The Taslima Nasrin Controversy And Feminism In Bangladesh: A Geo-Political And Transnational Perspective[1]

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ABSTRACT

Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi writer, attracted international attention in 1994 when an obscure religious fundamentalist group issued a *fatwa* sentencing her to death and demanding her trial on charges of blasphemy. This paper discusses the Nasrin controversy in the context of post-colonial religious fundamentalism, communalism, and feminist issues in South Asia.

RÉSUMÉ

Talima Nasrin, une écrivaine bangladaise, a attiré l'attention du monde entier en 1994 lorsqu'un groupe fondamentaliste d'une religion obscure avait lancé un *fatwa* la condamnant à mort et demandant son procès pour blasphème. Cet article discute de la controverse Nasrin dans le contexte religieux fondamentaliste post-colonial, l'esprit communautaire, et les questions féministes dans l'Asie du Sud.

In 1994, at the height of the Taslima Nasrin controversy, the *New Yorker* and the *London Review of Books* published two fairly long pieces on her saga (Weaver 1994; Wright 1994). Knowing that as a Bangladeshi woman I would be interested, a mentor and friend of mine sent the clippings to me with a note that read:

> Now I wait to read what a Bangladesh woman will have to say about Nasreen (she sounds pretty headlong, headstrong to me and not quite mature!). One would think she'd learn something of wisdom rather than anger from three marriages!! Eh?[2]

Until 1993, Nasrin[3] was largely unknown outside Bangladesh and West Bengal in India. Nasrin attracted international attention in May 1994 when an obscure fundamentalist group issued a *fatwa* (religious sanction)[4] sentencing Nasrin to death, put a bounty of *taka* 50,000 (US$1,250) on her head and demanded her trial on charges of blasphemy. The Western media immediately labelled her a Bangladeshi "female Salman Rushdie" (MacWilliam 1994). The international media presented Bangladesh as an Iranian-style theocracy where women are oppressed because of Islam and described Nasrin, who spoke out, as a victim of a fundamentalist attack (Wright 1994). Nasrin was quoted as saying: "I will not be silenced. Everywhere I look I see women being mistreated and their oppression justified in the name of religion. Is it not my moral responsibility to protest?" (*Outlook* 1994, 25).

The wide publicity about Nasrin across nations within a short span of time deserves closer attention and analysis. To me, there are serious problems with the setting up or targeting, by the Western press, of Nasrin as a symbol of freedom of expression and of women's rights. The way the Western press has presented her and the whole issue is inherently misleading for a variety of reasons: (i) it presents Bangladesh as a uni-dimensional theocracy; (ii) it ignores a complex history of colonial and post-colonial legacies and the divisive politics of the sub-continent; (iii) it overlooks the long and rich history of women's rights and human rights activists and the skepticism with which feminists view her "cause" in Bangladesh.

I argue in this paper that a combination of

colonial and post-colonial legacies and divisive politics in the sub-continent (Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) presented Nasrin to the West as an ardent advocate of women's rights, a lone fighter against religious fundamentalism - particularly Islamic fundamentalism. First, I explore post-colonial, transnational, feminist discourses in the context of religious fundamentalism, communalism,[5] and feminist issues in South Asia, particularly Bangladesh and India. Second, I introduce Nasrin's case through her writings, then describe the publication of her novel, *Lajja*,[6] and look at subsequent events along religious, socio-political, and transnational lines. Third, I explore the role of the international media in creating Nasrin as a champion of anti-Islam and presenting her as the sole feminist in Bangladesh. Fourth, I outline the complexities of communal, as well as state, politics in the sub-continent, the geo-political history of Bangladesh, and the activities of post-colonial and transnational social forces. Finally, I look at the actions of women's groups around the Nasrin issue.

FEMINIST THEORIZING: POST-COLONIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ISSUES

During the British colonial rule and the national independence movements in the sub-continent, religion was used as a powerful weapon by both Hindu and Muslim leadership against each other and against the British. The independence movement created a vision for social justice and democracy, promising to provide full rights to religious minorities and women. However, the post-colonial nation-states of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan quickly consolidated their geographical and political power, leading ultimately to the birth of religious revivalism. Since 1990, there has been an alarming spread of religious fundamentalism across nations in South Asia. The demolition of the Babri mosque in India in 1992[7] and the ensuing massacre of Muslim minorities in several states of India, as well as atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh and Pakistan, reflect the continuing politics of communalism in post-colonial states (Hossain 1995; Sarkar and Butalia 1995; Jayawardena and De Alwis 1996).

