

**NOT A WORD FROM YOU—**

**YOU FALLEN WOMAN!**

Taslina Nasrin

*Translator: Hiten Bhaya*



*To those who dare to trespass*

Some live to see the end of their exile

Some do not. I continue to nurse my

Unbearable statelessness.. Now and then

I gather the tale of my woes for some listeners—

With no introduction..

Taslima Nasrin

## Contents

--I am a Prisoner

--I was to fly my national flag from my rooftop!

--It is Independence Day there, and here I am in an alien land.

--Keep well, Kolkata!

--What is this *Pooja*? Whatever for?

--*BaT talaa* and *HaaT talaa* will flourish again

--Days go by, and so does the future of Fairs

--Those who lost their homes forever

--Not a word from you—You fallen woman!

--A fare of books.

--Those Golden days...

--Stained by the pain and anguish for my mother and sister.

--Keep well my beloved country!

## I AM A PRISONER!

Often, my friends, happily smiling, come and tell me “We are off” “Where to?” I ask them “Where are you going?” where again?” Some say ‘Kolkata’, some ‘London’, some say ‘Amerika’. They flick through their passports, run to the Visa Office, buy dollars and pack their suitcases. It reminds me of the day I too packed my bag and it was even loaded into the aircraft. It was the twenty-third of January. With me were, Shams-ur Rahman, Belal Choudhury and Rabiul Hussain. It was at the invitation of the *Abrittilok* (The Poetry Reading Society) and Soumitra Mitra came down to Dhaka himself to deliver the invitation letter to us. In fact, it was in my house that we met to decide who should be in our delegation. I was so excited at the prospect of going to Kolkata that I spent a whole week shopping in Bailey Street buying gifts for our friends in Kolkata. The famed *Jamdani* saris, and *kurtas* made of Dhaka muslin for some, books for others, dried fish from Shantinagar market, sweet balls from Muktagachha, embroidered quilts and, very lovingly, a jar of mango pickles for someone else. And for the whole of Kolkata loads of love which no suitcases could hold. I was so incredibly happy that on the day we were to go I picked up Shams-ur-Rahman from his house, bought his ticket, had his visa done and took him to the airport. As though Kolkata was my own city to which I could carry all our poets here, on our shoulders, as it were. Boarding cards in hand, we proceeded towards the immigration counter; Shams-ur and I each holding one end of the strap round one of my heavy bags. Happily watching the swinging of my bag, I presented my passport to the immigration man. My only concern at that moment was about, the time I would reach the Dumdum airport in Kolkata, wondering when I would be able to walk along Chowringhee and Park Street and again roam endlessly about in College Street, Gariahat and Chitpur. Meanwhile the immigration man saw the name on the passport, took out a slip of paper from his pocket, looked at it and rushed to his officer. The two of them stood at the door whispering to each other. Then the officer stepped out, faced me and asked “Do you work here?”

“Yes, I do” I answered.

“Where?”

“At the Dacca Medical College.”

“Do you have an N.C.O (No objection certificate)”

“No I don’t” I said briefly.

“In that case you can’t go” was his curt reply.

So, all of us walked up to his room. Maybe he too felt sorry to have to stop a person who was leading this group to attend a Poet’s Conference, when he had to let go any number of thieves and cheats. He said “I can let you go if someone from the top telephones me to do so”. He offered me the instrument. Calls were coming to him thick and fast and the officer answering “ Ji-Sir, we’ve stopped her.” “She is sitting right in front of me”. He went on Ji-Sirring in the same way.

Meanwhile using the telephone proffered to me, Belal Choudhury and Shams-ur Rahman were trying to locate ‘someone at the top’, one by one... We held our breath. They were talking amongst themselves—“The Health Secretary is a friend of our, he also writes, if we get him there will be no problem” The I.G. of police was also tried but he was not there. Then the Minister; he was out of Dhaka. Time was running out and I said to myself “Be calm. This’ll pass.”

At long last the Secretary was contacted. Shams-ur was saying “we’re going to Kolkata but they won’t let Taslima in. The answer at the other end was “Taslima may not go”. He added that he was going to retire from service shortly and may be asked to explain why did he let her go when his Ministry was going through the process of confiscating her books? The officer was told not to let me go. Everything around me rocked and reeled.—the immigration room, its walls, the happy steps of the people going past the immigration, the poets around me, some sad some happy. My joyous dream was shattered totally. The Immigration did not let me take a step forward. The plane was announced ready for departure. Then Belal Choudhury said “I am not going!” Shams-ur announced that he was also staying back- “We’ll

settle this matter and will take you along with us by the afternoon flight or by tomorrow's" The words of these two brought tears to my eyes and I pleaded tearfully "Why should you be late on my account? You go, I'll follow you later" One of our party held their arms and pulled them forward saying "Come on. The plane is about to take off."

All of them left, leaving me behind. I was all alone. So lonely, that I was on the point of bursting into tears, in front of the whole crowd in the airport. Little had I realized that watching them go would raise such a raging storm within me and my sorrow would well up in this manner.. My dream palace lay shattered around me like a crashing glass house. The entire airport listened to the cry of that crash. They did not return my passport. The officer pressed a slip of paper into my hand and said "Go to the S.B. (Special Branch) office tomorrow morning for your passport". Even then I did not realize that they would not hand me back my original passport.

The next morning I went to the office of the Special Branch and asked for my passport. They smiled and said "The enquiry is still going on".

"Enquiry about what?" I was puzzled!

"They are studying your books" was the reply

I found my books heaped upon the Enquiry Officer's desk. He was reading and underlining some passages in red. I could not understand this enquiry into my books. They explained, "We have been asked to mark out anything that you have written about Religion" On my side, I had applied to the Health Ministry for leave to travel outside Bangladesh, but the Chief Secretary would not sanction my leave. He repeated the same thing. "I can only sign if the higher-ups so permit". That approval did not come. Again for the same reason, that I have written something terrible about Religion. In protest, I resigned from my Government post. Then I found that, on the grounds of my resignation letter, another doctor has been already appointed, though the acceptance my resignation never came. Lest the acceptance of my resignation, facilitate the granting of a passport to me, the Home Ministry never issued the formal

letter. For the last seven months I have been repeating my request for the return of my passport.. But so far my letter has not been acknowledged even. I did not know then, but now I understand that the top was all that mattered, and someone has been influencing them. So I did not get my passport back. I am still without one!

