, has engendered, in the last ten years, unprecedented responses both for and against her writing. This has brought the issue of literature and its uneasy negotiation with state politics to the forefront of national debate. Despised by Islamists and fundamentalists, equally loved and loathed by the reading public, considered with caution by secular intelligentsia and fellow feminists, and ultimately banned by the state, Nasrin is a unique case in point. Her work, written under the gaze of the state defying the fundamentalist fatwa demanding her death, hence invites discussions on state censorship invoked using religious sensibility as a marker of literary judgement and the associated perils of women writing on women in a postcolony like Bangladesh.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), censorship, *fatwa*, freedom of expression, Islamic fundamentalism, postcolonial state, religious sensibility, secularism, Taslima Nasrin, Western media

This article focuses on the ways the concepts of literature and literary freedom are defined by different entities such as the state, reading communities, the press and the media, and the writer herself. All these entities, in their own specific ways, contribute to the meaning making procedure of a literary text. However, the major advantage the state enjoys over other entities is its unique power to act, in the real sense of the term, on a text, if the text, in its consideration, falls outside the 'acceptable' boundaries of literature. The state is invested with the power of censorship, a constitutional and jurisprudential apparatus, the invocation of which to curb freedom of expression is often justified on the grounds of protecting religious or public morality, as was seen in the case of Taslima Nasrin, the most censored writer in Bangladesh. All but one of her books, published in the last ten years, were banned because of their alleged potential to affront religious sensibility. Each case of banning Nasrin's book has spawned responses, both to the act of banning and to the book, in Bangladesh, and beyond Bangladesh, as it attracted substantial media and press coverage in India and the West. All these testify to the paradoxical nature of censorship. It is prohibitive in its attempt to circumvent the circulation of a text, but in doing so, quite inadvertently, it generates a string of discussions on that text, which, formulated in different ideological spheres, greatly subverts the intention of the state to invoke censorship in the first place. Given the enormous amount of curiosity sparked off by the very act of banning, a banned text, against the wishes of the state, does find a way of reaching its readers/non-readers, though often in a partial and limited manner. It achieves circulation in bowdlerized, pirated

and fragmented versions sold at street corners, excerpts printed in newspapers, reported by word of mouth, and at times, through its publication on the Internet as done by Nasrin herself, in the case of two volumes of her autobiography.<sup>1</sup>

In this scenario, one might legitimately question the effectiveness of any act of censorship of proscribing literary works. The censor is often responsible for focusing the spotlight on the censored writer, thus making her a famous figure. Given the arguments for and against censorship, it is pertinent to ask what really is achieved through censorship of literary texts. An investigation of the Nasrin affair in this context would also provide significant insights into the predicament of the postcolonial writer by showing how her space of articulation is continually negotiated through her relation with the institutions — social, religious, and legal — that make up the postcolonial state. Such negotiations could be tempestuous and complex because Bangladesh, like many postcolonial states, has gradually emerged as repressive, at times making use of the many laws bequeathed by the British Raj, such as the discriminatory law against homosexuality<sup>2</sup> and the law regarding offending religious sensibility.<sup>3</sup> In addition, because of the colonial legacy, Bangladesh is torn, both ideologically and politically, between the competing pulls of modernity and essentialist assertions of Islamic identity, and a writer like Nasrin, who is bent on teasing out in her work the ramifications of such rupture in the ideological, political and religious configuration of the nation-state, is destined to attract controversy.

Taslina Nasrin made her mark in the Dhaka literary scene of Bangladesh in the early 1990s. Her bold language of self-expression, stringent critique of patriarchy, religion and fundamentalism formed a powerful performance in favour of claiming a space for women. This style was provocative enough to produce the shock of the new. Her meteoric rise, as a poet-writer-columnist, was equally due to her sinewy prose and poetry, pulsating with vivid sexual imagery, and markedly different in scope and articulation from earlier writings by women in Bangladesh. Her newspaper columns proved extremely popular while the impressive sale of her books made her one of the best selling authors of the country. The crowning moment in Nasrin's career came in 1992 when she was awarded the *Ananda Purashkar* in West Bengal, India, arguably the most prestigious literary award in both sides of Bengal. Nasrin's presence in Kolkata created a stir while the sales of her prize-winning collection of newspaper columns *Selected Columns (Nirbachita Column)* confounded all speculations. To this date, *Selected Columns* has sold 120,000 copies in Kolkata alone.<sup>4</sup>

