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**Myth of Equality: Reading Mariam Karim's *My Little Boat* and Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* as a political discourse**

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**Abstract**

The attempt to weaken the power of religion through the discourse of secularism has paradoxically strengthened religious fundamentalism in several nations in the contemporary era. Critics believe that the disentanglement of religion and community has denied people a strong individuality which has led to the politicization of identity in the form of fundamentalism, xenophobia and a fanatical espousal of tradition. Such perspectives coincide with the observation of Newyork University history Professor David Ludden. The upsurge of religious nationalism has been noted with apprehension by the minorities around the world. The attack on Babri- masjid at Ayodhya in India on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 has been construed as a revival of religious nationalism in the subcontinent and this incident has also altered the communal dynamics of the subcontinent.

Though most nation states deny the existence of inequalities among their citizens, Mariam Karim's *My Little Boat* Nasreen's *Lajja* interrogate this ideological position-equality among all citizens-from the minoritarian perspective. These women writers challenge the public or national history which is predominantly a male discourse. This masculinised history is disputed by the private history which adds value, excavates female experiences which are infinite in number. Their creative imagination asserts their dignity and equality by liberating themselves from oppression and marginalization.

The narration, through its layering of copious, authentic statistical data and fictive plot elements underscores the disjuncture between the promises of the secular nationalist, socialist leaders and the ground realities. The fictions expose the younger generation to multiple narratives of nationalism—ranging from inclusive, democratic nationalism to ethno-religious nationalism. By doing so it invites the younger generation to play a decisive role in redefining secularism in nationalist contexts This paper attempts to explore the crisis of rationalist secularism and syncretism, in the sub continent due to the manoeuvring of

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various political factions and also examines the operations of opposing discourses such as secularism and religious fundamentalism in the fictional space.

Keywords: Secularism, nationalism, identity, syncretism, communalism, fundamentalism

What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist?

What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other.

(Githa Hariharan:2003)

The attempt to weaken the power of religion through the discourse of secularism has paradoxically strengthened religious fundamentalism in several nations in the contemporary era. Critics believe that the disentanglement of religion and community has denied people a strong individuality which has led to the politicization of identity in the form of fundamentalism, xenophobia and a fanatical espousal of tradition. Such perspectives coincide with the observation of David Ludden that “the late 1970’s nationalist movements, based on the assertion that one majority ethnic or religious group defines a nation have emerged with new force and creativity- with new rituals and spectacles including televised violence to revalorise old emotions and symbolic resources” (7). The upsurge of religious nationalism has been noted with apprehension by the minorities around the world. The attack on Babri- masjid at Ayodhya in India on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 has been construed as a revival of religious nationalism in the subcontinent.

Though most nation states deny the existence of inequalities among their citizens, Mariam Karim’s *My Little Boat* and Nasreen’s *Lajja* interrogate this ideological position- equality among all citizens- from the minoritarian perspective. These women writers challenge the public or national history in recorded forms, which are predominantly a male discourse. This masculinised history is disputed by the private history which adds value by running parallel to the recorded history of nation. The narration, through its layering of copious non canonical forms like journal entries, diaries, authentic statistical data and fictive plot elements underscores the disjuncture between the promises of the secular nationalist, socialist leaders and the ground realities. Their creative imagination asserts their dignity and equality by liberating themselves from oppression and marginalization. This paper attempts to explore the crisis of rationalist secularism, in the sub-continent due to the manoeuvring of various political factions and also examines the operations of opposing discourses such as secularism and religious fundamentalism in the fictional space.

