

Talking with Taslima Nasrine

It is hard to get Taslima Nasrine to talk about anything other than her own issues of exile and women's rights in Bangladesh. She tends not to respond to other questions, or else give terse answers that foreclose further exploration. Given her perspective on what defines her, as a person and as a writer, she is perfectly justified in doing so. However, since over the years we have become familiar with what she says and writes about, interviews with her have become one-dimensional affairs, laced with traces of self-righteousness. At least in interviews, the lady seems to display no wit or humour, or either irony and self-deprecation. In reply she may say that those are luxuries only male writers can afford. And she may be right.

It was one such interview I read in a local magazine, and which led me to the interviewer. Who supplied Taslima's email address and also suggested I talk to her on the phone before essaying forth into the interview. I called, and Taslima answered at the other end. It was a very short phone conversation. Her tone was extremely wary, and she responded to queries with a monosyllabic 'yes' or 'no.' Obviously getting to know some Bangladeshi male named Khademul Islam was not at the top of her agenda. Understood, I thought, yet as I switched off the cell phone, I had a very hard time envisioning her in Bangladesh, in Dhaka, leading any kind of 'normal' life. E-mails followed.

In theory of course Taslima should be free to come back. She has had the courage to speak her mind, to write about what she finds oppressive as a woman, to hit at the taboos governing our clique-ish, middle-class chatterati and literati. Perhaps we need more of that, not less. There is also the principle of secularism at stake here, which explicitly acknowledges that the freedom of the writer is really the freedom to be offensive (it is meaningless otherwise), and it is the business of the modern, secular state to provide protection for that freedom. But in practical terms, Bangladesh is not a modern, secular state. It is a crisis-ridden polity where various forces are in a state of fragile balance, and where Taslima Nasrine, for various reasons, has negligible support from the secular social forces at play. In the present political context, the establishment has its hands full in trying to keep a lid on things, and the last thing it may want is something else to stir up the pot. Also, Taslima is bound to stick out like a sore thumb. How can reasonable security be provided for her? Where will she go, and how will she go? There are no foolproof guarantees, and if something happens to her, Bangladesh's image internationally as a nation that allows bearded fundooos to periodically attack its writers will persist for an eternity. While one sympathizes with her plight and knows what should be done in principle, in real-life terms the problem seems to be an insurmountable one. And as is the case in human affairs, what once seemed to be a temporary solution often turns out

Daily Star: You have been expressing a strong interest in coming back home to Bangladesh. However, you have alienated your natural base of support, feminists and writers, by repeatedly stating that women in Bangladesh have not stood up for you, and by portraying the writers (men) as less than appealing human beings in your tell-all books. Given the unique nature of your situation, without support from these two sections of society, do you think you can make it back?

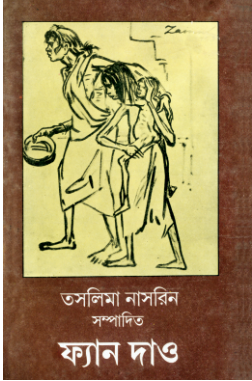
Taslima Nasrine: I have always wanted to return to Bangladesh, but no government has allowed me to do so. Bangladesh is my country, and yet I am denied the right to return there. Whatever I have written in my autobiographies are all true. I have not made up stories. Perhaps I cannot write good fiction because I can't make up stories. All the fiction and novels I have written so far all are drawn from true stories. Fundamentally my struggle is for equality and justice. I tell the truth, and therefore have to suffer the consequences. I have been living in exile, away from home, for more than a decade. On the other hand I have also received a lot of love from people for telling the truth. Whatever I have written about Bangladeshi feminists and writers was written purely on the basis of what my experiences and relationships with them were. I had wonderful experiences as well as bitter ones. I did not become a writer to either praise somebody or hurt somebody. I simply described the unvarnished truth of what happened. If somebody is hurt there is nothing I can do about it. Since I'm writing about my life, since truthfulness and honesty are my principles, it is inevitable that there will be those who will be very annoyed by it. I don't give it much importance. Those who know how to value a truthful account of a life, those who know that such autobiographies are rarely written anywhere in the world--autobiographies are written to sing one's own praises--and that too by a woman, where society teaches women to be silent, where a woman did not hesitate for a single second to tell what it was really like, shouldn't those books be valued greatly? This breaking of taboos, this disregard of 'scandal', is this a thing to be valued lightly? How steel is forged through the hottest of fires, to tell about it is to give courage to lakhs of women, so that they do not submit to shame, so that they stand up straight and tall and live self-confidently. If one is to garner support by simply praising people, I don't want that kind of support. If somebody wants



to give support by telling lies that is something I do not wish for. Those who love the truths I speak about, they will support me, and have done so. I have been given the love, sympathy, support and solidarity of ordinary people. If the extra-ordinary people do not love me, that is their affair. I have never compromised with the truth, and come what may I never will

DS: You're implying that feminists here can't face the truth. But quite a few of the women activists here feel that while they may not have demonstrated for you on the streets, they did strongly sympathize and feel sisterly solidarity for your struggle, only for you to bite them once you went abroad, that in fact you have become somebody who uses women's rights in Bangladesh for self-promotion and profit. How do you answer that?