The year 1993 saw the publication of Nasrin's novel *Shame (Lajja)* (Nasrin 1993a), a chilling portrayal of the atrocities committed against Hindus in Bangladesh by Muslim fundamentalists in retaliation for the demolition of Babri mosque in India by Hindu fanatics and the following Hindu-Muslim riots. Before being banned by the centre-right BNP (i.e. Bangladesh Nationalist Party) Government six months after its publication, *Lajja* sold over 60,000 copies in Bangladesh and brought the issue of minority repression to the forefront of the national debate, creating a huge embarrassment for the Government. In the following year, Nasrin was also credited with allegedly asking in an Indian newspaper for a thorough revision of the Koran given its 'discriminatory' dictates against women. Nasrin vehemently denied this in a rejoinder to the newspaper, and later to the Speaker of the Bangladesh National Assembly. She maintained that she had asked for the discriminatory Muslim Family Law, based on the *Sharia*, and governing the life of Muslim women in Bangladesh, to be repealed, not the Koran. This is because, as she explained:

I hold the Quran, the Vedas, and the Bible and all such religious texts determining the lives of their followers as 'out of place and out of time'. We crossed that social historical context in which they were written and therefore we should not be guided by their precepts; (the) question of revising thoroughly or otherwise is irrelevant. We have to move beyond these ancient texts if we want progress. In order to respond to our spiritual needs let humanism be our new faith (quoted in Riaz 1995: 43–44).

In an effort to further clarify her previous statement, Nasrin's apparent declaration of the Koran as a defunct holy text, instead of quelling the wrath of the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh, added to their ire. Answering the clarion call of the principal Islamic party the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, they now invoked a couple of *fatwas* or religion decrees, putting a hefty price on her head. The subsequent promotion of *Lajja* in India by the Hindu fundamentalist party BJP for political gain, and Nasrin's ill-timed remarks on the Koran and the *Sharia* during a volatile period of the India-Bangladesh relationship, due to the Babri mosque incident, helped fundamentalists in Bangladesh incite mass protests demanding Nasrin's execution for apostasy as per the Islamic dictate.<sup>5</sup> The BNP Government, a usual ally of the fundamentalists, observed a curious silence and instead of rounding up those who pronounced a bounty for killing Nasrin, issued a warrant under the Penal code 295 to arrest her for allegedly 'violating the religious feelings of their (her) fellow citizens' (Ghosh 2000:52). The illegally invoked *fatwa* was thus buttressed by the legally invoked censor. As things got out of control, Nasrin, on the advice of her lawyer, went into hiding for two months, while the international media intervened in the affair, labelling her 'the female Salman Rushdie', and extensively covering her predicament (Ghosh 2000: 39). Letters of support were hurriedly despatched by notable writers such as Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass and Wole Soyinka, while US President Bill Clinton himself requested the Bangladesh Premier Begum Khaleda Zia to ensure Nasrin's safety. The European Union also sent an envoy to Bangladesh offering asylum to Nasrin in any of the EU countries. Collectively, the West managed to exert enough pressure on the Government to grant Nasrin bail and arrange for her safe passage to Sweden in August 1994 (Nasrin 2004a).

Living in exile since 1994, Nasrin has continued to write in Bengali and have her books published simultaneously in Bangladesh and India. Her books have also been translated into more than 20 languages.<sup>6</sup> To date, she has published the first four volumes of her much-hyped seven-part autobiography, which, in the possible anticipation of more backlash from the Islamic faction, have been banned by the Bangladesh Government, whether it is headed by the centre-right BNP or the predominantly secular Awami League. Interestingly, the state's determination to get rid of Nasrin's work from Bangladesh literary circles has been matched with equal vigour by Nasrin's continual striving, despite being in exile, to carve out a space of her own in the field of literature in Bangladesh. To be specific, Nasrin's books, in the last ten years, were proscribed on the following grounds:

1. *Shame (Lajja)* (1993), a novel, for allegedly creating 'misunderstanding and distrust among different religious communities' as well as being 'seditious' (Sohban 1994:11, translation mine);
2. *My Girlhood (Amar Meyebela)* (1999), the first volume of her autobiography, for it may create 'adverse effects and hurt the people's religious sentiments' (Ahmed 1999);
3. *Wild Wind (Utal Hawa)* (2002), the sequel to *My Girlhood*, for 'containing anti-Islamic remarks, which are likely to anger Bangladesh's Muslim majority and lead to religious tensions' ('Bangladesh bans third Taslima book' 2002);
4. *Speak Up (Ka)* (2003), the third volume of her autobiography, on the grounds of religious affront and defamation (Muhammad 2004: 40-41);
5. *All Those Darkness (Seisab Andhakar)* (2004), the fourth/latest volume of her autobiography, for allegedly containing 'grave and objectionable comments about Islam and Prophet Mohammad' which 'may cause hatred in the society' (*Dhimmi Watch* 2002).

In addition, Nasrin was sentenced in absentia in 2002, as an outcome of a court case filed in 1994, to one year in prison for 'writing derogatory comments about Islam in several of her books'.<sup>7</sup>

The repeated invocation of religious sentiment with an implicit reference to public morality as a justification for suppressing Nasrin's work is reflective of the way the

Bangladesh state<sup>8</sup> tries to define and delimit the parameters of literature, executing a value judgement on 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' kinds of literary works. Drawing on its constitutional power to proscribe 'offensive' works on religious grounds, the state invokes the original meaning of the censor. Etymologically speaking, the word censorship, derived from Latin, means, 'to estimate' or 'appraise': 'The censor was one of two Roman magistrates who drew up the census of citizens and supervised public moral' (Dowd 1998: IX). In response to this, the supporters of freedom of expression would argue that any state has a self-serving interest in its motive to limit expression, and will 'exaggerate whatever harms the expression of critics or dissenters may risk of causing' (Altman 2003: 363). Although, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Bangladesh Constitution guarantees freedom of expression for every citizen, this universal assertion is localized and almost invalidated by the introduction of eight conditions upon which one's right to free expression is dependent (The United Nations 1998).<sup>9</sup> To be specific, one's freedom of expression is conditional on 'any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence' (quoted in Hoque 1992: 45). One can fight it out in the court, often through a lengthy legal battle, whether a particular decision taken by the state is 'reasonable' or not. However, the state is left to decide on its own what it means by 'public order' or how it wants to interpret ever-changing constructs such as 'decency', 'morality' and indeed, 'religious sentiment'. Interestingly, the same conditions appear in the Indian and Pakistani constitutions, making freedom of expression a negotiated concept in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>10</sup>

Such a provision in the Constitution allows the Bangladesh state to produce a limited and partial reading of Nasrin's work by reducing it to a single meaning of religious offensiveness. Such value-judgement of literary work, however, is hardly performed in isolation. It is regulated by certain political, ideological and religious power considerations. To a great extent, the Nasrin affair, marks the failure of secularism in Bangladesh as a project, the attendant rise of Islamic fundamentalism as a competing ideology, and their joint impact on the regulation of the state machinery such as the censor in controlling literary output. In the last three decades, Bangladesh has gradually gone through a process of Islamization, which resulted in the deletion of 'secularism' from the constitution in 1977 by the first BNP Government, the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1988 by the subsequent military junta to consolidate its power position, and an increasing reference to religion by the political parties, be they fundamentalist, secularist or right-wing (Riaz 2003: 301-320). Although this is not to deny any major ideological differences between the secularist and fundamentalist political quarters, the present *post*-secular Bangladesh is substantially different from the post-independence one of 1972 when, in fact, an embargo was in place, decreed by the then Government of Awami League, prohibiting the use of religion in politics.<sup>11</sup>

The chequered history of Bangladesh's progression from a secular to a non-secular state has led to a bitter tussle between the secularists and Islamists in their attempt to define the identity of Bangladesh as a nation-state. While liberal intellectuals and (predominantly) secular politicians prefer to delineate the identity of Bangladesh along secular principles, labelling the people Bengali, and thus highlighting the unbroken history of the people in both sides of Bengal, be they Muslims in Bangladesh or Hindus in West Bengal, India, sharing a common language, culture and heritage; the centre-right/right wing, Islamist and fundamentalist factions emphasize the Islamic disposition of Bangladesh and its people, and term them 'Bangladeshi', emphasizing the territorial integrity of Bangladesh and its religious distance and difference from the so-called 'Hindu-dominated' West Bengal in India.<sup>12</sup> The existence of such conflicting definitions might result in a problematic reception

of a writer like Nasrin, if she, as in her first banned novel *Lajja*, draws on the contentious relation between the nation-state and religion as it is played out on the body of religious minorities, especially that of women.