For a month I did not open my attaché cases. The airline stickers on two of them met my eyes night and day.. To touch them was to feel the pain of my old dreams wrench my heart once more. I used to start my hospital rounds at eight every morning. I got up as usual, felt for my apron and the stethoscope. Old habits do indeed die hard. One feels quite out sorts if one sits idle at home. My hands itch to inject thiopental sodium with saphsamethonium, in the vein the patient and sedate him with a whiff of nitrous oxide. It was not as though one had to go to a Government hospital to treat the ill. I really wish to sit in some clinic and treat the poor free of charge. But is it possible in the circumstances? Will I find a place to practice my years of training? To serve the ill? To heal those suffering from eclampsia, or retained placenta, obstructed labour or prolapse of the uterus? Is any place safe for me in Bangladesh? I sit in my room behind tightly bolted doors. Is there no room for me under the sky? An open sky under which I can lead my own life? They may then, just twist my neck and eat me up. They may not allow me to stand still nor let me settle down anywhere. As if, I was untouchable. With great love and sympathy, if I wanted to place my hand on another human being's head, heart or back, they would come baying for my head. They would love to parade round the city displaying my severed head. They do not, just want me live the way I like. They will not let me turn left or right. They must block my path at all cost, so that I fall flat on my face. They will be happy to see me beg forgiveness, on bended knees. That surely would soothe their eyes and calm their minds. But what about me? What happens to the person who cherishes freedom, body and soul? I exhort the women to come out in the open; I urge the weak and the miserable to empower themselves. Is this then, my crime—to ask others to break their chains? Now, do I myself have to retreat into a tiny speck of existence? No longer can I move about as I please or sit by the bank of my favourite river and sadly reflect on past memories; no longer be able to watch the people as I walk. How can I write if I cannot look at people as I see them, not experience life by moving around? This is also

another way of throttling my pen. Do I not have the right to walk and run about the grounds of my own country? Why can I not have the right to movement, to go for medical care, experience real life, like everyone else?

I get news of my case file moving to the top. They are looking for some loophole. The top bosses are looking for ways to punish me severely.. None of them are too keen to give me back my rights of a citizen.

Every step I take is full of thorns. A yawning abyss faces me. Death stalks me at every step. In the crowd thronging the Bangla Book Fair, some one comes forward and shows me red eyes. I can see what they are trying to convey. These are the very people who set up a ‘Taslima Suppression Committee’ on the Fair grounds, openly burnt my books and went round from stall to stall threatening to burn them if they dare display any of my books.. On the night of the twenty-first February, whilst our group was setting fire to the Red Sun on the Shaheed Minar (the Martyr’s Tower), another group of over a hundred men attacked me. I have heard that some well-known writers, under a banyan tree, were enjoying the scene, with their eyes half-closed, cooling and sipping their tea in earthen pots. The people who were chasing me, started throwing stones, the bulb broke and plunged us in darkness. In that darkness their fierce eyes, sharp teeth and claws burnt bright, they would have surely, torn me apart that night, had not the police rescued me. Later, the police also screwed up their eyes and told me “This sort of disturbance is bound to take place if you write anything about Religion. That is just not on. If you expunge all that, then you may get back your passport, your books will not be seized, no one will throw stones at you and you can move about freely.” But then, if I can not write freely, need I write at all? Am I that eager to be a writer? A writer like, one of those smirking under the banyan tree? No, if writing as I please, will bring death unto me, I would rather die. After all, I have to die some day! But should I shrink out of fear? That would be shameful indeed.

My book ‘*Lajja*’ (Shame) was banned.. But some people in Sylhet demanded that *all* my books be burnt and I be arrested and hanged. They called for the burning of my books wherever found and they even put a price of fifty thousand

rupees, on my head. The Government kept their lips sealed, as though it were the right of every citizen to announce a price on my head. The Government has stopped me stepping out of the country and preparations are afoot to see that my movement inside the country is also stopped, so that I am confined to my room, virtually under house arrest. So that I may be totally isolated day by day; I must rot and die secluded in one room. That my mind and brain are totally blunt, that my pen is rusted, and I may at least bow down to their power for once. Many people ask me to attend many functions. They come from Chhittagong University, from Rajshahi, from Khulna and Barisal: I have to tell them “No I will not come”. I have to say No, because behind the crowd of autograph-hunters I can see the blood-shot eyes of the hyenas. They are ready to spring upon me and tear me to pieces with their sharp teeth and claws... I long to open the windows in my house. But I can hardly do so. Men from the S.B. come and demand an explanation from me as to why ‘*Lajja*’ was selling still. Why have I written ‘*Fera*’ (The Return)? The answer as to why ‘*Lajja*’ is selling must be with those who are publishing and selling the book, yet they pester me. They are troubling me no end.. One day a phone call comes from the S.B. “Did you say in an interview, that the institutions of Religion and Marriage should be abolished?” “ “Yes I have, but may I know why you are putting this question to me?” I ask. The voice at the other end replies “The Home Ministry has asked us to investigate”. I am surprised that anything that I may have said somewhere should also be a matter of investigation... Do I have to I write or speak, as they think proper? If I don’t, then there will be more enquiries and another case file will be opened against me at the Ministry.

The open air is not for me. I have to spend the rest of my life sitting all by myself, behind closed doors and windows. My well-wishers come to warn me “Be very careful, Do not step out of your house too often. There is no trusting them, they may do anything any time....” But what have I done that from now on I may not board a train or a bus any time? I may not walk alone on the streets, in the open or in a crowd? Bookshops, libraries, theatre halls—nothing is safe for me? I am not even safe in my own house, not in the room where I sleep, I write. It may be bombed any time. They can behead me any time and hurrah in triumph. What really have I done that there is this commotion all over the state? Have I done something very wrong? Is

Religion so feeble that a stroke of Taslima's pen will kill it? That it is vulnerable is known to them who shout to save it, as well as to me. Or the time has not yet come to eradicate this powerless thing. Do we have to wait for a millennium? Do we aspire to go to heaven, leaving this shameful legacy for the coming generation? When will unite again? How much more blood has to be shed on the way to this union? How many more houses will be set ablaze, rooms burnt, and granaries set to fire and how many minds destroyed?

They have dubbed me 'a spy for India', an atheist, an agent of Indian intelligence- the RAW' and many such nasty epithets. I do not object to the term atheist, but I do object to being called an 'agent of India, of the RAW' and things like that. The prevailing mindset here is such that, should anyone dare raise one's voice against the reactionary forces, or sing Tagore songs, or light lamps at an inaugural ceremony, and proudly stand up for being a Bengali, then one is unanimously adjudged 'an agent of India'. Who cares for my protests? It is so decided that Taslima must be punished and sentenced to death by hanging! I see my life rolling up, somehow, day after day. An invitation arrives from Los Angeles, requesting me to attend the Banga Sammelan (Bengal conference). To one who loves to travel, but with no passport in hand, an invitation from abroad brings more sorrow than joy. Still, it did not cause me as much pain as not being able to see Kolkata. Compared to Kolkata, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, or Dallas means nothing to me. Instead of staring open mouth, at the huge skyscrapers, the museums, and casinos of Europe and America, or at the Niagara Falls, the Buckingham Palace, or the Beverley Hills. I would be far happier trudging barefoot along the streets of Chitpur, or lying flat on the greens of the Maidan, facing the open sky, or walking by the banks of the river Ganga, or watching the rush of traffic on the Chowringhee Road, losing myself in the crowd time and again.! I pine for a city where I can speak my own tongue, Bangla, laugh and cry in Bangla; a city which does not distinguish between me and the Malatis and Gourangas who walk on the road or the pavements. Is not Kolkata a city like that? Maybe not, yet that is the city I dream about. Like a dream that never ends, Kolkata too, for me never ends. One does finish doing Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Shimla or Kashmir, but never my Kolkata. When the group of poets returned from the Poetry Conference I

asked them anxiously, “What’s on in *Nandan* auditorium, currently? Anything special on Wednesday Evenings? Who are staging plays in the *Shishir Mancha* theatre, these days? Who were the poets who read their poems? How cold was it in Kolkata? All that they say does not quench my thirst for more.