TN: I have not said that these feminists cannot face



the truth. We all have one objective we're trying to attain, and that is women's equality. But our methods are different. I'm fighting all by myself with my writing, and the feminists with their organizations. The process too is different. The way I discuss religion, say that religion is the great obstacle in the path to women's empowerment, those feminists do not. When I was in deep trouble, when there were demonstrations against me and demands throughout the whole nation that I be hanged, when the government was lodging cases against me, when I had to go into hiding, then not a single feminist organization spoke out on my behalf. The men and women involved with a leading human rights organization did help me in every way during that time, and had they not come to my help then I possibly could not have come out alive. I was well known in Bangladesh and abroad as a feminist long before I was forced into exile. I have never ever thought in terms of either self-promotion or profit. That is a subject for others, not for me. I have been invited to feminist conferences and seminars abroad for a long time, but I can't find the time to attend all these.

DS: There is a feeling among some that you have become have become predictable in terms of voice and content. What are your thoughts on that?

TN: If I am, what is the problem? How many voices do you find of this kind?

DS: Your recent books have all been autobiographies. Your strength might be nonfiction, especially given your uncomplicated, conversational prose style. Your

response?

TN: I am far more comfortable with nonfiction, both in reading and writing. So much is happening around us, so many narratives are locked up in our lives and in the lives of those around us, why not write about that? I don't see the need to make up stories. I write in a simple, easy way so that ordinary people can understand what I'm writing about. There is a message I want to communicate, and the more people I reach the better it is for me. I do not write to win the praises of big critics in big newspapers. I want a change in our male-dominated, patriarchal societies, so that women can lead lives of dignity and honour, that there should be equality and beauty in our lives--this is the dream that powers my writing. This dream is the reason for my living.

DS: The English translation of *Lajja* was poor. Things have improved with later works, but not by much. Can we expect better standards, especially of the popular autobiographical books, in the future?

TN: The publishers commission the translators to translate my books into different languages. It's completely the publisher's responsibility. I have nothing to do with it.

DS: In your poems and articles in *Desh* magazine you have written quite tenderly, and amusingly, about Kolkata. Tell us about your day to day life there.

TN: Bangladesh is my mother, and West Bengal my aunt. When my mother has shut the door on me, an aunt's house has provided refuge. Just as there is love to be found here, so too there is no dearth of neglect, disrespect, jealousy, and pettiness. The difference between the two countries is really not that big. However, my country's inhabitants are far more open and sincere, more passionate, and I miss that very much. Life? Life goes on as it does, with police protection round the clock. Most of my time is spent writing.

DS: Recently Tahmima Anam's English-language novel *A Golden Age*, about 1971, was published from London to wide acclaim. Have you read it? Do you follow English language writing by Bangladeshis?

TN: I do, but I haven't read *A Golden Age*.

NON-FICTION

MAHMUD, RAHMAN

5:00 a.m. Wipe the shleep out of your eyes; shave and shower. And shove that weary body out the door.

In the dim light of the streetlamps, walk, don't shuffle, down Geneva Avenue. Trot if you can. Keep your ears alert for the train in the distance. There one comes, brakes screeching as it swings round the bend. Scramble up the ramp, but by the time you show the man your pass, slip past the gate, it's too late; the doors slam and the car rolls out the station. It's officially springtime in Boston, but it's still cold and you shiver while you wait for the next train. When it comes, you shiver inside. Too early in the day for the car to be warm. So you huddle, like the other scattered passengers, folded into yourself, half asleep. There, in the corner nods one man, full sleep ahead.

Savin Hill. Columbia. Andrew. Broadway. South Station. Washington. Out, then switch to the Orange Line, heading north. To the very last stop: Oak Grove. Walk over to Main Street in the town called Melrose.

7:28 a.m. Khtng! Stamp your yellow time card. You're ready to start another day at the factory. Once this place made car radios but it now makes bug zappers.

