

Homeless Everywhere

Writing in Exile

TASLIMA NASREEN



"Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently".
Rosa Luxemburg

When I look back, the years gone by appear dry, ashen. Suddenly, a half-forgotten dream tears itself from that inert grey mass and stands before me, iridescent, obtrusive. Odd memories tiptoe into my solitary room. Confronting me, they make me tremble, they make me cry; they drag me back towards the days left behind.

I cannot help but walk down the serpentine, shadowy alleys of my life, foraging for remembered fragments. To what use? The past is past, irrevocably so. The dreams that are long dead are unrecognizably dead. What good can it do to dust the cobwebs off them with tender fingers? What is gone just isn't here anymore.

I know, yet my life in exile makes me reach back into my past, again and again. I walk through the landscape of my memories like someone possessed. Each night brings with it nightmares, its own thick blanket of melancholy. It is then that I start telling the story of that girl.

A shy, timid girl, who grew up in a strict family, uncomplaining, constantly humiliated; a girl encircled by boundaries, whose every desire, every whim was thrown away as garbage; whose small, frail body was prey to many dark, hairy hands. I have narrated the story of that girl.

A girl with modest adolescent dreams, who fell in love and married in secret, hoping to live the ordinary life of an ordinary woman. I have told her story. A woman betrayed by her dearly beloved husband, whose convictions came crashing down like a house of straw, a woman who knew sorrow, pain, mourning, and bereavement; a woman who was tempted to follow the terrible road to self-destruction. I have simply told her agonizing tale.

A woman who then gathered up the broken pieces of her dreams and tried to live again, to make a little room of her own in the midst of a cruel, heartless society; who surrendered to a guardian called 'man' because society demanded it of her. But the hurt, the pain kept growing, the traumatic pain of losing an unborn child, wounds that left her bloodied and sore, onslaughts of malice, distrust and unbearable humiliation. All that I have done is to tell the story of that trampled and bruised girl.

That girl who, with whatever strength remained in her body and mind, stood up again, without anyone's help, turned away from all shelter, trying to be her own self once more, her own refuge; a woman who refused to renounce and retreat from the world that had deceived and rejected her, a woman who refused to heed people's taunts and sneers

I have narrated the story of this girl, of this woman standing upright. A woman who refused to obey society's diktats, its rituals and traditions. A woman whose constant stumbling, falling, being thrown, taught her to stand straight. Whose stumbling steps taught her to walk, whose wanderings showed her the way. Slowly, gradually, she witnessed the growth of a new consciousness within her, a simple thought took hold of her – "This life was her own and no one else's. She was the one who could rule over it, no one else". I have told the story of that girl, of the circumstances that shaped her. It is the story of a girl who came out of the furnace of patriarchy, not reduced to ashes, but as burnished steel.

Have I done wrong? Even if I don't think so, many people think today that it was wrong of me to tell this story. Today, I am standing in the prosecution box waiting for the verdict. It wouldn't have been such a terrible crime if I had not disclosed the identity of that girl. The girl was I, Taslima.

Had I used my imagination, I could have done whatever I pleased – written page after page of fancy and all would have been forgiven. But it is forbidden to stake my claim in this real world to being a flesh and blood woman and announce audaciously – “I am that girl; after those turbulent years of sorrow I am standing up again; I have vowed to live my life as I see fit”.

Why would the world accept this bold stance? No woman should have this kind of courage. I am completely unfit for a patriarchal society. In my own country Bangladesh, in my very own West Bengal, I am a forbidden name, an outlawed woman, a banned book. Nobody can utter my name, touch me, read me; if they do so their tongues will rot, their hands will become soiled, a deep disgust will overwhelm them. This is the way I am. This is the way I have chosen to be.