*Lajja* is a savage indictment of Islamic politics in Bangladesh and a human document of minority repression. In the aftermath of the destruction of Babri mosque in India, the fate of a Hindu family in Bangladesh, the Sudhamays, is implicated with that of the nation-state, despoiled by communal violence. The abduction and presumed rape of Sudhamay's daughter Maya is avenged by her brother Suranjan who brings home a Muslim prostitute only to ravage and rape her. Through the staging of such a violent act in naked detail, Nasrin poignantly underscores the vulnerable place of the religious and sexual other in Bangladesh. As the persecuted Sudhamays contemplate leaving Bangladesh for India, their parting words demonizing Bangladesh hit at the heart of the religious intolerance Nasrin is so critical of.

Nasrin's work was considered, in the sensitive political and religious climate of Bangladesh, 'offensive to religious sensibility', mainly because it staunchly criticized the present-day de-secularized 'Islamic' Bangladesh. Nasrin stepped across the line, implicitly demarcated by the state censor, every time she attempted to collapse the 'acceptable' boundaries of what is officially known as 'Bangladeshi literature'.<sup>13</sup> In addition, her uninhabited engagement with taboo topics such as women's sexuality, desire, and what she called the 'freedom of uterus'; her radical redefinition of virginity, motherhood, and women's right to polyandry, which openly challenged the prevalent interpretation of Islamic discourse; and her incisive criticism and downright rejection of Islam and fundamentalist politics; in effect, constituted the so-called 'religious affront' detrimental to public morality, as per the vocabulary of the state censor.

One predominant aspect of the state censor, easily distinguishable from its prohibitive and generative functions, was its tendency to produce a selective version of the complex Nasrin affair/canon. The operation of the censor was narrow because, first, its decision to proscribe Nasrin's work fulfilled the expectations of a certain section of the community, ignoring the opinion of others who spoke against censorship; second, it infantilized the citizenry by trying to decide on their behalf whether it was 'moral' to read Nasrin or not, thus divesting them of their right to individual autonomy; and third, by continually banning her books on an unchallenged ground of so-called 'religious sentiment', it produced a monolithic version of Islam incapable of accommodating dissenting voices within its fold, a version that unwillingly corresponded to the one often featured in some sections of the Western press in its portrayal of countries with a Muslim population. Given that the state censor hardly considered the literary merit/demerit of Nasrin's banned books, we are prompted to ask whether it was right to assign the task of literary critic to the censor in the first place. Instead of considering Nasrin primarily as a writer, the censor was more concerned with preserving people's 'religious sensibility', and hence, Nasrin was perceived as a disrupting force, threatening the equilibrium of the state and the religious machinery that vindicated its particular political ideology.

The production of a reductive reading of the Nasrin canon by the censor did not, however, go unchallenged in Bangladesh. A number of public intellectuals, progressive newspapers, feminist activists and general readers voiced their legitimate concern over what they considered unjustified acts of censorship, visibly motivated by a skewed political ideology, to mute voices of dissent, especially that of women. Justice K.M. Sobhan, for instance, criticized the BNP Government for invoking a 'repressive' colonial law to ban *Lajja* for its alleged seditious and anti-religious content, without caring to mention which specific sections of the novel it found 'objectionable' (Sobhan 1994: 11-13). The reluctance of the Government to engage with any informative debate on *Lajja* simply underscored its 'undemocratic and autocratic nature' – noted *Bhorer Kagoj*, a progressive Bengali newspaper

(Firdous 1994: 19, translation mine). Firdous Azim, the convener of *Naripakkha*, a leading feminist organization, accused the Government of violating the democratic principles of the land by attempting to stifle the space of free thought and of expression (quoted in Nasrin 2004a: 110). Whether Nasrin's books were well written or badly written could forever be debated, opined Shamsur Rahman, the leading poet of Bangladesh, but 'that should not be the pretext for nailing a writer down' (Rahman 1994: 8-10, 36, translation mine). Noting Nasrin's politics of offence, Afrin Sultana, a female student of the University of Dhaka, added: 'I'd like to be like Taslima Nasrin, but I can't be so for my sheer lack of courage. Neither can I express myself freely lest others censure me, nor can I declare like Nasrin: "I couldn't care less"' (Sultana 1994: 3, translation mine).