*My Little Boat* (MLB) articulates concerns about minoritarian identity politics, communal conflict and state policies in post – independence India. This novel is set in post Pokhran India and post Babri-masjid demolition where the minorities, threatened by the Hindu nationalism, have taken a defensive stand in the matters of nationalism. This novel details how these issues have become the major fulcrum of the threat to the Nehruvian secularism. In May 1998 a nuclear test was conducted at Pokhran by the BJP government under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Chaos has set in the country following Pokhran. Confusion has cropped up in the minds of Hindus and Muslims on who should take Pokhran pride Hindus or Muslims. In *My Little Boat* the conversation between various characters reflects the mood of the country. Javed, a secular person, husband of the lead character Nasreen is very much shocked to find his secular and reasonable friend Srivatsava supporting BJP's nuclear policy. Srivatsava on the other hand does not equate Hindu power with Pokhran bombing. He is of the view that for the first time since independence India has rejected the superiority of the West. In the busy market area in Rahimganj people are seen shouting slogans like “Hindu dharma Zindabad ..... Pokhran Zindabad” ( 210) in favour of Pokhran. In the press club Javed is furious to read an article which questions Dr. Abdul Kalam – a Muslim involvement in nuclear testing which is a Hindu in its essence. Hindu fanatics associate nuclear test with the revival of Hindu consciousness. They want to prove that all the people are only Hindus, only recently they have been converted to other religions and Dr. Kalam has a Hindu ancestry. Everyone senses civil unrest in the air and it appears at anytime riot might breakout between these two communities. Pokhran nuclear test was seen as an attack on Indian notion of secularism, non violence, tolerance and its pluralistic nature.

After independence amidst bloodshed due to partition, India opted for Nehruvian model of secularism where citizens are free to profess any religion and the state shall not favour any religion and all the religions will be treated with equal respect. It is widely acknowledged that India's commitment to Nehruvian secularism began to weaken when emergency was declared in 1975. The crisis of secularism reached its climax when the Babri mosque was razed at Ayodhya on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1999 in defiance of the court order. This incident has altered the communal dynamics of the subcontinent. The fallout of this incident created ripples in the neighbouring countries also.

Communal tempest which swept across Bangladesh uprooted millions of Hindu families whose lives were completely butchered and devastated. Like any other religious wars that saw the exodus of people, this nation too witnessed the migration of Hindu minorities. This very inhuman act has been fictionalised by Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi Doctor-cum- writer in *Lajja* for which a fatwa has been issued against her by Muslim

religious fanatics. *Lajja* captures the ugly face of the nation which is caught in a communal frenzy, which in turn has eroded the values of secularism- the founding ideology of the country. Nasrin states the reason for writing the novel in the preface of the book:

“I detest fundamentalism and communalism. This was the reason I wrote *Lajja* soon after the demolition of the Babri – masjid in Ayodhya on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992. The book which took me seven days to write, deals with the persecution of Hindus, a religious minority in Bangladesh by the Muslims who are in the majority. It is disgraceful that the Hindus in my country were hunted by the Muslims after the destruction of the Babri – masjid. All of us, who love Bangladesh, should feel document of our collective defeat” (1994: 1x)”

The collective defeat-the failure of the civil constitution and civil society in curbing and condemning the atrocities against the humanity- is narrated through the secular Hindu family Sudhamoy Dutta – a doctor, his wife Kiromoyee, an educated and unemployed son Suranjan and his daughter Maya. The novel opens with the tensed atmosphere in the doctor’s house due to communal riots – the first day after the masjid was brought down. Maya pressurises her family members to move to a safe place which is turned down by her brother Suranjan who does not want to run away from his home and believes that his motherland will not let him down. In another room Sudhomoy reminisces his personal journey which coincides with nation’s journey since partition in 1947. He remembers the sacrifice made by thousands of people to achieve independent Bangladesh to prove that nationality could be built around language, culture and identity:

“Starting from 1947 and stretching upto 1971, the Bengali witnessed wave upon wave of bloodshed and trouble, all of which culminated in the freedom movement of 1971. An independence that was earned at the cost of three million lives proved that religion could not be the basis of a national identity” (8).