It is 1979 and this is your fifth factory job. It's been four years since you finished college with a BA in sociology. You didn't want to go to graduate school because you'd developed an allergy to academia. For three years you coded surveys for a think tank but while the flexibility was nice -- at lunchtime you could read newspapers in the library -- there wasn't much to the work. Though you'd survived a war -- perhaps even because you'd lived through such tumultuous times -- you craved grit and challenge.

Your then wife, your closest friends and schoolmates sought work in factories, some of them because they didn't care for office work, some because they had visions of organizing the unorganised, and sometimes goals even grander than that. You follow their example, out of solidarity -- and curiosity. In the factories where you seek work -- small, lowly capitalized, with high labour turnover -- there would not be room for grand visions.

You did not enter an unfamiliar world. In college you'd worked with unions in support of striking garment and farm workers. You spent a summer as a community organizer working alongside longshoremen and other blue-collar workers. Even if the world of production was new to you, the lives of producers was not.

7:35. The machine room is humming. Place your barrels in place, the one on the left containing eight-inch long strips of steel, the other to hold the processed strips. Sit yourself down before the punch press that towers over you like a 12-foot giant. Fish a

strip out of the left barrel, feed it inside the jaws of the press, make sure it's straight on the die, remove both hands, remove both hands, press the two buttons at once, WHAM! Hammer on the anvil, down and then up again. Take the strip out that now looks like a hat, toss it into the right barrel.

Fish, feed, withdraw, press: WHAM! Lift and toss.

There's a shadow behind you. No time to look. No time to waste. You must press at least 90 strips an hour.

Fisssh, ffeed, withdrawwww, presss: WHAMMM! Lift and toss. Don't let him distract you. Fishfeedwithdrawpress: WHAM! Liftandtoss.

Fishfeedwithdrawpress: WHAM! Liftandtoss. Owner moves on to shadow a different

victim.

One day, Foreman will show you a barrel of strips, the bend you pressed on the wrong side. A waste of good metal. Better not let it happen again. You are grateful that you're not in Tsarist Russia where you'd have been fined. Or that you're not a servant in your mother's employ in Bangladesh where if you broke a glass, you'd get your wages cut.

You overhear Foreman question your co-worker, can he hack it? Seems too frail to me. While you resent the doubt about your physical abilities, you are pleased that he didn't question your ability to put in the time. You had succeeded in shedding the well-known disdain of the Bengali middle class for manual labour. Perhaps that's because

you grew up around a father who didn't mind grease under his fingernails since he spent much of his time tinkering inside the engine of his car. And as a teenager you joined Service Civil International, a group that organized work camps and instilled in you the notion that manual labour was healthy.

9:00 a.m. Brrrrng. Break time. Jump off the stool, rush outside, jostling your ten co-workers from the machine room, reach the canteen truck, order a coffee and a donut. Return inside, mingle with the nearest group. Billy, the Vietnam vet who works next to you. Matt and Dave, younger boys who get stoned every day at lunch. In the corner, the man they call the pervert -- did ya hear, Foreman found a magazine with photos of naked men at his station -- drinks his coffee alone. Matt asks, hear you live in Dorchester, where the nig... he tries again... where the blacks live? Yes. Foreman comes by, "No mingling. Break time's a privilege. No mingling." Everyone shuffles to their stations where we drain the last dregs of our coffee.

10:45 a.m. The right barrel is full. Dolly that one out, roll an empty one in.

Fish, feed, withdraw, press: WHAM! Lift and toss.

12:00 noon. Brrrrng. Join the rest of the factory in the cafeteria. French onion soup today. Some days it's chicken chow mein or chicken fried steak. You've learned to look forward to the dregs of onion soup. By the time you get your food, there's fifteen minutes to swallow it down and return to the machine. Still, you're grateful for the cafeteria.

1:45 a.m. The bin to your left is empty. You rummage out back, but there are no more strips for your die. Come into my office, Foreman says. He has you use the tabletop drill press to bore holes in a stack of small plates. At his desk, he smokes while he looks up from time to time to scan the press room through his large window. A whiff of perfume breaks through the odour of smoke. A young, blonde woman wearing a t-shirt and tight jeans enters, gives him some order sheets, sticks around to make a mean joke about the pervert. You find her fragrance intoxicating, a welcome break from the smell of grease, metal, and cigarettes. But there's one more reason. It whips you to the memory of another moment, the same fragrance, that time on a close friend, suddenly needy in a moment of vulnerability. You did the right thing, respecting the friendship. Yet the perfume soaked into your brain cells.