Interestingly, the tenacity of the state censor in promoting a circumscribed 'reading' of Nasrin's banned books has been replicated, if unintentionally, by various other entities, including the Western media and Nasrin herself. While critiquing the censor, these entities somewhat produce an unhelpful reading largely premised on the binary opposition between absolute freedom in the West and total silencing in Bangladesh. This tends to negate the structural complexities of the very act of censorship invoked against Nasrin, belittles the significant protest mounted by progressive factions, and runs the risk of producing a narrow reading of the affair.

In a recent defence of her work, entitled 'Homeless Everywhere: Writing in Exile', Nasrin justifies the politics of offence in her work on the basis of an absolute literary freedom ideally available to a writer. Ironically proclaiming herself an 'unreasonable human being', she sees her work as produced under the gaze of 'furious wrinkled brows', and impatiently asks: 'Who creates these definitions ... and sets out the limits? I decide what I should write ... Should I wait for instructions from X, Y, and Z ... ? Should I wait on them to tell me what to write, how much to write?' (Nasrin 2004b: 456-461). Drawing on the examples of a host of Western writers from St. Augustine to Catherine Millet, whom she applauds for their candid treatment of controversial topics in the form of confessional narratives, Nasrin staunchly defines literature as a privileged zone where a writer is at liberty to sketch out her own space and say the unsayable. 'This freedom', she goes on to add, 'is not something that I simply talk about; rather, I have established it for myself, in and through my life. ... I have muckraked; I have crossed the limit allowed to me'. Some of Nasrin's supporters, expressing solidarity with her views, ask for 'ban(ning) all bans' (Dougal 2003).

Nasrin's concept of literary freedom, which, to some extent, is invocative of the liberalist-idealist Western concept of literature, is persuasive, but probably inadequate in explaining on-the-ground realities in Bangladesh. The very assumption that there is an absolute freedom at least in the West is, if not untrue, only partially and trivially true. The concept of freedom of expression is a negotiated one, both in the West and in the Indian subcontinent, and as Michael Holquist notes 'one can only discriminate among' the 'more and less repressive effects' of censorship<sup>14</sup> (Holquist 1994:16). For some Western critics, who prefer adopting a pragmatic approach to the right to free expression, censorship is a structural necessity of any democratic state, which needs to be invoked, for instance, to provide protection for a minority group against hate speech inciting violence against them. What is needed, as they propose, is a two-tier approach to freedom of expression, where literary works receive more protection than speech acts (Altman 2003: 363-370). Hence, any formulation of freedom of expression that fails to consider the regional, ideological and political specificities of any act of censorship might end up producing an unattainable and only partial worldview.

The idea of Western freedom and non-Western non-freedom was writ large also in the representation of Nasrin in the Western media, which, to some extent, sought to suppress the cultural, religious and social specificities of Bangladesh in favour of producing a homogenized Muslim world. In selecting what was to be screened on television, in

zeroing in on those aspects of the Nasrin affair, which had particular resonance for a section of the Western audience, the media produced its own version of the affair. Especially during 1993–94, Nasrin was variously iconized as 'Asia's Antigone', 'the twentieth century's humanist heroine' and 'the female Salman Rushdie',<sup>15</sup> ignoring the fact that her *fatwa* was a local one invoked by petty rural mullahs, whereas Rushdie's one had a global significance, invoked by the principal religious leader of a powerful theocratic state. Nasrin's step outside Bangladesh was invariably read, in the last decade, as tantamount to tearing off her burqa and lifting her veil, although in reality, a writer of Nasrin's repute, living in an expensive apartment in the capital city Dhaka, and belonging to highbrow literary society of Bangladesh, would have never been required to wear any kind of veil, let alone an Afghani burqa covering her from head to toe (Mairin 2002; Nahai 2002). Even when Nasrin's work on gender and minority issues was mentioned, for which she mainly courted trouble in Bangladesh, it was in amazingly simplistic detail: 'She advocates free sex and open marriage. A woman should be allowed to have as many as four husbands. ... Religion is a great oppressor and should be abolished' (Anderson 1993: 6).