Yet even if the publication of *Dwikhandito* (*The Broken*) shatters me into a thousand pieces, I will still not confess to any wrongdoing. Is it wrong to write the story of one's life? Is it wrong to expose the deep, secret truths of life as you have lived it? The unwritten rule of every autobiography is – ‘Nothing will be hidden, everything shall be written about’. An autobiography's subject is the unknown, the secrets of a human life. I have simply tried to follow this rule honestly. The first two volumes of my life story, *Amar Meyebela* (*My Girlhood*) and *Utal Hawa* (*Strong Winds*) have not raised the kind of controversy *Dwikhandito* has. In any case, I have not started the controversy, others have. Many have said that I have deliberately chosen sensational subject matter, incapable of generating anything but controversy. This question should not be raised in the case of an autobiography. I have described the years of my childhood, my adolescence, my youth, living and growing through all kinds of experiences. I have spoken about my philosophy, my hopes and despairs, my beauty and my ugliness, my happiness and sorrow, my anger and tears, my own deviation from my ideals. I have not chosen a titillating or sensitive subject. I have simply chosen my own life to write about. If this life is a stimulating and exciting life, then how can I make it less so? I am told this volume has been written to raise a hue and cry. Does every conception have to have a petty motive? As if honesty, simplicity cannot be adequate reasons. As if courage, something that I am told I have in abundance, cannot be a good enough reason.

Controversy about my writing is nothing new. I am familiar with it from the very time I was being published. Actually, isn't the truth rather simple? Just this: if you don't compromise with a patriarchal society, you will find yourself at the centre of a storm?

There are many different definitions of what makes an autobiography. Most of us easily accept those autobiographies that are idealistic and describe only good and happy events. Generally, great men write about their lives to inspire other lives, to reveal the truth and the path of righteousness. I am neither a sage, nor a great, erudite being, and I write not to show light to the blind. I am simply unmasking the wounds and blights of an ordinary human life.

Even though I am not a great litterateur or a remarkable personality, momentous things have happened in my life. Certainly it is no ordinary life, when, because of my beliefs and ideals, thousands take to the streets asking for my death; or when my books are banned because they carry my opinions; or when the state snatches away the right to live in my own land for speaking the truth!

When it is all right for others to constantly describe my life, and add colour to their portrayal, why shouldn't it be all right for me to take the responsibility to describe it myself, fully, truthfully? Surely no one else can know my life the way I know it?

If I don't reveal myself, if I don't depict the whole of myself – especially those events that have shaken me – if I don't talk of all that is good and bad in me, of my weaknesses and my strengths, my happiness and sorrow, my generosity and cruelty, then I don't think I can stay true to the responsibility of writing an autobiography. For me, literature for literature's sake, or literary niceties for their own sake, cannot be the last word; I place a greater value on honesty.

Whatever my life may be, however contemptible or despicable, I do not deceive myself when I sit down to write about it. If the reader is disgusted or appalled by my tale, so be it. At least I can be satisfied that I have not cheated my reader. I am not presenting a fictitious narrative in the guise of an autobiography. I narrate the truths of my life, the ugly as much as I do the beautiful, without hesitation. I can't change my past. The ugliness and the beauty must both be accepted; I won't lie and say, "It didn't happen".

The sharp arrows of mockery come flying from every direction. The mud of slander and humiliation is flung to soil me. There is only one reason for this assault. I have spoken the truth. Not everyone can bear the truth. The truths of *Amar Meyebela* and *Utal Hawa* can be borne; *Dwikhandito's* is insupportable. In *Amar Meyebela*, when I described my ignoble childhood, people said sympathetically, "How terrible!" In *Utal Hawa*, when I described being cheated on by my husband, they expressed their sympathy. But in *Dwikhandito*, when I spoke openly of my relationships with various men, they began to point fingers at me. We can draw only one conclusion from this: As long as a woman is oppressed and defenceless, people like her and sympathize with her. But when she refuses to remain exploited or suppressed, when she stands up, when she straightens her spine, establishes her rights, breaks the rotten social systems that chain her so as to free her body and mind – she is no longer admirable, she becomes hateful. I knew this character of our society; even then I was not afraid to speak freely about myself.

One of the main reasons for the controversy regarding *Dwikhandito* is sexual freedom. Since most people are immersed neck-deep in the traditions of a patriarchal society, they are irritated, angry and outraged at the open declaration of a woman's sexual autonomy. This freedom is not something that I simply talk about; rather, I have established it for myself, in and through my life. But this freedom is not license; men cannot touch me whenever they please. I decide.

Our society is not yet ready for such freedom in a woman. It refuses to accept the fact that a woman can sexually engage with and enjoy any man she desires, and yet rigorously decide where to draw the line in any encounter.

Our renowned, famous, well-heeled writers delight in slandering me by calling me a fallen woman, a whore. In doing this they only prove themselves to be the figureheads of this disgusting, dirty patriarchal society! They first use 'fallen women' for their enjoyment and then deploy the words 'fallen woman' as a term for abuse! There is really nothing novel in the use of women as sexual slaves.

