

## Letter from New York

Anjum Niaz in New York went to a reading by Taslima Nasrin of her book *Meyebela*. This is what she emailed to us.

THE West's poster girl Taslima Nasrin frowns at being called a 'female Rushdie'. While he chickened out and 'apologized' for having hurt Muslim sentiment, the Bangladeshi feminist, 'bravely' withheld the religious frenzy, 'I faced the music when 100,000 fundamentalists came out on the streets of Dhaka and demanded my head. Still I did not apologize.'

She's never met Rushdie, 'but I believe he's angry with me for criticizing him.' Her next sentence is sure to make him cringe: 'Why doesn't someone call him a male Taslima Nasrin?' Her audience at Asia Society's splendid premises on Park Avenue in Manhattan delight in this quip.

Tossed sky-high into international notoriety for writing just one book denigrating God, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Quran, it earned them both fame and sympathy from civil libertarians in the West, and a death sentence from hard-line Islamists that made them flee for their lives.

But New York loves the odd couple.

Rushdie—with his sights set on the Nobel Prize—is reinventing himself as America's godless top gun, while Nasrin, battling her childhood demons and religious discrimination that has scarred her for life, is still struggling to find a focal point for her fight against Islam, portrayed as the personal villain of the piece in her memoir *Meyebela (My Bengali Girlhood: A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World)*, 2002, translated from Bengali by Gopa Majumdar.

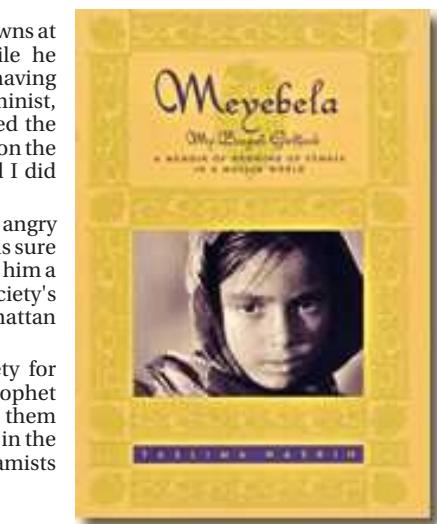
Speaking haltingly in fragmented English, the home-sick Nasrin, now turned 40 and shunting between Germany, Sweden, France and the US since her exile 8 years ago, her nape-clinging cut highlighting the gray in her crown and a trimmer figure dressed in black pants and a multi-coloured jumper worn with a blue scarf, mechanically... or impassively travels the same road she has walked a thousand times to draw gasps from her audience on the hypocritical, subterranean vices practiced by the men feigning religiosity through their hidebound, intolerant and excessive attitudes towards their women.

Responding to charges that her book *Lajja* (which continues to be a bestseller in India) was used by the BJP to fan anti-Muslim sentiment in India, and that The Statesman added fuel to the fire by misquoting her on the Quran, she clarifies her position: 'I do not hold the view that the Quran should be revised thoroughly, because I think it is impossible to revise the Quran.... Why should we try to change a religious text which is held as sacred by many? My view on this issue is clear and categorical. I hold the Quran, the Vedas, 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 socio-historical contexts in which these were written and therefore we should not be guided by their precepts.'

Does she then consider herself a Muslim? 'I consider myself a human being. I am very proud to be a Bengali. I don't believe in religion because of religion there's bloodshed, ignorance, illiteracy, women's oppression, injustice and inequality. My books were burnt as blasphemous and I was thrown out of my country. Religion and freedom cannot coexist.'

'Dedicated to my mother who suffered all her life,' *Meyebela* revolves around her 'Ma,' a devoutly religious woman who instilled the fear of God in her daughter: 'If I didn't pray, fast or drape a burqa I would burn in hell. Fire, fire, fire. I would ask 'Ma,' why does God terrorize everyone? Why does he want to hurt people by fire?'

'I never wanted to be famous. All I wanted was to fight for the rights of women in my country. My mother told me I was inferior to my brothers. At age 15, I began asking questions. Because I asked questions and got no answers, I would often cry for myself, other girls and the sufferings of maidservants.' (In *Meyebela*, she recounts her mother often catching her father in bed with the maidservants whom 'Ma' would



Taslima Nasrin with Jacques Derrida

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---extract from Salman Rushdie's open letter to Taslima Nasrin

fire unceremoniously.)

Giving God a male identity, Nasrin compares Him to her 'Baba' (father) who is 'wicked and cunning... but men will go to heaven where they'll get exotic food served by pink beautiful women with their skin glowing, pouring wine in their glasses. Grandfather's wonderful pilgrimage will send him straight to heaven... he belches continuously... I hate that smell... the termites attacked the books in our house, they made me cross, so one day I smashed them on a book of Hadith.'

Her childhood stream of consciousness co-opting God, Quran and the Hadith as antithetical to her very existence may have ensured her a lifetime of admiration from the West, but has deeply hurt Muslims around the world. Not to mention providing grist to the anti-Muslim mills spewing anger and disgust against Islam since 9/11.

"I can't control the hate!" exclaims Nasrin in response to the above. "There is no conflict between East and West, Christianity or Islam. The conflict is between secularism and fundamentalism; between rationality and blind faith; between innovation and tradition; between past and future..."

Shimmering at the heart of her discourse is the chilling story of a girl, interrupted, deprived, discriminated, sexually abused and raped. She opens her tale with the 1971 brutalization by Pakistani army when she's nine years old.

"The Punjabis" are coming, and the family must flee farther into the countryside to another relative, then another... and then the soldiers come. I was simply pretending to be asleep, traveling the land of dreams, playing with fairies, swinging on a high swing, no longer a part of this world. Pretending that I did not know that men wearing heavy boots had entered the room and were walking about, a rifle dangling from every shoulder... little girl, never mind what those heavy boots do in your room. Your heart must not tremble... if it does, hide that tremor from these men when they lift the mosquito net and look at you, lust and desire pouring from their eyes, flames shooting out of their mouths as they speak in a language you cannot understand."

"*Meyebela* will be problematic as an educational tool in the United States today, where people are constantly being told that Muslims are evil. In a society that knows little about any variety of Islam, the dark picture painted by Nasrin may be universalized, and welcomed all too eagerly," warns Meredith Tax, herself a feminist and founder of the PEN American Center Women's Committee.

"My father is very sick, I can't go visit him in Bangladesh," Nasrin's voice trembles. When her mother was dying of cancer, she returned in 1998 and surrendered to the courts. She was allowed to care for her mother. After her death, Taslima again left Bangladesh, this time to France, along with her *cause célèbre*.

Bangladeshis who heard her speak came away with mixed feelings. One woman said: "I concur with the perverse male hypocrisy and women's subjugation in our society. But she's seizing the world's sympathy for her."

... treated like a heroine. What about millions who left suffering in silence back home?"

Added a man, "Someone should tell Taslima of the terrible things that happen here in the US: child abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment and gender discrimination. There's no Islam here, so who takes the rap?"

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