Further, in some of Nasrin's interviews with the Western press, she was particularly persuaded to tell the same old tale of the fundamentalist *fatwa* on her. Valid questions such as the possibility of social and religious reform in Bangladesh and Nasrin's contribution to it, or a literary-critical discussion of her books that plunged her into controversy in the first place, if at all entertained, were usually in passing.<sup>16</sup> 'Very few of the commentaries in the Western press refer(red) to *Lajja*; the drama of Nasreen's escape and her status as a victim of religious intolerance become [became] the dominant foci' (Ghosh 2000: 40). Even today, the ghost of the 'silenced' Muslim woman still haunts the media. The first volume of Nasrin's autobiography, entitled in Bengali simply as *My Girlhood*, was launched in the post 9/11 US flaunting an Orientalist subtitle: *Growing Up Female in a Muslim World* (Nasrin 2002). The same fate greeted the US version of *Shame*, subtitled *The Provocative Book that Unleashed a Storm in the Muslim World* (Nasrin 1997). A recent documentary, entitled *Fearless: The Price of Freedom*, shown in the Australian SBS TV channel in 2003, significantly failed *not* to produce a stereotypical version of Nasrin. Here, Nasrin's detailed reflection on her predicament was inserted with and authenticated by none but an Asian-Australian writer who was researching a book on her. What is particularly problematic is that the director did not deem it necessary to interview anyone from Bangladesh to introduce a different perspective on the affair. The result is a documentary, predominantly packaged for the West, which greatly silenced and effaces other voices – be that of the Government of Bangladesh, secular intellectuals, feminist organisations, Nasrin's fellow writers, general readers or the fundamentalist faction which declared the infamous *fatwa* on her.

In the long run, the very valorization of Nasrin in a certain section of the Western media, based less on her writing and more on the sensational aspect of the *fatwa*, coupled with her facile projection as an endangered Third World Muslim writer, whose image can easily be conflated with the free-flowing media images of 'persecuted' Middle Eastern women, has denied both Nasrin and her supporters any significant agency. Such reductionist narratives have also managed to ignore the very space of articulation in Bangladesh etched out by those, who, despite all odds, participated in the controversy through debate and discussion, whether or not they agreed with her polemical stance on issues of national identity and women's place in religion. Indeed, the difference between those who participated in the debate and those who propagated a limited 'reading' of her work by labelling her apostate and calling for her death by hanging was that the former accepted the existence of the writer/her work and continued to engage with that, whereas the latter asked for her very annihilation. The former did not necessarily opine that *Lajja* or other banned books of Nasrin were great pieces of literature, nor that they were required to do so, but many of

them did maintain that a novel like *Lajja* on minority repression needed to be written.<sup>17</sup> That such extensive discussion for and against Nasrin, collected in no less than five volumes edited in the manner of *The Rushdie File*,<sup>18</sup> has hardly received any mention in the Western media, might explain why some secular intellectuals can now only think of her as a mere 'poster girl of the West' – an image allegedly constructed to serve certain ideological and political purposes by portraying Third World Muslim countries as benighted lands infested *only* with Islamic fundamentalists.<sup>19</sup> To be represented in the West, it seems, Nasrin had to be born again, having died in a country shrouded in a mythical black *chador* of total silence.

There are many Nasrins, both real and imagined, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan would say; the construction of was been helped by the Bangladesh censor, the fundamentalist *fatwa* and the reading of the affair executed by various reading entities (Sunder Rajan 1993). However, in performing a value-judgement of Nasrin's work, in finding her work lacking in reverence for Islam, in defining literary freedom in implicit collusion with the idealist concept of literature, in selecting what was to be produced for the consumption of a section of the Western audience; the reading communities, located in different geopolitical spaces, ended up producing, if unwittingly, a partial reading of the affair, to meet some certain expectations, to generate a particular interpretation, or to correspond to a specific worldview held by them. The binary opposition between absolute freedom and total silence, a by-product of the affair, redefined Nasrin as a writer as well as Bangladesh as a nation-state.

Just as there is no total silence, there is no absolute freedom, although more freedom is preferable indeed to its lesser variant. As we repudiate any act of banning books, we also need to be alert to lacunae and biases resident in an evaluation of the state censor performed by various reading entities. Instead of a straitjacket denunciation of the censor, it is fruitful to investigate censorship as produced, in Annette Kuhn's formulation, 'within an array of constantly shifting discourses, practices and apparatuses', if only to achieve a politically nuanced reading of a complex issue such as the Nasrin affair (Kuhn 1988: 4).