Although in this volume of my autobiography I have spoken about my personal struggle

against patriarchy, spoken about the torture meted out by society on women and religious minorities, nobody talks of the fact that I have spoken of such things. They only notice my relationships with men. They notice the audacity that I have in opening my mouth about the deep, secret, ugly and repulsive subject of what happens to sexuality in a patriarchal society.

Whenever, in the history of the world, in times of darkness, a woman stands up against patriarchy, speaks about emancipation, tries to break free from her chains, she gets called a 'fallen woman'. Many years ago, in the preface to my book, *A Fallen Woman's Fallen Prose*, I wrote about how I delighted in calling myself a 'fallen woman'. It was because I knew that whenever a woman has protested against oppression by the state, by religion, or by society, whenever she has become aware of all her rights, society has called her a whore. I believe that in this world, for a woman to be pure, to be true to herself, she has to become a 'fallen woman'. Only when a woman is called a 'whore' can she know that she is free from the coils of society's diktats. The 'fallen' woman is really a pure and pristine human being. I truly believe that if a woman wants to earn her freedom, be a human, she has to earn this label. This title, coming from a fallen, degenerate society, should be seen as an honour by every woman. Till now, of all the prizes I have received, I consider this honour to be the greatest recognition of what I have done with my life. I have earned it because I have given a mortal blow to the decaying, rotten body of patriarchy. This is the true measure of the worth of my life as a writer, of my life as a woman and the long years of my struggle to be the person I am.

A writer in Bangladesh has sued me for defamation after *Dwikhandito* came out. Another in West Bengal has also followed suit. Dissatisfied with that, they have demanded a ban on my book. I really cannot understand how a writer can demand this about another writer's work. How can they fight for freedom of speech and thought and then behave like fundamentalists. I believe every word of what Voltaire said – "*Je ne suis absolument pas d'accord avec vos idées, mais je me battrais pour que vous puissiez les exprimer...*" – ("I do not agree with your ideas, but I will fight for your right to express them".)

So many people have written about their lives. If it is a human life, it is full of errors, mistakes, black marks, and thorns, even when those in question are saints. St. Augustine (335-430 AD) wrote about his life, talked openly about his undisciplined, immoral, reckless youth in Algeria, his illegitimate son, his sexual exploits. Mahatma Gandhi spoken of how he tested his celibacy by making women sleep in the same bed with him. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1774) in his *Confessions* narrates every incident of his life, without holding back the ugly and the bad. Benjamin Franklin (1709-1790) confesses how he brought up his illegitimate son, William. Bertrand Russell and Leo Tolstoy have been equally frank about their lives. Why did these men talk about things they knew were unacceptable by society? It is because they wanted to let their readers know their real selves, and because they felt that these experiences were important in their lives. Does anyone call them names because they have been indiscreet? Rather, these admirable men remain exactly in the position of honour they have always occupied, and it is reinforced by their telling of the truths of their lives. Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (The sexual life of Catherine M) describes the sexual freedom of the sixties, her life with many men, vivid descriptions of sex. Hasn't this book occupied a place among other literary works? Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *Vivir Para Contarla* talks of other women with whom he had relations.

Will someone run to court to ban Marquez's book?

In every country, biographies are written about famous men and women. Biographers conduct research for years to unearth some hidden aspects of the life under examination. Even innermost secrets no longer remain so, and we have seen this even in the case of Rabindranath Tagore's life. In spite of being a passionate spokesman against child marriage, why did he allow his daughter to marry so young? We now know the reason. But the question remains: Why does a reader need to know all this? Why do researchers spend years finding out the most intimate details of a person's life? It is because in the light of these hidden facts we can analyze and understand the writer and his work in a new way.

Many Bengali writers love playing games with women, and even if they hesitate to mention these escapades in their autobiographies, the characters they create boldly commit such acts. Nobody has ever questioned them, but if a woman talks of sexuality, in a fictional work or in her autobiography, eyebrows are raised. Sexuality is a man's prerogative, his 'ancestral' patrilineal property. I can't possibly write like men. I must write more discreetly. I am a woman after all. Only a man possesses the right to discuss a woman's body, her thighs, her breasts, her waist and her vagina. Why should a woman do it? This patriarchal society has not given me that right, but since I have thumbed my nose at this rule and have written about it, however sad or poignant my tale may be, I have crossed the limits.

