Taslima Nasrin, the writer from Bangladesh, shot into international fame and limelight with the publication of her novel ‘Lajja’ (Shame) which criticized Muslims for attacking minorities. Bangladesh’s government ordered her arrest in 1994 on charges of blasphemy. After a year in hiding, Nasrin fled Bangladesh for four years of exile in Europe. Several Muslim religious leaders demanded her immediate arrest and trial. They warned the government of serious consequences if she is not put on trial for suggesting that the Qur’an should be rewritten. Nasrin was denied making the comment. However, it was finally confirmed that the 36-year-old author should indeed stand trial. Nasrin has appealed to the international community for help.

I am not a great philosopher, a great historian, nor a great writer. I am a simple ordinary woman who has been exiled in Bangladesh by the religious fundamentalis. They have decreed a fatwa, a religious sanction, against me and have put a price on my head. Even today you have only to mention my name to provoke an angry reaction. Not only that, I am a criminal according to my government. They accuse me of having exposed society’s injustices and the government’s failure to protect the rights of the religion. Now, the government has banned my book and issued an arrest warrant against me for committing blasphemy. As a result I have been forced to go underground. With the help of my friends, I managed to hide for sixty long days. Because of the pressure created by the international human rights movement, the Bangladeshi government granted me bail and let me leave. Away from my own country, I was surrounded by police who not only saved me from harm but also imprisoned me by their total protective vigilance. My future is uncertain.

Although I have been far from my country and my own people for several years, I still remain true to my own ideals. I continue to believe that the fundamentalists are not in any country to seek refuge in Bangladesh by the religious fundamentalists. They have decreed a fatwa, a religious sanction, against me and have put a price on my head. Even today you have only to mention my name to provoke an angry reaction. Not only that, I am a criminal according to my government. They accuse me of having exposed society’s injustices and the government’s failure to protect the rights of the religion. Now, the government has banned my book and issued an arrest warrant against me for committing blasphemy. As a result I have been forced to go underground. With the help of my friends, I managed to hide for sixty long days. Because of the pressure created by the international human rights movement, the Bangladeshi government granted me bail and let me leave. Away from my own country, I was surrounded by police who not only saved me from harm but also imprisoned me by their total protective vigilance. My future is uncertain.

Although I have been far from my country and my own people for several years, I still remain true to my own ideals. I continue to believe that the fundamentalists are not in any country to seek refuge in my country. I do not pray to any god to end my sufferings. I still have confidence in myself. And, I assure you, I most certainly have faith in the spiritual and logical fight against religious fundamentalism.

I am an atheist. Let me explain, although I am not a specialist in the study of religion, how because of my personal experience I have come to the atheist position. I was born in a Muslim family. When I grew up I was shocked to learn that some of my neighbours were not the real owners of their houses. The actual owners had been Hindus forced to leave their homeland by the partition of India in 1947, a partition forced on the basis of religion. Just across the border was the land of the Hindus.

The violent and fratricidal partition forced many Hindus out of my country to seek refuge in the Hindu-majority country on the other side of the border. Meanwhile, many Muslims in my country had also heard that it was religion that had led to all these disasters. So it followed that, when young, I could not understand what religion was all about until I thought of religion as something positive. I realized that religion was oppressive.

Over time, and during the course of my training, in the science, I developed the powers of observation, experiment, analysis, and reasoning. Without reasoning, I found, nothing should be accepted as fact. I knew about the Hindu texts that are called Aatavahins. I received wisdom, ‘facts’ which are supposed to have been received from some superior authority. It is authority that cannot be questioned. There are similar unquestionables in all religions. But I could not accept the concept that some things are supposed to be unquestioned.

I began to study the Koran, the holy book of Islam, I was surprised to be told there were only two sexual objects. Naturally, I set aside the Koran. Meanwhile, wherever I looked I continued to find that religion was oppressive. When I travelled to the West, I became more convinced of the need for independence.

One day, I resolved to fight back. I took up my pen and started writing against injustice, unreasonable, and prejudice. I exposed the crimes of the religion, particularly the injustice and the oppression against women. And what happened as a result? My government, as I previously mentioned, has accused me of blasphemy and for moving from my friends, my family, my home, my homeland. I am against religion for other reasons. Religion as practiced does not always teach people to love one another. On the contrary, it often teaches them to hate people of a different religion. Religion also leads people to tyrants. To kill and to be killed. It is a sad history.

While I was living in the West, I watched the development of secular ideas. My reasons are: first, the insistence on the superiority of the individual over the collective. For example, the Indian government, to whom I had been exposed to the same sort of oppression because of religion, particularly the religious sanction, against me and have set a price on my head. I have been received from some superior authority that cannot be questioned. There are similar unquestionables in all religions. But I could not accept the concept that some things are supposed to be unquestioned.

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