Just because I openly express my love for Kolkata, they call me an agent of India! I did not know that in order to love a place outside my country, you have to be their spy. Should I then drown my love in our own river *Sheetalakshya*?

I do think of all the nineteen crores of Bangla-speaking people as Bengalees. I hate this way of talking in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ it is only now that the wall of Religion has separated us. But it is as true as the sunrise, that one day this wall will be broken down, Religion outlawed, and the Bengalee will return to his ancestral land, green with paddy fields, groves of mangoes and jackfruits, as far as the eye travels, beyond the horizon. Some day Bengalees will walk hand in hand, from Bongaon to Benapol, Rangpur to Kochbihar, Meghalay to Haluaghat, Shillong to Tamabil, and the boatman row down the river Padma on to the expanse of the river Ganga, singing a typical boatman’s song in *bhatiali* tune.. I live on with such a dream in my heart.

I have been waiting for my passports, the last seven months. Confined, here, I roam around aimlessly all over the city. My friends go abroad; I see them off at the airport. I can feel the sentries aiming their guns at me, lest I should cross the line drawn by them. Is it because I myself have set no such limits that they felt it their duty to mark where my limits end?

In the last few days, a general strike has been called in Bangladesh in preparation for hanging me. Nor will trains run. Soon there will be more such calls in some more towns, offices and courts. Schools and colleges as well as shops will remain closed. There will be no transport on the streets. And then, the Government will have no option but to announce a date and time for my execution. What else can it lead to? I am really surprised that they should go on strike, call for my death by

hanging, all because of the little I have penned so far. I have only just started writing and if a sentence of death is pronounced at the beginning, then what is there to follow?

If my death helps uniting the Bengalees, to be citizens of a single country, I would climb up to the gallows smilingly. I am willing to give up my life—not in exchange for money but for rationality and humanism.

1992

## I WAS TO FLY MY NATIONAL FLAG FROM OUR ROOFTOP!

We were all hiding then in a village called *Dapunia*; my mother, little sister and I. We could not even manage two square meals a day. At night, six or seven of us had to huddle in one bed. My elder brothers were hiding in some other village. We hear about our father being sometimes in *Trishal* sometimes in *Nandiyal*. One of my mother's brothers had joined the War. The military had abducted Aunty Nellie from their house in the town. My uncles' house, near *Sohagau* station had been burnt. One of them had been hacked to pieces by some people, in broad daylight. Day long the vultures flew in the sky. The people of *Dapunia* were all shrinking with fear and worry. Then one day we suddenly find a truckload of men with rifles marching along the highway, breaking the ghostly silence of our village with their cry of "*Jai Bangla*" ('victory to Bangladesh). As though, a cremation ground had suddenly come alive. The whole village ran after the truck. I too joined the crowd and cried myself hoarse, shouting '*Jai Bangla*', the whole afternoon

This '*Jai Bangla*', moved me beyond measure. The same night, the night of the sixteenth, December 1971, I asked my mother. "Ma what will happen if '*Jai Bangla*' comes true?"

My mother told me" Then we don't have to flee from place to place, we'll go back to our own home; speak our minds and walk the streets as we please; no one will abduct us, or torch our houses or shoot at us. We shall be then able to live in peace"

Excitement kept me awake the whole night. Even all those, young and old alike, who, under cover of blankets, went to the Sardar household to listen to the radio surreptitiously, spent the night in rowdy celebrations. As the dawn broke next morning dispelling the dark night, it seemed that the whole world was relieved of all darkness. There was neither the wail of crying nor the sound of firing; the air was free of the stench of corpses and gunpowder. People were venturing out into their courtyards, to

the fields—people laughing, returning to their homes. We too were back home. Father is back again. Our house was left open all this time, so everything was looted. But we were not too sorry about that. If there is assurance of living in peace and safety to look forward to, one does not lament the losses left behind.

From then on, every sixteenth of December I would get up very early and unfurl the Bangladeshi flag on our rooftop. This task was reserved for me. Before flying the flag I used to smell it for a long time. I could savour the fragrance of happiness, of relief. As the flag was flying so was my mind, like a bird in the open sky. What immense happiness, this matter of Freedom meant!

The sixteenth of December comes every year. So will it this year. But who will fly the flag from our rooftop this year? For a long time now, my mother had been crying and crying herself out of mind. I hear that she even keeps the lights on during the day. Says, “It is so dark outside”; she also rambles. And my father is also bent with age, as it happens, when the society ostracizes one. No longer do the relatives come to enquire about their welfare; erstwhile friends avoid the vicinity of our house like the plague. The daughter’s sin is visiting the parents! This is not all. My younger sister also lost her job without notice. The boss told her to take her dues and make herself scarce. He added “if they come to know whose sister you are, we will be in big trouble.”

And me? Here I am thousands of miles away from home, sitting all by myself, in a silent, dark country. No one to talk to in my own language, not a shoulder to weep on. What is my crime, that prevents me from going back to my homeland, sing the freedom songs, recite my favourite poems? There is not one more vibrant sound like that of ‘*Jai Bangla*’ in the whole of Bangla language. The tongue which utters these two words will never come to terms with falsehood.

Why may I not join the happy victory procession like all others? Why this unbearable distance from my very own country. And why, the land that let me be born, grow up, and live for thirty-two long years; the country that gave me, twenty-five years ago, the freedom to say what I liked, in my own tongue, to move around without care and lead a safe life, has suddenly changed so much so that the people get

into a frenzy, and demand her head, when they hear that a daughter of their own, wants to come back home? Isn't it then my own country anymore? The western world is showering awards, gold medals, and doctorates and also publishing my books. There is no end to their honouring me. But my heart is left on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. I remember the time when at high noon we used to jump into the pond green with moss, and swim back and forth rowdily. My heart lies in plain rice with mustard-*hilsa*, it revels in the single- string accompaniment of the Baul singer, it lies in our playing fields, in the sailing boats on the river, and every day now, is heavy, filled with this unbearable emptiness. My body is here but my mind flies with the clouds from the West to the East. I fly from the Baltic to the Bay of Bengal, on the wings of the seagulls.

Many do not like my writing. The Government also does not approve of it, so they file a suit against me and seize all my books. The case is still hanging like a sword over my head. No one knows when it will be settled. I hear that the present Government has also decided to pursue this case, which is against freedom of speech. Here, despondency is swallowing me like a starving demon; darkness is enveloping me on all sides. I am shrinking, freezing under the weight of chunks of cold ice.. My pen too is frozen like a stone. The Wild girl of the past is gradually wilting away.