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### Notes

1. The first and third volumes of Nasrin's seven-part autobiography, *My Girlhood (Amar Meyebela)* and *Speak Up (Ka)*, have been made available by Nasrin for free download from her Internet Homepage. See *Taslima Nasrin's Website*.
2. The position of Bangladesh on homosexuality is very clear. Considered a serious offence, homosexuality is strictly prohibited by the anti-sodomy law. Section 377 of the Penal Code reads:

*Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine. Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section (emphasis mine) (quoted in Bondyopadhyay and Khan 2003: 17).*

3. Section 99A of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act of 1898 reads:

*Where any newspaper, or book ..., wherever printed, appears to the Government to contain any treasonable or seditious matters or any matter which promotes or is intended to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of the citizen of Bangladesh or which is deliberately and*



*maliciously intended to outrage the religious feelings of any such class, by insulting the religion or the religious beliefs of that class ... the Government may, by notification in the official gazette, stating the ground of the opinion, declare ... every copy of such book or other document to be fortified to Government ...'* (emphasis mine) (quoted in Hoque 1992: 80).

4. The sales figures quoted in Nasrin's other books published in Kolkata are equally impressive — 75,000 for *Shame (Lajja)* (Nasrin 1993a), 43,000 for *The Fallen Prose of a Fallen Girl (Nashta Meyer Nashta Gadya)* (Nasrin 1993b), and 15,600 for *Selected Poems (Nirbachita Kavita)* (Nasrin 1993c). However, it is almost impossible to know how many millions of pirated copies of *Shame* were sold all over India and Bangladesh during 1993–94.
5. Bangladesh does not have the Islamic canon of law as its jurisprudence, although the Islamic and fundamentalist parties as well as a small section of the BNP, have been pressing the Government, somewhat unsuccessfully, for the introduction of Islamic/*Sharia* law, especially capital punishment for blasphemy.
6. *Taslima Nasrin's Website*.
7. Moazzem Hossain (2002). The BBC report reads: 'Taslima Nasreen was tried in her absence by a magistrate court in Gopalganj, nearly 100 kilometres (60 miles) from the capital Dhaka. The case was filed by a hard line Islamic leader, Mohammad Dabiruddin, who heads a local religious school. Mr Dabiruddin accused Taslima Nasreen of writing offensive comments about Islam – and magistrate Shah Alam found her guilty of hurting the sentiments of the Muslims.' The report, however, fails to mention that while filing a court case against a Bangladesh citizen accusing him/her of 'hurting religious sentiment', the accuser must secure permission of the Home Ministry; although in this case, there is no evidence that such permission was sought. That such a case was at all accepted by the Lower Court for trial is itself a violation of the law of the land (See Nasrin 2004a).
8. While discussing the Nasrin affair, my usage of the term 'the state' is indicative of both the state of Bangladesh and its Government headed by any particular political group, because, in the present legal system, which is a legacy of the British, the state is identified with the Government.
9. The Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* reads: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' In this regard, the *Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression* calls for an unconditional right to expression and emphasises that this has to be disseminated 'without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories'. See The United Nations (1998) and *Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression*.
10. Some of these restrictions on freedom of expression appear also, for instance, in the British Article on Freedom of Expression, but the continual invocation of these restrictions by the Bangladesh Government to mute dissenting voices is what makes freedom of expression a negotiated concept in Bangladesh (See Fenwick 2002: 74–8).
11. I have used the term *post-secular* to resist the tendency of conflating the national identity of Bangladesh with an Islamic one as promoted, for instance, by the present BNP Government. In the official language, Bangladesh is defined nowadays as a 'Moderate Muslim country', thus ironically subscribing to the notion that Muslim countries are usually extreme, whereas Bangladesh is an exception (Lawson 2002).
12. An entry on 'Nationalism' in the recently published *Banglapedia*, the first national Encyclopaedia sponsored by the BNP Government, presents an 'official' version of 'Bangladeshi' nationalism, though only by significantly distorting the political history of Bangladesh and presenting it with a religious twist:
 