When most of the Hindu families left Bangladesh to India during partition in 1947, Sukumar Dutta Sudhamoy’s father who had unwavering faith in Jinnah’s propagation of secular nationalism over religious nationalism : “From this day onwards, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists will not be identified by their respective religions but by their identity as Pakistanis”(87) decided to stay back and asked his family members who urged him to move to India, to forget their historical connection to India and to remain faithful to Bangladesh and the secular ideals they have fought for. Soon it dawned upon the elite East Bengali who opted to go with Pakistan at the time of Partition that their religious nationalism is an utopian one. They preferred secular identity and democracy. The

confounding identities, the conflict between Islamic( Pakistani) and Bengali identity saw the birth of Bangladesh. It's ethnic and linguistic identity was highlighted. Sudhamoy felt very happy and breathed a sigh of relief to acquire this status: "The constitution of the nation reads thus :“ Pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism ..... be the fundamental principle of the constitution”. ( 182)

When the secular nationalism fails to perform, unable to fulfil its promises of economic prosperity, social equalities, people feel let down, betrayed and meekly surrender to religious nationalism. Mark Juergensmeyer comments that: “where the anticipation of secularism’s performance had assumed messianic proportions, the disappointment in the lack of performance reached satanic depths”(23). In Bangladesh also when the Awami League the first ruling party fails to alleviate property people were disenchanted which eventually led to the Islamisation of the country. The Awami League government succumbs to religious forces. In 1975 constitution was amended and the word secularism was removed and Islam became the state religion: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in the public” (181). As a result of this declaration Hindus and other non-Muslims have been implicitly reduced to second class citizens.

Even at this juncture, Sudhomoy, a secular man, for whom his Bengali identity comes first before his religious identity shares the same view of his father. When many of his close friends, relatives including his wife forced him to move he refused as he did not want to live as refugee in another country. His family has been living there for generations and even at the time of partition they did not move to India. He had taken part in the independent struggle which was realised in 1971 and endured the agony when his motherland’s founding ideology secularism was nailed in the coffin on the day it became Islamic state in 1978. So he feels it’s his birth right to stay in his native soil. He asks, “Why should I leave my homeland and go somewhere else?.... If I live it will be on this soil and if I die it will be in this very same place”(7). His firm decision to continue to live in his motherland regardless of all odds indicates his rejection of the authority of muslim that they are the rightful persons to live in this country and asserts his right to be in Bangladesh.

In *My Little Boat* too Javed rejects Hindus claim that they are original inhabitants of India. His friend Kushmood Miyan’s discerning statement to Javed that, “you cannot expect the Islamic world to tolerate Hindu bomb” (94) conveys Muslims still considering themselves as outsiders and their world is somewhere outside India. There is a conflict in their self perception over being secular and Muslim. Javed’s sharp retort that, “India is not Hindu state” (94) reconstitutes the nation as a place belonging to various communities and

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a sole domain of one particular group. Unfortunately to Kushmood Mian the future of Muslims in India is not bright. Javed's effective rebuttal, "It is as bright as it ever was, I think" (94) clearly indicates his powerful struggle to lay claim on this nation against both majority and minority claim which construct Muslims as outsiders and Hindus as original inhabitants of the land.

Not only Muslims even Christians and Anglo- Indians also considered as outsiders. They constantly struggle to establish their identity. Roy Braganza, an Anglo- Indian friend of Nasreen laments the fact that since they are Anglo- Indians people consider them as the bastards of the British who do not accept them and reject them. He says, 'we need to constantly apologise for our existence to prove that we are Indians, like anybody else' (120) clearly proves how majority disqualify Christians and Muslims as their holy lands are in Arabia or in Palestine. Hindu fundamentalists believe there has always been single society and the minorities have intervened and try to destroy Hinduism and so these persons should be expelled.