After Independence, our leaders framed a Constitution and stuffed it with high-sounding words like secularism, democracy and such other lofty words. But the fundamental premise of democracy is that it recognizes that there are different political opinions; and that people may also have differing views on any number of subjects. On no issue can there be complete unanimity of views. And all of them have the freedom to express their own opinion. Maybe my opinion differed from the rest, but is that cause enough to raid my house? Why should they throw stones at me? Why should they publicly announce a price on my head? Why ever should I have to leave my own country? Is it that even twenty-five years independence has not brought real freedom for any of us?

It may be a poor country unable to feed every one, maybe every one of us has not got a roof over our head; maybe everyone has no access to education. We may

not be rich enough to show off but we do have some history to be proud of—the movement for our mother tongue, the war of liberation. A people who have taken to the street for saving their language and culture, stained the main street with their blood; a people who went to war defying the bond of religion, why should such a pure nation be decaying day by day? Religion is biting into politics, into Parliament, into society- everywhere. Book-burning is like lighting the sacred fire for them. A few barbarians have vowed to kill some writers. Yet everyone is turning a blind eye. The sixteenth of December was certainly not for all this to happen. This is what used to happen during Pakistani dictatorship! Rabindrasangeet is banned, anything with words like RadhaKrishna, or God is prohibited and if one writes or does anything contrary to the official view, one must be tied up and thrown into the prison—be one a poet or a politician, a singer or a mere greengrocer. When I was young I heard my older brothers sing *‘they want to rob us of our tongue; they want to chain us hand and foot anyhow.’* Where then, is the difference between the rulers then and now? Did we fight a nine-month battle just for this? My mother told me “Now we should be able to say what we like to, can move around as we please. We shall live in peace and safety. And we don’t have to hide and flee”. But I have to still hide and flee. Was my mother mistaken?

The fact is that on the sixteenth of December in nineteen seventy-one we did get a country unto ourselves, but we could not mould it according to our desire. The Bangladesh I dreamed of was one that would be the meeting place of the south and the north, the east and the west; where the believer and the non-believer, the man and the woman will live together with the same rights.; where one will not be fined or jailed for speaking one’s mind even though it was not in tune with the authorities, and no one will have to be a fugitive in one’s own country or abroad. I dream of a Bangladesh where people will talk of their joys and sorrows unbridled, just live content and happy; where even I could move freely, visit the Book Fair amongst a throng of people, be able to place wreaths at the Shaheed Minar on the twenty-first of February and on the twenty-fifth March and recite my poems on the sixteenth December on the dais, in the procession or in open fields. I shall then fly the national flag from my own rooftop.



**IT IS INDEPENDENCE DAY THERE, AND HERE I AM IN AN ALIEN LAND!**

When my mother was a teen-ager she used to sing '*ladkey lengey Pakistan*' (*We shall fight and win Pakistan*) without knowing what it meant. When right before her eyes Amala left and Kuntala Shashibala and Romola followed suit, she stood under the bean tree, speechless. This '*ladke lengey Pakistan*' left mother alone in a desolate ground, alone in the courtyard with fading hopscotch markings, lonely for the whole afternoon –lonely in the midst of a noisy silence.

Mother was born and brought up in Maniruddin Munshi's four-tier hutment by the banks of a pond full of small fry, in a dirty lane in west Mymensingh town. Ma was unaware of the fact that the British had left the country. But she knew and felt the going away of the next door neighbours--the Kamalas, Shashibalas and the Romolas. Deep inside her she nurtured a long suppressed cry of anguish.

Like her I was also born in the same hutment by the stagnant pond full of small fry. I did not have to songs urging the British to leave, nor '*ladkey lengey Pakistan*'. In the morning we lined up in the school to sing "*Pak sar zameen saad baad*" Ma sighed 'what is it that we sing.? Can't even follow the language!'

Next was the sight of the demos. The processionists marched along the high street shouting slogans like " Burn Ayub Khan's seat of power, burn it to ashes" My elder brothers came home in the evening with voices hoarse with shouting slogans and discussed in whispers all night , the Six Point Demand. Any procession in sight was fired upon by the police. Still no mother could hold back their children from joining them. One day my brothers came home bearing the body of Alamgir. Some one was flying his blood-stained shirt like a flag! I remember how Sheikh Mujib came to the bank of this dirty pond in this dirty lane. There was such a crowd just to get a glimpse of him.

After a couple of years, I remember hearing the sound of bullets all around, planes droning overhead and dropping bombs at random, and mother shoving us under

the bed stuffing our ears with cotton pads. The town was empty overnight. People were crossing the border, running towards the villages. We also went to Begunbari in a buffalo drawn cart, under the cover of a dark night. From Begunbari to Trishal, Trishal to Dapunia, leaving behind my mamma-doll, daughter-doll, thirty-six pair of marbles, a top and our playfield

After nine months' when we returned home the air was full of the stench of corpses. My dolls were gone. Uncle was dead, another one was a cripple, and my aunt coming back from the camp, raped, and hiding her face. The War has taken a lot from us but at least in exchange it has given us freedom. Freedom to speak, to sing in our own language.

The British left, the Urdu fanatics were gone, the countries' map was in shreds, and we got a small piece of it which was supposed to be my country--. My mother's country. Mother, as she sat on the bank of that small pond full of small fry was the daughter of a vast country. And suddenly while still in the same place, she was reduced to an insignificant citizen of a country like a drifting kite without moorings. She can never again board a train bound for Calcutta, Bombay or Delhi. How was it possible with the tracks being barricaded with barbed wire all around? Poor Ma, she was always very keen on going to the markets in Calcutta and pick up a Kanchipuram sari!

Mother may not have understood then but now she realizes full well that '*ladke lengey Pakistan*' was simply a ruse by the *Urduwallaha* .to mislead the people. And they are exploiting us just as the British did. If finally, they had to be driven out, then where was the need to partition the two Bengals, to stop trains bound for Calcutta, Bombay or Delhi?

A lame man once lamented to me that he was cured of his typhoid after a great deal of suffering but it left him with both his legs paralysed. In the same way, we were free of two centuries of foreign domination, but India was divided into two. Just like cutting a person into two—one part had the body and other left with the heart. This still pains my mother and me too, even though I was not born in undivided India.

One, who loses all, is still left with his dream and that is what one clings to, for life. The dreamer Bengali has fought for flowering just one blossom, for bringing the smile to just one face. We have won a country called Bangladesh, where our neighbours, Archana and Anjana had the same rights, where no one had to uproot themselves, a country which was to give us democracy, secularism and a Bengali nationalism. But what happened? Years pass and discontent grows. There is blood again on the highway, rulers come and go—rulers in military uniform. They snuff out secularism; crush our Bangla nationalism under their jackboot, pound out socialism and gamble throughout the country in the name of democracy. The utterly poor people await helplessly the ultimate doom.

I had fought for the freedom of Mother's neighbours Archana and Anjana. But my fight was unlike those of my brothers, not in demos with sticks and spears in hand, but with my pen—my only weapon.

Religion only brings discord, division and death. Religion only brings solitude to my mother by exiling her childhood mates Amala, Kuntala and Shashibalas to far off lands. Who has suffered more than the Bengalis in the flame of blind faith? Yet, the foolish Bengali is again playing this devastating game of Religion.