I agree with Jayawardena and De Alwis (1996), who state that while national liberation struggles were often positive for women, post-colonial nationalism in South Asia "took on a chauvinist hue, tinged with misogyny" (xii). As a result, violence and atrocities against women - for example, *sati* and dowry deaths in India, acid burning, rape, trafficking in women in Bangladesh - are still on the rise (Ashworth 1995; Zaman 1998). How is religious fundamentalism juxtaposed with the rise in violence against women in contemporary South Asian societies? Sangari and Vaid argue:

> ... far from enjoying the benefits of so-called development, the majority of women have in fact been pushed to the margins of the production process. Alongside this "invisible" economic process, there is a visible escalation of communal conflicts and an increasing politicization of "religious" identities. These later developments have given a new lease of life to patriarchal practices under "religious" sanction. (1989, 2)

In their recent work on feminist genealogies, Alexander and Mohanty (1997) favour taking a "local feminist praxis," but suggest that "we also need to understand the relation to larger, cross-national processes" (xix). Looking at the communal revivalism and the violence against women in Bangladesh and India, one can find transnational processes involving politics and religion influencing every level of social existence. The case of Taslima Nasrin can perhaps be better understood in this transnational context, and I develop this later in the paper. An analysis of transnational geo-politics is convenient for a number of purposes - it acknowledges "a purely locational politics of global-local;" it cross-cuts national boundaries; and persuasively challenges the construction of "inadequate and inaccurate binary and divisions" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 13). As Grewal and Kaplan convincingly argue:

> Transnational linkages influence every level of social existence. Thus the effects of configurations of practices at those levels are varied and historically specific. (1994, 13)

NASRIN AS A WRITER, POET AND COLUMNIST

Taslima Nasrin, a Bangladeshi physician, has been writing on women's issues since the 1980s. Between 1989 and 1994, she authored nineteen books and wrote columns for various local daily and weekly newspapers. Of the books, seven were novels, one was a collection of short stories, seven were collections of poems, and four were volumes of articles previously published as newspaper columns. Her straightforward and provocative style made her well known and controversial in Bangladesh. For example, her book, *Nirbachita Kolam (Selected Writings)*, was on the best-seller list in Bangladesh and more than 100,000 copies were sold in 1992.

Typically, Nasrin's writings attack the status quo, religion, and men as agents of oppression. A recurrent theme in her writing is sexual discrimination and violence prevalent against women in Bangladesh. She uses graphic language to express herself and to depict the situation of women in the country. In 1993, J. P. Das translated some examples from *Nirbachita Kolam*. Here is one example:

> A lucky man's wife dies, an unlucky man's cattle dies. ... If your wife dies, you can get another wife. But if you lose your cattle, you do not get free cattle. For new cattle you have to pay hard cash, whereas a new wife brings some cash. In such a situation, you can neglect your wife, but you should never neglect your cattle. (Das 1993, 28)

Her analogy between the status of a wife and the status of an animal is symbolic, and it narrates explicitly the discrimination against women and their subordination in the family structure as well as in the society.

Most of Nasrin's writings are grounded in her own and others' experience within the context of wider social life, and she juxtaposes personal and larger social issues. For instance, by recollecting and rearticulating her own/other people's memories, Nasrin exposes the brutality of the Pakistani army which violated women's minds and bodies during the Liberation War. These crimes were never brought to the International War Crime Tribunal System for various geo-political reasons. In the following extract translated by writer Shamsul Islam, Nasrin does not write down her own war story, but reconstructs someone else's to show the pervasiveness of violence against women - and the consequences:

> Of my three maternal uncles involved in the freedom struggle only two returned from the camp after sixteen days of captivity. Of our neighbours who were part of the struggle, some lost their arms while others lost their legs. Still, all relatives and near ones were thrilled to have these people back. However, nobody wanted my aunt to return, as if they would be happier in her absence ... for sixteen continuous days my aunt was locked up in a dark cell and repeatedly raped by ten lustful pro-Pakistani male animals. Our society is not proud of such aunts. ... Each one of us has accepted the damages of war, the gruesome torture inflicted by boots and rifle butts, even the horrors of death. But we have not accepted the accidents [sic] called rape ... my aunt, to protect herself from further shame and disrespect, hanged herself from the ceiling fan. (Islam 1994, 20)

In reconstructing her aunt's story, Nasrin brings to the surface the consequence of being a woman in Bangladesh and the polarization of shame and honour along gender lines. In the introduction to their book about embodied violence in South Asia, Jayawardena and De Alwis echo Nasrin's views:

> Women are seen to be the repository of tradition and their "inviolability" has been a powerful tool of cultural defence against modernisations and westernisation. Nonetheless the control of women's bodies as the symbolic space of the nation has often involved women's oppression. (1996, xv)

Like the above two stories, many of Nasrin's stories transcend national boundaries and present feminist as well as transnational issues. She clearly makes links between women's oppression and exploitation, violence against women and socially sanctioned silence.