As an electoral strategy, politicians use the language of communalism for sectarian purposes to woo the voters which pose threat to the fabric of secularism. In Indian politics politicisation of Babri –masjid at Ayodhya by the political parties is a truism. References are made about this incident in the novel. Javed could not trust the Government since it was ruled by the leaders who had organised rath –yatra to garner Hindu votes by whipping up the communal passion. In *Lajja* Nasreen criticises Awami –League, a secular party at the time of independence, for its failure to restore, reinstate secularism during its tenure in 1996, as they were not willing to lose their political benefits. Suranjan condemns Awami-League – the opposition party for not taking any steps to curb the communal holocaust as it wants to gain political advantage by blaming the government's inability to maintain law and order. His remarks, "Everyone needs votes. In this country, it is only vote based politics that survives. No one bothers about ideals. By hook or by crook, vote must be acquired. The Awami-League thinks that it will surely get the Hindu votes. What do they call it? Vote bank, I think...."(112) proves how religion plays a crucial role in the dynamics of power politics. Nasreen attacks not only the Bangladesh Government but all the governments in the sub-continent for their hands in inciting violence: "In the three major countries of the sub continent, the evils of fundamentalism and fascism had been indirectly encouraged by the respective governments for their political gains"(178).

Another fraught issue which is examined in the novels is religious conversion that originated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries in India. In *My Little Boat* one can come across so many such incidents where Christian missionaries are accused of converting

tribal groups and lower caste people to Christianity by imparting them literary skills and also promising them conversion as an escape route from grinding poverty. Lennie, who is a Christian admits that Assembly of God, one of the churches in Lucknow is involved in converting low caste people “The Assembly of God in Lucknow takes care of the Chamars, Converts them, I suppose” (121) Prevalence of inequality in Hindu caste structure is cited as one of the main reasons for conversion. This lack of egalitarianism of the Hindu religion prompted conversions from lower caste enters the much debated public space thus transforming alienation into integration. Conversion is one of the main reasons for unleashing violence against minorities. Hindu fanatics retaliated by attacking nun Augusta, Nasreen’s friend inside the church. The attacks against minorities convey that Rahimgunj has become totally unsafe for the minorities to live in and the level of intolerance prevailing among different communities. Rahul Ganguly, a reporter was shot dead as he was probing this molestation case. The murder confirms the hatred which runs very deep in the minds which have become repositories of vengeance and violence. “Violence is at the core of conversion because conversion tears away the secure lineaments of identity and orders the extinction of an individual’s most innate beliefs and understandings” (Viswanathan : 339) Through these incidents Mariam Karim subtly suggests that the threat faced by the Christian community is no different from that of Muslim community.

In *Lajja* Nasreen details how the biased amendment in the constitution have indirectly propelled Hindus either to convert or to migrate. When Sudhamoy was in detention camp many of his wife Kironmoy’s friends forced her to become Muslim, but she was defiant. Non Muslims were forced to take religious lessons. Maya was made to stand outside the class as she was a Hindu girl. Even the names of the Universities, schools, Colleges, roads and stations have become the victims of conversion and renamed in Islamic names. Suranjan laments the fact that government has bowed to the whims of fundamentalism as it remained in power because of them.

The conversion has alienated the Hindu minority from the mainstream society. The onslaught on minorities is deep rooted and the victimisation and isolation of Hindus had its beginning before Babri – masjid destruction. Suranjan for the first time felt isolated when he was plotted to eat beef by his class mates when he was in seventh standard. Hindu women had to renounce much of their religious identities like ‘sindhur’ on their parting hair, loha and sankha on their wrists whereas men had to give up wearing dhuti in order to assimilate with mainstream Muslim society. In government jobs also Hindus were neither considered for promotions nor for new jobs. Sudhomoy was retired only as an Assistant Professor whereas Muslims juniors were promoted as Professors. Another heinous act which further pushed them to the margins is ‘Vested Property Act’. During the time of partition properties which

were left by the Hindus who migrated to India was acquired by Pakistan in the name of 'Enemy Property Act' with due promise that it would be returned to the owners when they come back. After Bangladesh independence, instead of returning these properties to the Hindus when they came back, the government usurped such properties in the name of 'Vested Property Act'. "However, the properties of Muslims who were staying either in India or abroad were not attached".(129) These kind of situations enhance the feeling, among the public that state is a corrupt force and cannot be trusted. This incident exposes the biased judiciary and hypocrisy of the government and its failure to give protection to the minorities which is guaranteed to them by law during independence.