For a man, a playboy image is something to be proud of. When a woman writes about her love and sexuality with honesty, she becomes a suspect, a 'characterless' woman. I have talked of certain things in my autobiography that I should not have. I have muckraked; I have crossed the limit allowed to me.

One should not discuss what happens inside the bedroom or between two individuals because such events are unimportant. But I consider them important because all those incidents have shaped the Taslima that I am today – this woman with her beliefs and disbeliefs, mores and thoughts, and her own sense of her self. The world around her has created her brick by brick, not as a chaste domesticated angel, but as an ardent, renegade, disobedient brat.

Then they say: I can destroy my own reputation, but why do I have to destroy the reputation of others? This question has come up, although I am writing about what is after all my own life. I fail to understand why those who are so self-consciously respectable do things that they consider contemptible? They say that I have broken their trust. But I never promised anyone my silence. People tell me there is an unwritten rule, but only those afraid my revelations will destroy their saintly images uphold this code of discretion. And then they try to intimidate me with their furious wrinkled brows! But what if I want to reveal whatever I consider important? What if I decide that what I am talking about is not obscene, at least to me?

Who creates these definitions of obscenity and sets out the limits? I decide what I should write in my autobiography, how much to reveal, how much to conceal. Or should I not? Should I wait for instructions from X, Y, and Z, from some Maqsd Ali, some Keramat Mian, or from some Paritosh or Haridas Pal? Should I wait on them to tell me what to write, how much to write?

Critics want to characterize my freedom as self-indulgent license. This is because our likes and dislikes, our sense of right and wrong, sin and virtue, beauty and ugliness are

moulded by thousands of years of patriarchy. So, patriarchy has taught us that the true characteristics of a woman are her diffidence, her timidity, her chastity, her lowered head, and her patience. Therefore, the critic's habituated, controlled perceptions are afraid to face harsh truths, and quickly shut their ears in disgust. "Is she a real writer? Does she have the right to an autobiography?", they ask in anger.

I think that everyone has a right to talk about their lives, even the pompous critic who regards a pen in my hands as an outrage! I have been called irresponsible. I may be irresponsible, I may be irrational, but I refuse to give up the right to be so. George Bernard Shaw once said, "A reasonable man adapts himself to the world. An unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man".

Taslima Nasreen is one of those unreasonable human beings. I do not claim that progress depends upon me; I am simply an insignificant writer. In the eyes of wise men, I am happy to be labelled an unreasonable or imprudent person. It is because I am foolish that I have not kept my mouth shut, I have stood my ground even as an entire society has spat upon me. I have remained firm when patriarchy's ardent supporters have come to trample me. My naïveté, my unreasonableness, my irrationality are my greatest assets.

The question of religion has also come up. Those who know me also know that I always speak up against religious conventions. Religion is thoroughly patriarchal. If I insult religion or religious texts, why should men tolerate it, especially when these same men use religion and religious texts to suppress others? It is these pious gentlemen who have forced me to leave my country. I have paid the price for truth with my own life. How much more should I pay?

Just like in West Bengal today, my books have been banned earlier in Bangladesh on the excuse that they may incite riots. The communal tension raging through South Asia is not caused by my books but by other reasons. The torture of Bangladesh's minorities, the killing of Muslims in Gujarat, the oppression of Biharis in Assam, the attacks against Christians, and the Shia-Sunni conflicts in Pakistan have all occurred without any contribution from me. Even if I am an insignificant writer, I write for humanity, I write with all my heart that every human being is equal, and there must be no discrimination on the basis of gender, colour, or religion. Everyone has the right to live. Riots don't break out because of what I write. But I am the one who is punished for what I write. Fires rage in my home. I am the one who has to suffer exile. I am the one who is homeless everywhere.

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NOTES

1. Written by Taslima Nasrin in response to the ban order placed on November 27, 2003, by the Government of West Bengal on her book *Dwikhandito*, the third volume in her memoirs. Taslima Nasrin has had her previous book *Lajja* proscribed in her native Bangladesh. Following death threats by fundamentalist organizations and a hostile government, Nasrin has had to live in exile. She currently lives in the United States of America. For pdfs of her banned books and more about Taslima Nasrin, see www.taslimanasrin.com.



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