Three long years have gone by, and I have been unable to go back home—to my own country, to the eternal memory of the dusty lane where the four-tiered hut on the banks of a dirty pond full of small fry, stood. The United nation has given me a travel permit which states that I am free to travel to any country in the world—except Bangladesh! I could not care less for this U.N. Permit if I had a call from home. I would leave all this honour and welcome in foreign lands and rush forth toward my country. A daughter comes home to the lap of her sorrowful mother. O my dear Ma, how I long to meet you! It is ages and ages since I saw you! The last time I saw her was the night I left for the airport wrapped in a dark blanket. My mother rolled on the floor in tears, stifling her cries so that no one may hear her, no one may know about my flight. Someone shut her mouth. The one who left a mother bereft of her child, just disappeared without a trace. Mother is all by herself now, when she stretches out her hand all that she meets is a long wall of emptiness., The neighbours,

and even our enemies, can hear her when she cries out aloud and bangs her head on the wall out of despair; but no one comes forward to place a sympathetic hand on her shoulders.

Independence Day in our sub-continent is being celebrated this year with great pomp. It is the fiftieth anniversary. I am also a participant; a piece of this sub-continent is also my native land. But how can I forget that this freedom made my teenage mother weep as her friends Amala, Kuntala and Shashibalas left forever. My mother used to tell me of her childhood sorrows—how suddenly on an afternoon, she was left desolate. I have also seen in my rounds in the village that there were no Brahmos left in the Brahmo colony, no Baidyas in the Baidya colony, none of Upendra Babus grandchildren come to the Upendra Bidyapith, the school founded by him, nor are there any students in the Radhasundari, Mahakali, or Mrityunjay schools either. The old houses on Rambabu Road, Ishan Chakrabarty Road and T.N.Road are now inhabited by Shamsuddin, Alimuddin and Mansur Ali.. Khadija, Laila and Tofajul Husain came from West Bengal to settle in the Durgapur area of Mymensingh

I was born fifteen years after Independence. I might not have witnessed its advent but I have seen its consequences. I have seen the pain of immigrants uprooted from Bardhaman and Murshidabad in West Bengal. I had to witness more of sorrow than happiness.

India has been free of the British fifty years ago. As they celebrate, I am in Scotland who also wants to get rid of the English. From here I shall soon go to Ireland. The Irish also want their freedom. Everyone wants freedom, is there anyone who does not? We too wanted and got it. But what did we do with it except to fight amongst ourselves and shed each other's blood. We have erected a wall within us. A strong, hard wall. In the name of religion and caste nurtured the poison-tree of hatred and intolerance.

India is a country which has practiced democracy for half a century. I am a woman of this sub-continent but I am denied a visa by the secular India! Indian independence and democracy have rewarded me with "Denial". When they celebrate their Independence I roam alone the streets of a foreign land.. They ask me "Where are

you from?" I reply ' from the sub-continent" They ask me "There is celebration there, aren't you going? "

I sigh silently. I, an unfortunate writer, rejected, exiled.. I am stateless, I have no religion, and I have neither a sub nor a full continent to myself. All that I have are the heavens above, a sky full of sorrow that is my very own.

Let everyone enjoy, let them fly the freedom dove; let a hundred doves spread their wings above. I will shed tears alone for my solitude, for my mother, for Amala, Kuntala and Shashibalas, for Khadija and Laila. I shall cry by myself for the carelessly torn atlas. I shall hold warmly a fistful of the Berlin Wall in my hands. One, who has nothing, has at least one's dream—dream of living.

1998

## **KEEP WELL, KOLKATA!**

My reverie was broken as the plane suddenly took off skyward from the Calcutta airport. Sitting mournful near the window, I was thinking about the friends who came to see me off. I have lived months and years of my life in the skies, spent a great deal of time in the air, but even I was frightened as I watched the plane pierce the clouds and rush towards a fiery sky. This fear broke a secret lock in my heart and appeared before me as a few question marks-

“Where am I heading for? ‘With whom am I staying?’ ‘Why am I going at all?”

All through this tiresome journey, as I read, listened to music, dozed, woke up, sipped tea, brooded or just stared blankly, these questions would not go away but lurk in a corner of my mind. I turn the answers in my mind, but the answers come back at me like sharp knives and slash me into pieces... I am going far away to a foreign land, not for fun, not happily but because I have no other option... I am not going. For my own sake at all, nor for anyone else. I am going because there is no place for me in my native soil; I am going because I am homeless. I am going on exile, for a long stretch in an alien land, on an unbearable sojourn.

Ten years ago I had to leave Dhaka. That was to save my life. Then the answer to the questions, as to where I was going and why, was simply, ‘Wherever I was going I was going to save my life—to stay alive.’

But I carried within me a deeply secret dream that I will come back some day. So many years passed by but there was no return for me. Even today the door is closed for me in that country. Its image is somewhat dusky in my eyes. I do not know if anyone else remembers that someone like me ever existed, someone whose life was spent there, was born and brought up there, I do not know if anyone in that country thinks of me as their own, or ever was. I wonder if there is anyone in whose remotest thoughts there is a concern for the daughter of the house who is only waiting to return

home. None of my near ones are there anymore in that country. Father was, but now no longer. Mother used to keep my room ready in the hope that I shall come back one day. Now there is no one to settle my room. That well appointed room of mine has fallen apart and is gathering dust. So much so, that I would hardly recognize it. All kinds of vermin—termites, weevils and even human insects have been nibbling at all my things, leaving nothing for me. Things! What little sense do material possessions make without love and affection? When I lost my mother I still had my father. Having lost everything I had, everyone I called my own, I clung to my father as the last hope. Just then he fell ill. He wanted very much to see me. He refused to go without once seeing me, petting me, taking my hand to his heart and talking to me like the old times.

I cried my heart out for just having one glimpse of my father. Alas no hearts melted at my misery. Their doors remained shut for me. I was not permitted to enter my own country. Neither Khaleda nor Hasina relented. Am I not a citizen of that country? I certainly am. Is there any law under which they can stop me?

My beloved country, there is none quite like you, in the whole universe!

Annadashankar, the famed Bangla writer remarked once, “Bangladesh is Taslima’s *ma* (mother) and West Bengal is her *maashi* (mother’s sister).” The overwhelming love showered on me by the people of Calcutta, elicited the old adage from him—not as a critique but in appreciation—“the aunt seems to be more loving than the mother herself I don’t care as to who is the mother and who the aunty, wherever I find love, I can feel my mother. For me now, Ma is no longer a person in flesh and blood. She is just love. Love pure and unalloyed. I no longer consider Kolkata as my *maashi*. I feel now that she is indeed my mother. My native country is not a particular soil, flora and fauna, rivers and plains. A love full of love is my pure, unsullied native land. When there is no one around, when there is no one to love, when a huge ogre of emptiness holds me in his grip and plays the game of death with me, then the language in which I talk to myself, the language in which I dream, comes to my rescue. How blindly I cling to It.! My mother-tongue becomes my motherland!