Nasrin's concerns encompass multiple layers of women's oppression. Her fight is for freeing women's minds and bodies from men's control. In another extract from *Nirbachito Kolam*, she states :

> Look, they come to bite you, taste you, tear you; they are another name for death. They are another name for savagery and they come to drink you up, lick you up, smash you up. They are men. They are not human .... (Das 1993, 28)

In a poem translated by Alam, "Women Can't," Nasrin repeats the message:

> Any man can unhesitatingly become exultant
> By touching and kneading
> Any woman's flesh and fat,
> Any man can get heated
> By suddenly opening up any woman from top to bottom...
> Only animals and men can
> Touch a body of flesh
> Without love.
> Women can't. (1994, 367)

Nasrin's personal experiences - for example, as a nine-year-old seeing soldiers raping women, including some of her friends - are reflected in the gross generalizations she makes about men. Anger laces Nasrin's writings, and her anger is mostly directed against men. The anger and bitterness is evident in "Enjoying a Woman:"

> What all you'll get
> in this beautiful body,
> you will also get in a full-time wife,
> in half a dozen office girls
> and in cheap harlots ... .
> And since I know that
> before you can spit on my body
> I spit twice over into your aberrant mind.
> (Das 1994, 19)

From her writings, one may assume that she hates men. As Weaver comments about Nasrin, however, "She frequently professes to hate men, yet she has always surrounded herself with them" (1994, 48). Claiming that she is an advocate for both sexes, Nasrin rejects outright her public image as a hard-hitting feminist and man-hater: "I am just an advocate of humanity, and of equal rights for both men and women" (Amin 1993). Nasrin as a writer breaks down stereotyped gender relations as well as sex roles, and challenges male chauvinism in unconventional ways. For example, in her poem, "Other Way Round," she uses reversed role-playing to ridicule society's norms:

> I notice a man buying a woman at Ramna Park
> I would like to buy a man!
> Clean shaved, clean shirt, groomed hair sitting on a park bench,
> Or standing lazily at a street corner,
> I would bargain him for five or ten Taka a time.
>
> I would then pull him up by the collar on my rickshaw,
> Tickle him to giggle,
> Bring him to my room,
> Take my high-heeled shoe
> To beat him up at my pleasure,
> And tell him, 'Piss off!'...
> I would like to buy a man.
> (Alam 1993, 30)

Reversed role-playing ridicules society's norms, breaks down stereotyped gender relations as well as sex roles, and challenges male chauvinism in an unconventional way.

One frequent topic in Nasrin's writings is women's bodies - a taboo subject in Bangladesh society where there is silence about women's bodies and related issues. Contemporary women's groups in Bangladesh have demanded control over women's bodies only in the area of reproductive rights and have fought against capitalist/imperialist aggressions to control women's bodies through population control measures (Akhter 1992). Issues like marital rape, incest, homosexuality, and female orgasm are taboo subjects and are considered firmly beyond social issues. Nasrin's vivid descriptions of women's physical anatomy and her narrations on the issue of incest challenge the norms of Bangladesh. Riaz considers Nasrin's explicit description of woman's physical anatomy as a form of breaking the structured silence (1995). It is the last topic most Bangladeshi women would share in the public arena. As reported by Weaver, Nasrin argues:

> Why shouldn't I write about what I've seen? I'm a doctor .... To see the ruptured vaginas of women who've been raped? The six- and seven-year-olds who have been violated by their fathers, brothers, and uncles - by their own families. (1994, 14)

Beyond doubt, Nasrin is a strong proponent of freeing women's bodies from male aggression. Her central argument as I have translated it is: "Any really healthy, brilliant woman will be seen as bad" (Nasrin 1993, preface). According to Chowdhury and Chowdhury, Nasrin's work comes close to that of some Western feminists like Erica Jong (*Fear of Flying*) and Naomi Wolfe (*The Beauty Myth*), both of whom have been attacked in the West as pornographers (1994, 8). In Bangladesh, certainly many label Nasrin's work as pornography. Others, however, focus on the issues she raises. For example, Siddiqui (1997) describes Nasrin as "a relentless campaigner of the cause" and compares her with the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, who turned his anger against the British colonial forces through poems and writings and consequently was imprisoned. Similarly, Nasrin, for her writings, has been exiled.