... But to the average Bangalis the concepts of secularism and socialism appeared to have been alien and unappreciable. Even the cognate 'Bangali' with nationalism came under severe criticism from the late 1970s through 1990s when the authorities and their supporters were inclined to call it 'Bangladeshi nationalism' instead of 'Bangali nationalism'. To the critics, Bangali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism have qualitative differences inherently. *Ideologically, the former is thought to be foreign biased and the later is Islam biased. The idea of secularism and socialism is now very dimly pronounced by the concerned political parties.* Religion sometimes may play important role in fashioning nationalism of a country. As a country with over 90% of Muslims among its population and with its Islamic tradition of a thousand years, *Islam as a religion could hardly be underestimated. So primacy of Islam was given to state thought and nationalist pronouncements since the 1980s.* (Emphasis mine) (*Banglapedia Online*).
13. The muddy politics surrounding the term 'Bangladeshi' has significantly influenced literary productions of note. An intriguing version of the so-called 'Bangladeshi literature' is provided in an anthology celebrating 50 years of *Bengali* writing from the then East Pakistan/East Bengal (1952–1971) and the present-day Bangladesh (1971–2003), but controversially entitled a collection of 'Fifty Years of *Bangladeshi Writing*' (emphasis mine). By labelling her anthology one of *Bangladeshi* writing, the editor Niaz Zaman

- not only makes a factual mistake, but coerces a diverse range of Bengali writers, both from the pre and post 1971 era, and belonging to different ideological sites, into an uneasy cohabitation under the predominantly non-secular *Bangladeshi* umbrella. Any befuddled reader of this anthology might legitimately wonder since when writings in Bengali during the Pakistan period were called 'Bangladeshi' given that the term 'Bangladeshi' (a coinage of the first BNP Government of 1975–81, responsible for deleting 'secularism' from the Constitution) was unheard of before the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 when the struggle for Independence galvanized around the vision of a homeland for Bengali people of East Pakistan. Given that in the present-day Bangladesh, the term 'Bangladeshi' is a problematic one sharply dividing political parties, non-political factions and the general populace into incompatible quarters, it was probably unwise to publish an anthology which, though purporting to be all-inclusive, forwards a dubious version of the history of the nation-state and its people. Interestingly, the anthologist does include a couple of poems by Taslima Nasrin, a self-proclaimed 'Bengali' writer. See Zaman (2003).
14. For instance, in the West, in the name of free expression, one cannot shout 'Fire' in a packed cinema. Britain, unlike Bangladesh, has a blasphemy law providing protection *only* for Christianity, and not for Islam. This is precisely why in 1989, the British Muslims failed to invoke a ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*; whereas in 1975, court action was taken against *Gay Times* for publishing a poem depicting Christ in a homosexual context (Fenwick 2002: 314–17).
  15. See *Taslima Nasrin's Website*, Bishnupriya Ghosh (2000) and *The Celebrity Atheist List* (Esau 1995).
  16. See, for instance, 'Taslima Nasrin and the Struggle Against Islamic Fundamentalism: An Interview with the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society'.
  17. For a range of opinions for and against *Lajja*, see Yasmin (1994).
  18. These volumes are, in the order of publication, Mesbahuddin Ahmed (1993) *For and against Taslima Nasrin: Volume 1 (Taslima Nasrin's Pakksho Bipaksho: Pratham Khanda)*, Mesbahuddin Ahmed (1994) *For and against Taslima Nasrin: Volume 2 (Taslima Nasrin's Pakksho Bipaksho: Ditiya Khanda)*, Mousumi Yasmin (1994) *Taslima Nasrin's Shame and Related Issues (Taslima Nasrin's Lajja O Annanya)*, Golam Murtoza and Rahman (1994) *Context: Feminism, Communalism and Taslima Nasrin (Prasanga: Naribad, Sampradayikata O Taslima Nasrin)*, and Robayet Firdous (2004) *Taslima's Speak Up: Manuscripts Don't Burn (Taslimar Ka: Pandulipi Poda Na)*.
  19. During a research trip to Bangladesh during August and September 2004, I discussed the Nasrin affair with a number of writers, intellectuals, feminists and academics such as Shamsur Rahman, Kabir Chowdhury, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Muhammad Abu Zaafer, Maleka Begum, Syed Manzoorul Islam and Firdous Azim; of whom Serajul Islam Choudhury and Firdous Azim were highly critical of the role of the Western media during the Nasrin affair.

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