Why must I leave Kolkata and go somewhere else? I have hurled this question, time and again from my plane, down to the Ganga flowing below, towards her welcoming shores, where for centuries people have built their homes, people from so many far off countries, speaking so many different languages,

People of varied hues! But no one had an answer to my query. Even born liars will feel ashamed to admit that I am running away from Kolkata to save my life. I never left Kolkata for life; I come back to Kolkata in order to live. I return here to get back the breath of life, to feel the warmth of love. A life without this warm touch of love withers away. Am I not keeping well abroad? Yes, surely I am, in the sense of good food good living. Abroad, they spoil me, indulge me no end; but they also put me on the shelf when they have had enough of me. But I want to feel the dust of the grounds all over me, and run in the dust laden field playing our favourite game of 'Touch and Run'. They do not want me to get hurt in any way. But who told them that I want to save my skin always; haven't I enjoyed reaching my goal however scratched and bruised I might be on the way? Such scratches and bruises were certainly, no big deal. What does one gain from living a still, indifferent, dull life in one of those neat and clean, orderly, barren, lifeless countries of the far North, buried deep under snow and darkness.. This kind of life is nothing but to go on for the sake of living –a moronic existence. Tired of paddling in one's own mucky pool, I am refreshed in the clean water of another culture; but I still thirst after my past life. What else is there left for me? I am human, I come from the southern climes, I want warmth, I want to boil and bubble over. I want to explode and emit a million sparks. A foreign country may be very good to me, lionise me, but still it remains an alien country. Some have been able to accept a foreign country as their own, but not me. So many years have gone by, but still even for a moment, I have not been able to think of such a host country, as anything but a foreign land.. I could not, because I nurse in my heart the image of a 'Bangla', because I have been under the spell of one 'Bangla'. After all these years I am still a stateless subject. The country of my birth has already declared that I do not belong there. Where I now reside is most certainly not my country, but dare I tell the country which I consider my own, that I may have lost the East but I still have my West? What if the same West makes it clear to me-the reluctant guest-, in so many

ways “You are an alien’, and sounds the ugly alarm bell to tell me “Enough is enough, now pack your bags and get lost”. What then? Where shall I go? Did Kolkata ever call me aside, like a mother, put her hand lightly on my back, gently moved the unruly lock falling over my face and asked me lovingly “Do you wish to go anywhere, my dear?” Even when I say that I have no wish to go anywhere else, Kolkata never once says “No, you need not go anywhere. Do stay here, this is your homestead, your own courtyard .Take this fresh madhabi creeper to plant. Stay on here on my lap, close to my heart”.

I think of Kolkata as my mother, but she could not become one to me, even as she wanted it. This is because some people threaten and show red eyes. Even a couple of years ago one was unaware of such a possibility. But times are a-changing. The air is awash with scowls of hatred .Now, my ways annoy many.

The intellectuals avoid my shadow. I am supposed to be the deadliest of cobras. Much before I could fathom all this, and ascertain why my book *Dwikhandita* (Split in Two) was torn to pieces, I had already alienated a number of friends. What indeed is my crime? That I have written a book brashly disregarding the rules of the game? Thereafter my face was about to be blackened and my neck adorned with a garland of shoes. Yet at the very moment when the loss of friends and all this humiliation was driving me towards an irritating loathsomeness, I was pleasantly surprised to feel the cool shower of love from some quarters. The pain of losing my old friends was falling off me, like raindrops: someone was wiping them dry and also filling my home with new friends. The home was no longer like a house; it was more like a garden.

This time the one-and-a-half month in Kolkata, passed like one-and-a-half day. The days were slipping by without my realizing it. The days crept away secretly. I did not sleep at night lest I waste my time. Whilst Kolkata slept by my side, I waited to see its innocent child-like face. I watched the sunrise every day. The Kolkata sky, its rising sun, all seemed to me so very much my own. Every morning a bouquet of flowers arrived from Anil Datta. Out of gratitude and curiosity, as well, I went to meet him.

Why the flowers? Because he liked my writing! He has been to Konark, to Ajanta, Ellora but he never met the artists who created them; he could only offer his esteem silently. And now he faced an artist in real flesh and blood. So he paid his respects in this way. Anil Datta was past eighty; with deep emotion he called me a temple, a goddess! .There was such intensity in his articulation. The tears in his impassioned eyes and his delight made me touch the dust in shame and shrink in humility into an inert being. as it were. I knew that I did not deserve in the slightest degree the crown that he put on my head, but how could I deny that touch of deep affection. I felt it so close to me; was it my father's hand? No, even my father's hand did not touch me so closely!

We cannot select our relatives, but we do select our friends. We select them according to our own liking, beliefs and judgment. This is why I do not believe that blood is thicker than friendship. It is not that I was regaling myself all the while in Kolkata; sorrow has also often darkened my door like an unwelcome guest.

It is those friends who pulled my stupefied self out of that slough of despondence Old friends, like Shibnarayan Ray, Amlan Datta and Nikhil Sarkar remained. open to me like the wide sky.. We exchanged our deepest thoughts anew with Mahashweta Devi. We both believed more in doing rather than talking and so we were able achieve something together. This kind of work gives a unique sort of pleasure. And that is what pulled us to the far off village of Langalberia. I chatted with Sukumari Bhattacharya as I had always done before, about the similarity between the Vedas and the Koran, about how the men composed them and why.. Annadashankar Ray was also once as open to me. I could not bear his absence this time. He was no longer waiting for me at his house in Ballygunge. When I met him last, he was in a coma, could not even register my presence by his side. Apparently, only the day before, he had asked for me and waited for me. Why did not I go then? I want to make amends, but however I crave, that day will not come back ever again. Likewise, my heart was wrenched by his awesome absence as soon as I set foot in the room of the poet Subhash Mukhopaddhaya. The man with the genial smile was not there, nor in his chair. Everywhere I meet this emptiness. So much has disappeared. But still we live on. How do we still manage to live amidst this monstrous emptiness? Sometimes I

feel man is the most stony-hearted creature. Yet the same human heart can be devastated by the flood of love. Man is strange. Man is beautiful. However I cannot always live with my head in the skies and with humanity at large. I belong to the earth, its dust and dirt. I am a tomboy climbing trees, swimming wildly. I really can not live in the company of extraordinary people too long. I need to come back to the common people. I must. My life in Kolkata was brimming with such common humanity, as always. I may have lost some rare old friends, but does it matter much? I always had numerous ordinary friends. I have always felt relaxed and happy amongst the crowd of such people. This time also I had the same Bishwa, the same Gopa, friends whom I could wake up noisily and take them to the Harinabhi gardens to look at the rising Moon. Then there was the cook Jharna, who sent me meals twice a day, and as I ate them I felt I was tasting the world's best dishes at my Grandma's house, sitting on a low flat wooden stool. I am bathing morning and evening in the fountain which springs from affection. Every time I go to Kolkata I make a new set of friends. I keep the door of my heart open so that one can drop in any time one feels like it. Many have entered, some touching my heart. The freedom fighters were always by my side, as were the sculptors and artists. Arun Chakrabarty of *Rekhachitram* lit up the room with his calm, charming, handsome presence. Arun was an amazing artist. His perfect artistry was to be seen to be believed.. Even in short visits to his home I felt so near to the members of his family.. As if, I had known them for ages. I tell myself, 'how is it that they look so familiar? Were they related to me in some past life?