PUBLICATION OF *LAJJA* AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

Lajja is perhaps not her best work, but Nasrin gained international recognition after she published the novel in February 1993. Although *Lajja* was a short and hurriedly written novel, it became a best-seller in both Bangladesh and India. Through *Lajja*, Nasrin also quickly became entangled with volatile communal politics in Bangladesh and India.

Lajja depicts the plight of a fictional Hindu family in Dhaka, in the wake of communal violence that erupted in the city after the destruction of the Babri mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992. It is the story of a young, progressive Hindu man (Suranjan) in Bangladesh. His sister has been kidnapped by Muslim fanatics during the communal riots that spilled over from the Babri mosque, and Suranjan takes his revenge on a Muslim prostitute. Later on, the family decides to leave Bangladesh for India. The book received mixed reactions. Liberal intellectuals in Bangladesh considered *Lajja* a second-class literary work. Other people said that it publicized the situation of Hindus - a religious minority in Bangladesh. Still others considered it as provocative - distorting and defaming the pervasive secular forces in contemporary Bangladesh. Hindu fundamentalist parties in India (especially the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]) used the book to further their political cause and distributed free copies of an unauthorized translation all over India. As Shamsul Islam remarks:

> The official organ of Hindu communal politics, a weekly magazine, printed *Lajja* shamelessly and deleted those parts of the novel which held the Hindu communal parties of India responsible for provoking the Muslim fundamentalists of

Bangladesh. (1994, 20)

In addition, the "Indo-phobic" quarter in Bangladesh propagated the rumour that Nasrin had received a huge amount of money from BJP to write the book and destabilize communal harmony in Bangladesh (Riaz 1995).

Nasrin's writings about religion, sexual freedom, and religious *pirs* (teachers) in Islam and her treatment of explicit sex had already angered Bangladeshi *mullahs* (religious clerics). After the publication of *Lajja* and its reception in India, Nasrin began to receive anonymous letters, death threats, and phone calls. In February 1992, at the Bookfair in Dhaka, angry mobs attacked bookstores that carried her books. The deliberate campaign against Nasrin added more fuel to the mullahs' anger and, in the fall of 1993, a previously unknown fundamentalist group named Shahaba Sainik Parishad in Bangladesh issued a fatwa and put a bounty on Nasrin's head. The group demanded both that a ban be placed on all her books and that she be put on trial for blasphemy. As a result, *Lajja* was banned by the government of Bangladesh on the grounds that it might prove the Indo-phobic rumours true and destabilize communal harmony in the country.

Events took a dramatic turn in early May 1994. After attending a human rights conference in Paris, on her way back to Bangladesh, Nasrin visited Calcutta and was interviewed by Sujata Sen, a reporter for the *Statesman*, a local English daily. In the published report, Sen quoted Nasrin as saying that "the Quran was written by a human being" and it "should be revised thoroughly" (Riaz 1995; Wright 1994). Nasrin later refuted the statement and stated, "the misquotation was due to the inexperience of the non-Muslim female reporter of the *Statesman*" (Wright 1994, 20). Nasrin added that she promoted change to the Sharia, the texts of Islamic law, but not to the Koran. She issued the following clarification as reported in a journal:

> I hold the Koran, 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 have crossed the social-historical contexts in which these 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 to progress. (*Women and Revolution* 1994-1995, 14)

After the interview, the fundamentalists in Bangladesh launched a campaign against Nasrin, particularly the mullahs, who formed a Taslima Nasrin Peshan Committee (Committee to Grind Down Taslima Nasrin). To save herself from death threats and to avoid arrest, Nasrin went into hiding. On July 29, 1994, nearly 200,000 Islamic fundamentalists marched through the streets of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, demanding Nasrin's death (*Women and Revolution* 1994-1995, 14). The fundamentalists repeatedly protested in the streets of Dhaka and other major cities, demanding Nasrin's trial on charges of blasphemy. On the basis of an age-old law drawn up by the British colonial government, the Bangladesh government finally laid charges against Nasrin and a no-bail warrant was issued for her arrest. Under this law, anyone offending religious sentiments may be punished by up to two years in prison. Meanwhile, negotiations were going on between Nasrin's legal advisors (such as Dr. Kamal Hossain, a renowned lawyer in the country), Western ambassadors (Sweden, Norway, United States, France and Germany), the Women Writers' Committee of PEN (International Writers Group) and representatives of the Bangladesh government. Finally, Bangladesh, an aid-dependent country, had no choice but to comply with the demands of the donor countries. Nasrin was granted bail and allowed to leave on August 9, 1994, for Stockholm, Sweden.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The Western media presented its coverage of the proposed trial of Taslima Nasrin and her fleeing from Bangladesh to Sweden in a melodramatic way - Bangladesh was an Islamic theocracy, and Nasrin was anti-Islam and the sole feminist speaking out against religious