In *My Little Boat* Mariam Karim gives an evocative instance in which the Muslims are identified with Pakistanis. Javed does not favour India's nuclear policy, because he feels India lacks credibility. His friend hails government's action as for once India has rejected western supremacy and he accuses Javed of looking at it from narrow view point. Javed is very much offended as his friend who knows him well, has called his opinion a narrow Muslim view point, a prejudiced one. He thought, "The next minute the new Ganguly boy would be calling him a Pakistani" (36) He wondered, "And he .... who claimed objectivity had reduced himself to the same level... had been cornered into reacting like minority...had been ghettoized .... neatly"(38). A picture of a Muslim seeing himself as a minority, as an alien, outsider, the other emerges strongly in these above lines.

The focus on female identity is a compelling issue in the debate on minority. Mariam Karim locates herself as a feminist who has placed her women character as those who recognise their subordinate position in the society and want to break the shackles. Nasreen's mother is highly critical of Muslim officers marrying Hindu women, who would become Muslims and their children are given Muslim names. She criticises Indian secularism as people are not respected for what they are, she questions, "What was the true secularism if you did not first accept your wives as being persons in their own right? That is where the first divide lay? What could one do but turn to West? (190). She warns of the danger of not accepting People as they are. As Rajendar Kaur observes, "State imposed secularist ideology by calling insistent attention to issues of class and gender that tend to get ignored in the debate on secularism"(56). Karim opines that women, Dalit and poor are considered to be inferior and illegitimate beings in the society, family and religion.

Religious riots rip the women's bodies apart. Even small girls are not spared. They are abducted, raped and murdered. Despair, pain, frustration, agony, anguish and grief have become part of their memories. Maya, Suranjan's sister was ruthlessly abducted and never returned. His moments with his sister haunt his memories like a recurring nightmare. The family longs for her coming back home even if she had been raped: "Maya was no more....



In fact it was probably true to say that everyone in the house nursed the hope that the tortured, raped and brutalised Maya would return one day".(194) has pathos. All these brutal happenings are not just memories, which they excavate and remember. It will be there in their heads all the time, what happened and what has happened and what has changed forever. The traumatic experiences have not only been inscribed but been etched in the memories and on the dignity of people. Both the novelists underscore the concept that whether it is a secular country or religious one, women are victimised and their position is secondary to men who treat them like any other inanimate objects.

During the communal clashes in 1992 minority communities were at the receiving end. The majority community attacked, looted, damaged and burnt the properties of minorities. The hooligans who indulged in the riots did this not because of their love towards their religion, but to satisfy their vested interests, their greed for gold, money and women. The rioters went berserk as they were backed by the ruling party. Bangladesh government comes into sharp criticism for its impartial treatment of her citizens. When the leaders and government heads are very much concerned about the destruction of one single mosque in India, they did not bother to take action against all those Islamic fanatics who brought down hundreds of temples. "They are angry when a mosque is destroyed, don't they realise that Hindus will be just as angry when temples are destroyed? Just because one mosque has been demolished must they destroy hundreds and hundreds of temples?(55). Even media did not write a word about the outrage on minorities. They showed that no such riots happened there and only in India such things happened. Suranjan's question, "has any Hindu been able to touch any mosque" conveys Hindus are not in a position to retaliate in an Islamic state whereas in India- minorities are strong and they could register their opposition in a democratic manner as it is a secular country. Suranjan's friend pictures the position of minorities in a secular state and a religious state:

"The Muslims in India are in a position to fight, because India is secular state. Here power is in the hands of the fundamentalists. There is no scope to fight in this country. The Hindus here are second class citizens. Since when do second class citizens have the power to fight." (81)

During communal clashes Muslims in India have not left the country whereas Hindus in Bangladesh vacated their homeland to India. Minorities in the subcontinent are under constant "apocalyptic fear: that they will eventually be driven away from their homelands or persecuted or killed if they remain" (Mark: 179). Both the novelists articulate these concerns through their lead characters in the novel. Nasreen totally loses her mental balance after witnessing the molestation of Sister Augusta. Slowly she withdraws from life. She is not able to come to terms with crude reality of Rahul's murder which happened due to

different religious views. In her fight against the fundamentalist forces she loses and finally she commits suicide by sailing in her little boat into the depths of river Gomathi.