If I had any belief in reincarnation I might have taken this to be true. This time, I met another clutch of artists like Arun. All of us took a trip on river Ganga. I had never seen the river so close. Kolkata looks like a belle from the river. They shared my joys and sorrows—Kripa, Kamal, Kaushik. Also with us were Sushil, Rinki, Swapna, and Swati. They were neither famous nor pricey like the snobbish upper crust of the society. But to me they were as precious as diamonds and pearls. There was Jaba, true to her name, with the warmth of a hibiscus and Rekha with her fascinatingly beautiful eyes. Suddenly stormed in one Panchu and became a lover in no time. The hotel's cleaner boy young Subhash used to come running with messages. Shankar and Manas belonged to the Police, but were totally unlike cops. Bilas came all the way from

Jadavpur.. One day the hotel guards refused him entry, because his clothes and shoes were not expensive enough! My pleadings did not help. So I an 'honoured guest' of the hotel, marched out into the open , welcomed my revered guest Bilas Sarkar with a bouquet of flowers and escorted him into the hotel. The hotel employees were standing agape. If it were possible I would have spread the red carpet for Bilas. What a blind stinking cesspool of false pride people do live in. I feel incensed to spend a lifetime in hotels, in my Kolkata. Some people snigger. As though I stay in a hotel out of choice, as if I love it! Did any of you even offer me to stay in your attic and did I refuse coquettishly? Those who deride me will continue to do so whether I stay in an expensive hotel or in a shanty in the slum area. I understand some feminists claim that my dealings are all with men only, that I fall all over them I do not mix with women; I do not care for them in the least.

Listen to me my dear Feminists "I do not select my friends by their gender. I choose those with, thinking, belief and ideals similar to mine. My dear female friends, however large in shape and size the gender maybe, the genitalia are not more important to me than the head. Hark ye, feminists! I have seen many men who are more of a feminist than you are; and I have also met many a woman more patriarchal than men.

Oh how lucky I was that I did not become a feminist from reading books. I am fortunate that after skimming through all 'isms' like feminism, militancy and so on, I have finally settled for humanism. Without getting into arguments and counter-arguments, if I could only wipe the tears off that crying child on the pavement, find her a mother's lap! Only if I could pick up one of the sad young things from the darkness of Sonagachhi, the red light district of Kolkata, whisked her round the bright lights of the whole city, singing and dancing all night, and finally, eating at one of the roadside stalls-the *dhabas*, and then in the morning, show her a decent way of living the rest of her life! If I could only buy their books and stationery and send to school, the boy hauling luggage and that girl polishing the shoes of the passers by. There are so many such things I want to do. But am I able to do them? How little can I do! So I dream, I shall die dreaming.

I wish to get together some dreamers like me and do something stirring.. But others will never allow me do any such thing. Evil tongues spread the rumor that shall never be allowed to set foot in Kolkata again. Doors will be shut for me in this country as well.

Out in the open of the Book Fair, I have seen some who are happy just to touch my hand, others just to have a look at me, some just to say that they are with me. But when some one said I have learnt Bangla only to be able to read your books I could not hold back the tears in my eyes.. There are many of them; countless. The tide of love has flooded me, drowned me; I had lost my moorings but found new ones again. Doubtless, I had lost some friends, but I gained many more than I lost. People have come from distant towns and villages. They have come from Assam, Tripura, and Bardhaman. One doctor, Sheikh Muzaffar Hussein had come from a village in the 24-Parganas, disappointed with the true character of writers and journalists with secularist mask. This was my biggest gain in Kolkata, this time. I bowed my head in respect before the youth who were fired by my writings; I bowed before, this tremendous possibility, this hope, this incipient explosive, this foreboding.

Many who did not agree with the banning of my books, however, remained silent (silence is also a kind of agreement!). Some have sniggered from a distance. I know they are the dangerous ones.. When I was the victim of a cruel attack then many sniggered the same way, and clapped on the side. I am talking about the time when there was an outcry throughout the country asking for my head., but the revered artists and writers of the land said unanimously “ This is her personal affair” .They did not bother about or interfere in my “personal affair”. I had created this trouble, and it was up to me to settle it. In that year of 1994 even if a hundred people opened their mouths and said “This not just Taslima’s personal matter, but it concerns all of us, it is a question of the freedom of speech of everyone”, then I would not have to leave my motherland.

I am happy to see that people in Bangladesh have woken up at last. Today when a male writer is attacked, the whole country gets united at the snap of a finger, regardless of the fact that the man may have been engaged in nonsensical acts and

wrote utter nonsense but just because he is a man. It did not matter that he might have had any number of critics. The entire male-dominated society becomes mad like a bull, to protect the rights of a man- the right to write or speak freely, the right to rage. They want these immediately.. Now they cry hoarse for freedom of speech. Every place is in a turmoil, meetings and protests everywhere. Columns of condemnation are overflowing in the newspapers. The bogey of the country being in danger is raised all over.

However much Humayun Azad may have criticized me, I too strongly condemn the attack launched against him. I see a ray of hope in the way the people have woken up, taken a stand and joined the fray in support of Humayun. Whatever the issue, let there be movements for the right of the writer to write freely, let the freedom to express one's opinion be ensured, let complete tolerance prevail in that country. I fervently wish for this to happen.. Only the other day, just one day before the 21<sup>st</sup>. February, the twenty-first , a day of the greatest honour for the Bangla language, the government of Bangladesh banned my book '*Sei sab Andhakar*' (Those Dark Days). Nobody was to read the book, touch it, publish it, distribute or sell it nor allowed to quote from it. Did a single soul express any regret for the fact that my book was prohibited on the Twenty-first, a great day for the triumph of Bangla language? No one did. This was also considered my 'private affair'.

But when on the same Twenty-first Fair, a male writer is attacked then it is no longer his "personal affair", then it becomes a common concern. I am certain if I were the victim, if an attempt was made to kill me by hitting me or maybe even actually kill me, then it would still remain my "personal affair". Such events against women are certainly personal! Whenever women are tortured, raped or murdered, it is held that it is the woman who provoked it. If a woman sits by herself and happens to pen some strong words, and does not act as a puppet of the men at their drinking bouts, and entertain them as they please, then she must be termed a harlot. One after another her books are banned in her country; she is chased out of her own country and not allowed to come back. On the charge of writing a selected column she is even sent to prison for a year. They can easily argue for her capital punishment or let anyone who likes to kill her, do so.