fundamentalism, women's oppression, and patriarchal structures of the society. To capture the flavour of Western media publicity, one only has to look at newspapers and magazines between 1993 and 1995, the time when international controversy about Nasrin was at its height. The front page of a journal was titled, "Islamic Fundamentalists Vow to Kill Woman Writer" (*Women and Revolution* 1994-1995, 14). The *Observer* (London, England) in its World News column reported, "Bangladeshi [sic] call to hang 'female Salman Rushdie'" (MacWilliam, July 3, 1994, 21). The *Globe and Mail* in Toronto claimed, "Fundamentalists continue to call for Nasrin's death," and "Exiled author longs for home: Writer who fled Bangladesh to escape Islamic extremists has become an international symbol" (August 31, 1994; Leeman, February 18, 1995). The *Vancouver Sun* announced, "Police hunt for Muslim novelist over 'insult'" (June 6, 1994). *Outlook* reported, "Sentenced to Death" (March, 1995). *Maclean's* magazine published a feature titled, "Fighting words: A poet forced into hiding by Muslim extremists still speaks out for oppressed women" (Morris 1995, 44). As Carolyne Wright pointed out:

> Compelling photos in the *New York Times* have shown Bangladeshi women clad in burqah and veil, as if Bangladesh were an Iranian-style Islamic theocracy - when in reality very few women dress so severely. (1994, 21)

As these headlines show, the Western media were anxious to portray themselves as secular and democratic. There was no rigorous analysis of the Nasrin affair in the context of transnational politics, inter-communal violence, colonial legacies or the role of the state in consolidating power in the sub-continent. The Western media's treatment of Nasrin ignored the strengths of existing feminist groups and of the secular forces which had a long historical tradition in Bangladesh. Ajit Bhattacharjea, a political analyst, commented:

> The Hindu minority of some 25 million was able to stay on despite communal reactions to events in India. The tradition of tolerance, with its strong Sufi and pre-Islamic roots survived, especially among the intellectuals. Pride in the Bengali language and culture grew, to the extent that anniversaries related to Rabindranath Tagore were celebrated with more enthusiasm than in West Bengal. Women play a role in society and politics that orthodox mullahs would not approve. (1994, 8)

Ironically, Nasrin's work prior to *Lajja* was limited to women's rights and discrimination against women in a local context. Both the publication of *Lajja* with its wide publicity in India as a champion of anti-communalism in Bangladesh and the complexities of geo-politics in the Indian sub-continent placed Nasrin in the international arena. Nasrin's own actions and attitudes towards the mullahs also helped the situation deteriorate. As Carolyne Wright remarked:

> Taslima Nasreen appeared to enjoy taking even more confrontational stances. At times, she even appeared to taunt her enemies, smoking a cigarette while handling the Koran in a BBC television feature filmed before she went into hiding. (1994, 21)

The Western media's portrayal of Nasrin as a champion of anti-Islam not only helped the political situation to deteriorate further, but also took away her support at the grass-roots level. It is a fact that the majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims, but not fundamentalist in the traditional sense. Indeed, there is a strong secular trend in Bangladesh politics and culture. For instance, the leftist/liberal forces, many students, and various women's groups fought side by side relentlessly from 1952 to 1971 to free Bangladesh from the military-bureaucratic neo-colonial complex of Pakistan. Partha Ghosh, Director at the Indian Council of Social Science Research, remarked, "Bangladesh is typical of South Asian politics

where religion is used for political purposes yet secularist forces also remain vigilant and strong" (1993, 709). Throughout the Nasrin controversy, the Western media did not explore the activities of either leftist/liberal forces or feminist/women's groups, and in its ignorance, overlooked these other contemporary forces. They painted a negative image of Bangladesh, where religious fundamentalists issue and execute fatwas and Bangladeshi women are passive victims, helpless in their daily lives. In fact, liberal and secular forces were strong in the socio-political processes in Bangladesh. The 1996 general election demonstrated again how strong these forces were when all religious parties were rejected outright by the voters in favour of secular democratic parties. The Western media image of Bangladesh as a uni-dimensional Islamic theocracy was totally misleading and false.

TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE SUB-CONTINENT AND THE ROLE OF THE POST-COLONIAL STATES IN THE NASRIN AFFAIR

To comprehend the Nasrin affair in the context of religion, politics and feminist issues in the sub-continent, one needs to go beyond her case and look at both the local context and the post-colonial socio-political processes crosscutting national boundaries. Since the liberation of Bangladesh, a number of writers have received fatwas as well as death threats from the Islamic fundamentalist parties. Notable among these are Ahmed Sharif, Kabir Chowdhury, Begum Sufia Kamal, and Jahanara Begum, all of whom ignored the death threats and continued with their day-to-day activities as usual. In the case of Begum Sufia Kamal, the 86-year-old poet/writer and life-long activist, even her family members received death threats. Jahanara Imam's book *Ekattorer Dinguli* (translated as *Those Days of 1971*; the English language version is *Of Blood and Fire*) is considered an authentic diary as well as an autobiographical record from a woman's perspective. It vividly documents atrocities of the Pakistani military, its collaborators, and religious fanatics during the Liberation War in 1971. Her son Rumi, a freedom fighter, disappeared after being arrested and tortured by the Pakistani army; her husband was also tortured by the Pakistani army and later on died. With the formation of the Ekatturer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee (Co-ordinating Committee for the Elimination of Collaborators and Assassins/Killers of 1971), Jahanara Imam successfully mobilized a mass movement. On March 26, 1992, in its own public court, with the support of a large crowd, the Committee sentenced Golam Azam, the *amir* (leader) of the right-wing religious party JI (Jamaat-i-Islami) to death for war crimes and asked the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) government to carry out the sentence. During the Liberation War, the JI had collaborated with the Pakistani military and had been condemned for its heinous activities. Despite numerous death threats and fatwas, Jahanara Imam pursued her crusade until her death in July 1995. Neither the international media nor Indian feminist groups/media ever paid any attention to her cause of bringing war criminals to trial!

I believe that the Nasrin affair was used by the BNP government to divert public attention from national politics and to create divisions between and among the opposition parties. Since March 1994, the AL (Awami League), the major opposition party, allied with the JD (Jatiyo Dal) and the JI to boycott sessions of Parliament. They pressed forward a number of demands, such as the resignation of the BNP government, and called for a national election under a neutral caretaker government. The alliance between the AL, considered the liberal and secular political party, and the JI, the Islamic religious party, was awkward as the JI had previously supported the BNP. The situation got worse as the opposition parties continuously called for nation-wide strikes and *hartals* (a stoppage of work in protest or boycott) and staged mass rallies and demonstrations (Hossain 1995).

When it was first published in a Calcutta-based newspaper, Nasrin's interview did not receive any publicity in Bangladesh. The BNP government at that time was led by Khaleda Zia in a fragile parliamentary democracy. According to Riaz, a

government-owned newspaper highlighted the interview "to create an environment conducive to filing a case against her" (1995, 25). In other words, the government's strategy was to use the Nasrin issue to diffuse public attention and create divisiveness within the opposition alliance. The government failed to comprehend the political wind and public mood, and eventually the government's strategy consolidated all religious groups - which ultimately formed another alliance to persecute Nasrin. The anti-government mood turned into an anti-Nasrin campaign and several pro-liberal newspaper offices were attacked and ransacked. Since the independence of Bangladesh the religious fundamentalists had never gained such strength publicly! (After the liberation in 1971, the then-AL government led by Sheikh Mujib had banned all political parties based on religion, a ban that was lifted in 1986.)

The BNP government faced a complex political scenario. On the one hand, it risked losing the support of religious fundamentalist groups that had swept the BNP to victory against the Awami League in the 1992 general elections. On the other hand, it faced pressure from Western donor countries - as Weaver commented, "Seemingly overnight, Taslima had become the Western world's symbol of freedom of expression and of women's rights, in opposition to the rise of religious intolerance" (1994, 56).

In India, the Hindu fundamentalist parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), made every effort to use *Lajja* against the Muslims residing in India and used the book to demand the eviction of "illegal" Bangladeshis who were Muslims. As I mentioned earlier, the BJP even printed copies of *Lajja*, but deleted some parts of the novel which held the BJP responsible for provoking the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh. It is clearly evident that the novel was used to strengthen the communal forces and the fundamentalist parties in both India and Bangladesh.