Her husband feels proud to say that he is a secular man. But incidents such as demolition of Babri masjid, attack on the nun and minorities made him to jettison his faith in Indian secularism. He says, "I always believed that I was living in a secular society, but of late I am beginning to be less sure" (16). These loaded words symbolise the transition of Indian society. Javed, a practical man, who doubts India's secularism after Godhra incident, strongly believes in assimilation and believes that Muslims have bright future in India. The novel ends on an optimistic note where Mehjabeen, Nasreen's daughter decides to complete the journey, which her mother had left unfinished. She receives the walking stick used by her mother which symbolically conveys that the younger generation of the country has to fight against social evils to practise secularism every day. The author who reposes her faith in Gandhi says, "we cannot let secularism bite the dust and fascism to take over. After all Gandhi dreams, certain dreams for India and we are all followers of that dream" (61)

After Partition Hindus in East Bengal have been reduced to minorities and they had to renounce much of their secular identity to get assimilated with the main stream Muslim society. Sudhomoy and his son Suranjan are secular Bengalis non-believers in religion, spent much professed humanity and humanitarianism. They are agonised at the thought that finally they are identified as minority Hindus. At the end of the war, his son loses his battle. He has given up everything which his parents tried to inculcate when he was growing up. Suranjan is happy to be seen as Hindu because the world wants to identify them along the religious lines. His outburst: "However much we call ourselves humanists, those people out there will call us Hindus. The more we love the people of this country, the more they will isolate us... Sooner or later all of us will be shoved under a bridge to die. Baba, please let's go... let's go..." (213) brings to fore the loss or transformation of secular identity into a more religious one. When Suranjan announces that he is tired of being different and wants to leave to India, Sudhamoy's worst fears whether they would finally leave their beloved homeland have come true. Both of them decide to migrate to India.

Both the novelists do not stop with merely registering the events. They go one step and further try to find out the epicentre of this hatred towards each other and probes why the two communities started to move away from each other. The reasons are numerous, but partition could be the founding trauma for the crisis against humanity in the name of religion. The riots which broke out after Babri masjid destruction proves the ghostly presence of partition dragon which appears at any moment. As Priya Kumar observes: Memories of Partition violence have inevitably seeped into their consciousness, shaping and forming their

self definition and ways of being in the world especially for the population of those religions that were directly impacted by the event. (94).

Both the novels expose the younger generation to multiple narratives of nationalism—ranging from inclusive, democratic nationalism to ethno-religious nationalism. Both the authors repose their faith in the younger generation who play a decisive role in redefining secularism in nationalist contexts. Through the younger generation Mehjabeen, Maya and Suranjan the authors highlight the fact that how future generation challenge rigid majoritarian nationalism that side lines minority religious and cultural identities and instead advocates for inclusive, pluralistic nationalism.

Both the novels point out that whether the society is a religious or secular, the problem of minority rights and the assertion of their identities, which lay claim on the nation persists and it is fundamental. The common citizen interrogates the relevance of the nationalist agenda which promises equality in the post independent era. G. Aloysius, modern social scientist in his pioneering work *Nationalism without a nation in India* argues nationalism was a mere illusion. He opines. “ Nationalism instead of giving birth to one national society seems to have delivered a whole litter of communities divided from one another in terms of language, religion and caste” (10). Equality is a myth- an idealistic condition, preferred by any society which cannot be guaranteed. Thus the novelists by capturing the most important moments in the history of sub-continent challenge the euphoria created by the elite nationalist discourse that promised a peaceful atmosphere for their citizens. This makes their novels- that place the histories of the affected minorities alongside the official history -relevant in the contemporary scenario.

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