The women here, a hundred perhaps, work out front, as assemblers. They start at 3.00 dollars an hour, fifty cents less than the men on the presses. You're part of the machine men, the aristocracy of labour. What a joke. Any of the women you know could do a better job at the press than you. You came in off the street answering an ad for 'machine operator.' It helped that you

told them you'd operated complicated machines before: a glass lathe, a clicker, and your pride and pain, the machine that glued posters on chipboard for jigsaw puzzles but broke down every ten minutes.

2:00. p.m. Brrrrng. Afternoon break. The choreography resumes. Out the door, grab another coffee, swing back inside, gather around a machine, continue the morning conversation. So how long does it take you to get here from Dorchester? Just over an hour and a half. Foreman comes by, "No congregating. Break time's a privilege. Might have to take it away from you guys." By the time you're done with this job, Matt might know where Dorchester is in relation to Malden or Melrose. You could talk about Bangladesh, but when some of these guys haven't even been to downtown Boston, there's not much curiosity about some place on the other side of the planet.

Fish, feed, withdraw, press, WHAM! Then: NOOOOOOOOOOOO! A scream that tumbles your insides, freezes your heart. You look left, and Billy's gaping at his right hand, four fingers gone. Gone.

The machines all stop.

Foreman runs over. Leads Billy away. Someone else fishes Billy's fingers out of the press, takes them, wraps them up. Foreman comes back.

Work resumes.

Fish, feed, withdraw, press, WHAM! Lift and toss.

Fishitt! You cannot pretend. You go into the office, tell Foreman you're leaving. He nods. You punch your time card, and slam your body out that heavy iron door. You stroll, you think about finding a bar, but you're not the type that often buries your blues in liquor, so you keep walking until you arrive at the station. Catch the next train waiting to leave. But your eyes remain glazed and all you can see is Billy's hand, the fingers gone. A body slumps down next to you. It's the man they call the pervert. He confesses to you, he couldn't take it either. The two of you sit, side by side, in silence, your bodies swaying when the train sways, pulling themselves into place when the train jerks to a stop. When the train reaches Park Street Station, he gets off to catch the Green Line towards the South End. Neither of you say, see you tomorrow. That will be for sunup to decide.

Billy was in Vietnam with the 82nd Airborne. Came back, his body in one piece, though not his head. Too often he drowned his memories in drink. In a mimeographed flyer handed outside the plant the next week, a leftist group will write, "What the imperialist war could not accomplish, the class war finished." In this war, they choppered Billy to Mass General, but the hospital could not sew his fingers back.

Back on the Red Line: South Station, Broadway, Andrew, Columbia, Savin Hill, Fields Corner. Make sure you wake up. Out

the sliding car doors, down the ramp, you trudge back home up Geneva Avenue.

6:30 p.m. Home, where, with intact fingers on both your hands, you cook dinner, eat, and tumble into bed, sleeping long this night.

You consider quitting, but when tomorrow comes, you will return for another day at the factory. You will return because there's rent and the heating oil bill to be paid. You will return because you can still remember a recent month when a job eluded you and you found yourself pawning a ring someone left in your hands. You will return because you cannot afford the luxury of quitting simply because you are too frail to handle realism on the factory floor.

In a week, a new man will be at Billy's press. Towards the end of summer, a new man will also sit at your station. Before you leave, you will join the company picnic where the owner treats all workers and their guests to lobsters. There, everyone will relish the lobster. Even you. If there is a perversity to eating a lobster in this crowd, pulling apart claws from body, you block that thought. You will migrate to a different factory, you will make a statement before a labour investigator, and when you last speak with Billy, he will tell you the company is still resisting his claim to decent compensation.

Within the next dozen years, factories like this one will vanish from the greater Boston landscape, the task of making car radios and bug zappers, if such things are still made, outsourced to distant shores, and you will sometimes find yourself wondering how Billy, Matt, Dave, Joe the foreman, the gay worker in the corner, the woman with the perfume, and all the others made it past the dislocation. In another dozen years, Massachusetts will legalize gay marriages, and you will hope there are fewer situations where people are pegged as perverts simply because they are drawn to their own gender.

As for you writing this story, twenty-eight years from that day, you will sometimes notice that the shadows of real people you knew back then offer to become characters in your fiction. You retain a high tolerance for 'boring work,' and you did three years of data entry work while starting to write fiction on the side. The moments of manual labour, now limited to housecleaning, provide meditative interludes. When offered the chance, you still thrill to the challenge of conquering obstinacy, though these days it doesn't come from industrial machines but from contemporary tools like computers and otherwise from rough stretches in your writing. When you finish a story, you look for it to hum like a smoothly working machine, the language and story out front, the cogs and wheels obscured.

Mahmud Rahman spent two years working in what he often misremembers as "every sweatshop in the Boston area."