THE ROLE OF FEMINIST/WOMEN'S GROUPS: SUPPORTIVE OR AMBIVALENT?

The beginnings of formal women's organizations in Bangladesh are linked to the Liberation movement. During the mass movement against the military dictatorship of Pakistan in 1969, students, writers, peasants, workers, academics, journalists, and left-oriented women's groups actively participated in demonstrations, protests and marches. This mass movement intensified women's consciousness and resulted in the birth of Mahila Parishad (Women's Council) in 1970, currently Bangladesh's largest women's organization with more than 30,000 members. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and the First UN International Women's Conference held in Mexico in 1975, various women's groups emerged to change discriminatory policies towards women and promote gender equity.

Despite the diversity of these women's groups, from time to time they form alliances against the state and all forces of oppression, all of which has made the movement quite visible. For example, the women's groups formed an alliance in 1995 against the brutal rape and murder of a young woman, Yasmin (age twelve), by three policemen and forced the BNP government (led by Khaleda Zia) to take action against the police and local administrators. Without doubt, the women's groups in Bangladesh have strengthened their base and been successful in identifying women's issues as social issues - for example, rape, violence against women and children, women's rights in the workplace, property rights of women, divorce, and child custody.

At the early stages of the Nasrin controversy, liberal forces including writers, journalists, poets, and literary critics applauded Nasrin's boldness and supported her freedom of expression. Intellectuals, activists, journalists, and secularists formed a coalition and supported Nasrin's writings, but her confrontational stances, attacking well-known people personally through her column, and the geo-politics of her book, *Lajja*, cross-cut national boundaries and challenged what

Grewal and Kaplan (1994) call "inadequate and inaccurate binary divisions." Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kari (a non-government organization or NGO) remarked:

> Taslima went for the jugular, and we're not ready for that. There's simply too much at stake. You have to learn how to deal with the situation - how to handle the bearded ones. And that is something that Taslima never understood. (Weaver 1994, 58)

As Nasrin became more and more controversial (Mortaza and Rahman 1994), support for her within Bangladesh declined even more. As Weaver notes, Nasrin commented, "Only a few artists came to visit me when I was living underground. They were fearful and confused - they were cowards" (1994, 58).

Despite the support from international groups, such as Amnesty International, PEN, and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), women's groups in Bangladesh were ambivalent towards Nasrin. Her issue put women's groups in an awkward situation. They feared that Nasrin's writings might set off a conservative backlash against the movement, and indeed they did. Fundamentalists attacked various offices, particularly those of women's organizations and NGOs, burned down some NGO-run schools in the rural areas and claimed that the NGOs were anti-state, anti-Islamic organizations.

In spite of their later ambivalence, some feminist/women's groups tried to give Nasrin support. On June 12, 1994, The *Pioneer* - an Indian English daily - reported that some Bangladeshi women's organizations had signed a statement: "The case against Taslima must be withdrawn. It is the mullahs who should be put on trial for committing repression on women through fatwas and unauthorized Islamic courts" (Fazl 1994, 7).

There are three main reasons why Nasrin did not receive spontaneous and unequivocal support from feminist/women's groups. First, she had never been involved with any of the women's groups. In addition, she had never actively participated in any protests or demonstrations pertinent to women's issues. Second, fatwas and death threats had been issued occasionally to writers and poets like Nasrin, but not all reacted as she did. For example, the women's groups, whatever their internal differences, recognized and respected Begum Sufia Kamal, who received fatwas several times, but ignored them and pursued her daily activities as usual. In contrast, in the interview with BBC television, Nasrin smoked a cigarette while holding the Koran and taunted the religious fundamentalists. Through this act in the Western media, Nasrin alienated not only the general public, but also women's groups in Bangladesh.

Third, quite frequently, Nasrin underplayed and underestimated feminists and activists as well as writers (both female and male). This put her on a double edge. In her interview with the *Statesman*, for example, when she was pressed to make remarks about Begum Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam - highly acclaimed activists - Nasrin bypassed the question and commented that most women activists are afraid of fundamentalists, are affiliated with a political party and are happy to be "housewives" (Wright 1994, 21). Nasrin's disregard of feminist activists/women's groups either made them angry or forced them to be silent. They continue to be reluctant to be involved with anything related to her.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed the Nasrin case in the context of local and cross-national processes to illustrate how contemporary feminist positions in Bangladesh are influenced by the geo-politics and colonial legacies of Bangladesh and India. The controversy raised by Nasrin drew various local, national and international forces into the fray, which eventually forced her to flee the country. In my opinion, the issue was internationally publicized, not to support feminist causes, but to highlight the rise of fundamentalist forces both in Bangladesh and India. Nasrin was a "pawn" in the political game played out by various forces for political gains. The international focus on Nasrin as a lone fighter against the religious

fundamentalist onslaught avoided questioning or examining colonial legacies, inter-communal politics and violence, the role of the state, and the transnational socio-economic, political processes; it also ignored the strength of the feminist/secular and leftist/writers' groups who had played vital roles during the 1969 popular uprising, the Liberation War of 1971, and the recently held 1996 general election, to name a few.

What about Nasrin and feminism in Bangladesh? Her book, *Lajja*, represented more geo-politics in the subcontinent than feminist views in Bangladesh. Nasrin did break the structural silence of her society on various women's issues, but her writings and her remarks went beyond what feminist/women's groups could support, and may have jeopardized their gains. After Nasrin's exile to Sweden in 1994, her case was not discussed by any feminist/women's groups in a public forum in Bangladesh. Even in the general election of Jatiyo Sangsad in June 1996, no individual or group raised Nasrin's case as an election issue.

Nasrin is still in exile. I hope that this paper stimulates dialogue and interest among feminists as well as activists (Bangladeshi/international) in post-colonial, transnational feminist issues in the sub-continent, especially in Bangladesh and India. The controversy surrounding Nasrin and her exile should not be treated simply as a local or Islamic fundamentalist issue, but as a geo-political, transnational feminist issue.

POSTSCRIPT

Since I completed the final revision of this paper, the Nasrin issue has once again hit the media in Bangladesh and in the West. Nasrin's recent (October 1998) return home sparked riots in the streets of Dhaka, which demonstrates that the religious fundamentalists' hostility against her remains undiminished despite her four years of exile. As I indicated earlier, while some women's groups in Bangladesh support Nasrin, Bangladeshi women's groups in general do not want her return to be an issue that diverts attention from other important women's rights issues: "Our problem is [that] the Western press and the Indian press have been building her [Nasrin] as the only issue," said Khushi Kabir, a leading women's rights activist in Dhaka as reported in *Kinesis* (November 1998). As reported in the *Vancouver Sun* (October 10, 1998), Farida Akhter, a Bangladeshi feminist, said, "Under no circumstances would we agree with the fanatics to cut off her head ... she is responsible for the fact that people are not coming forward to support her. Taslima Nasrin is not a women's movement issue, but an issue created by the international media." These responses provide further support to the general argument presented in this paper.

ENDNOTES

1. The paper is based on my research project, Women's Work and Social Change in Bangladesh, funded by the Simon Fraser University President's Research Grant (January 1996-August 1997).

2. This is an excerpt from my personal communication with Dr. Louise Sweet, former Professor of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, September 22, 1994. Dr. Michèle Pujol, a former colleague of mine in Women's Studies at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, also motivated me to write this paper. Dr. Pujol organized a lecture, Feminism in Bangladesh, at the University of Victoria (March 22, 1996) and invited me to lecture on the Nasrin issue. While I am solely responsible for the content/analysis of this paper, I sincerely acknowledge Dr. Pujol's contributions in shaping some of my thoughts. The final version of this paper has benefited from comments by peer reviewers, particularly by Dr. Marjorie Griffin Cohen and Dr. Marilyn Porter, editors of *Atlantis*. I am thankful to all of them.

3. Also spelled Nasreen by various authors. I shall use "Nasrin" throughout the paper.

4. Fatwa is considered a religious opinion by clerics and is based on the interpretation of the Koran (the Muslim Holy book) and Sunnah (the teachings and activities of Prophet Mohammed). Religious leaders can deliver fatwas related to interpretation of Muslim rituals/text, but they have no authority to implement fatwa. Further, fatwas do not have any legal sanctions in Bangladesh.

5. "Communalism," which means the act (such as riot), advocacy and subtle, as well as overt, threat of violence along religious lines, is a term widely used in the Indian sub-continent when Hindus and Muslims propagate hatred and act violently against each other.

6. Salman Rushdie had earlier published a book with the same title: *Shame*.

7. Hindu Nationalists in India claimed that the Babri mosque in Ayodhya had been built on the site of the destroyed Ram temple (birthplace of God Ram); hence, on December 6, 1992, they launched a political protest to erect a Ram temple on the site of the Babri mosque. This culminated in the destruction of the Babri mosque by a large group of Hindu fundamentalists. For details, see Partha S. Ghosh, 1997.

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