The argument is that she writes about sexuality, a little too openly: her writing does not qualify as literature, she is not a writer. She does not write stories and novels as we do. That's enough. The prosecution rests their case. End of the story. Not only the men of the East, but even the men in the West are putting forward such pleas. Why I am in danger? Have I harmed anyone's interest? No I have not. Maybe I have. Whatever anyone may say about me, I still wish that prosperity overflows that country, it becomes the land of milk and honey, where people can live well on their own right. Where they have the right to speak out, where they have the right to differ; no one's book is burned, no one's book is banned ever, and no one has to lose one's own country like me, no one is forced to this frightening loneliness; no one need to roam in the streets like a beggar

Are these good wishes only for the Bangladesh, does not this other Bengal need it? Is it such a citadel of democracy? As if freedom of speech is here just for the asking?

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the Chief Minister of West Bengal is also unhappy about the affair of my books. But I wish him well. Let him and the twenty-five intellectuals as well as Sheikh Muzaffar Husein keep well. Let all those who love me, and also those who hate me keep well. Let my old and my new ones keep well.

Let all those whom I've met and all those whom I still have to meet, keep well. Let the river Ganga and the trees flourish. Sky, you keep well, go on spreading light. My heart, do keep on giving light. I am the untouchable, the last and least, lower than the lowliest. I have strayed, fallen. I hide my face in the dark for my remaining days. Away from my home, away from you, my near and dear ones, away from Kolkata, from my mother I have no means of keeping well. I may not be well, but Kolkata you keep well. Keep well in sunshine and in rain, morning and evening, in sickness and in health. Whether I meet you again or not I wish you well. Whether you love me or not, keep well. If you want to forget me altogether, do, but you keep well. If you want to hate me, do so, but do keep well.

### WHAT IS THIS PUJA? WHATEVER FOR?

There is no *Eid*, no *Puja*, no Christmas for me, and no *Buddha Purnima*. I observe neither Hanukkah nor the Sabbath; I have no faith in God, Ishwar or Allah. I am a person with no religion whatever. I believe in rationality and free thinking. I believe in the earthly, the mundane, in socialism and in humanism, in debating and in protest against discrimination of any kind.. I may be irreligious, but not more and more from more than more more than them for them and necessarily immoral. Am I for that matter, the least bit illiberal? Even my enemies dare not say that of me. Today, here in secular India, in my dear city Kolkata I witness all around me preparation for a religious festival—it is going to be on a larger scale, more splendour than before. It reminds of the frenzy before the Eid in Bangladesh. The rich competed amongst themselves as to who could buy a more expensive bull for slaughter. I have never seen the Puja in West Bengal but heard about it. Both my atheist and religious friends have talked to me about it.

They said it was entirely a Bengali phenomenon and now it has nothing anymore to do with religion. What about caste and class? None they assure me. Anybody can join a public festival. Even some Muslims are the Presidents of Puja Committees, these days. Is that true? I am stunned... I ask “May a *shudra* become a priest? Can women touch the idol on days other than the day of immersion? As I ask these questions I notice the signs of annoyance appear on the forehead of my friend .in spite of their trying their best not to show their embarrassment. One of my non-believer friends dwelling on the flip side of the Puja celebrations, launched on a vivid description of how the chasm between the rich and the poor is hideously exposed during these times. Remembering the festivities he turned up his nose in disgust and said “you call this a festival, when men and dogs scabble over the food left over after the feasting?” I smile wanly and say “that is also a kind of festival—festival for the dogs and the poor”

It is a country where people do not even have clean water to drink, lack education and health care, yet they have to have their Festival! A country which is the home of ninety-three percent of Asia's poorest people, where four hundred million people live below the poverty line, and forty percent of people are illiterate, needs must have its Festival where crores and crores of rupees will be wasted on senseless entertainment.

The other day I saw Kolkata by night. The Clubs and the mansions of the rich were overflowing with festivities; men were drowned in expensive liquor. Only a few steps away from the shining lifestyle of the intellectuals who are spouting day and night, superior words on politics, socialism, literature and the arts, I see any number of starving, emaciated, suffering people sleeping on the pavement. I was transfixed with horror, shame and amazement at the sight. Horror, because this terrifying disparity does not seem to be so to the people here, shame at the fact that I am stepping over these pavement dwellers to go and sleep in my soft bed on the fifth floor of a mansion. Amazed as to why thousands of people are accepting this disparity without protest. I could never really understand why they accept or are made to accept this situation.

During the day I have gone round and watched the show of *Shani* (Saturn) Puja. Do people really believe that if you worshipped *Shani*, your life will be free of bad luck and accidents? Not just the *Shani Puja*, people are worshipping everywhere in a thousand ways. Most people are wearing gems and stones for all events, like getting married, keeping cool, increasing virility, or winning lawsuits. Every one is carrying a mobile phone. I have never seen such co-existence of science and superstition, amongst any other people. Most of them avoid going into the merits of the two but keep and use them for comfort and convenience. It is quite patent that religion is used just for commerce. All that is happening is just that—feathering one's nest! Religion has been like that from the very beginning. Some people always exploited the gullible. Those who exploit are themselves non-believers and the exploited are the completely faithful ones. The former were few in the past, now they have swelled their ranks. It is no longer a matter of shame to use religion in one's self-interest in a small or big way. I am not advocating that religion in itself is a good

thing, only its misuse is bad. Whatever use it may be put to religion by itself is not a good thing. Not for an individual or for the society or the state.

We were talking about *pujas* and my question was “Do the secularists say anything about doing away with these pujas? The answer I got was “they do not”. I was dying to know why they do not. But my eagerness was not welcome to anyone. Blind faith does encourage such worships, but I would put it more strongly—the more religion the more of these rituals. But the way religion is being nurtured with indulgence, day in day out, what will it finally lead to? Will the Pujas be still celebrated in the same way, one or two centuries hence? When we climb the ladder of civilization, is not the first rung to be stepped on, known as religion? Something created by men, fanatically anti-women and patriarchal. At least that is what I think. Some people pointed out to me brutally that those whom we took to be secular are not so in reality. If the Communists of this regime are themselves non-secular, why blame the common people? The actual meaning of the word ‘secular’ is ‘without any religion, not just ‘neutral to all religions’. In the name of this ‘neutrality’ the communists of today seem to bow down to every religion. At the same time the ruling parties are desperate to move religion from being a personal affair, to a regional affair, an affair of the State. They are so conscious about not hurting the religious sentiments of a single person that they do not hesitate to curtail a writer’s freedom to write. I was speechless when I learnt that the renowned Communist leader Hiren Mukherjee wore the sacred thread till his last days. I am equally speechless to see them running on a pilgrimage to Tarapith and Bakreshwar!

If festivals are a necessity, then why not *Poila Boishakh* (The Bengali New Year’s Day), *Varshabaran* (welcoming the New Year), *Nabanna* (The new Harvest) and so on? Rabindranath Thakur introduced many such festivals in Santiniketan which are still observed with great enthusiasm. These had no connection whatever with religion. Is it not possible for these festivals to spread throughout Bengla and eventually the whole of India? Maybe it is just a dream. True, more often than not, I am in a dreamland!

Has anyone ever proposed that let this year's budget for Puja expenses be spent on the uprooted homeless people? Or, if so many crores are being spent, then at least half or a third of it be spent on some other head. Such as for those boys and girls who are unable to enrol themselves in schools? The money that was earmarked for fireworks be spent on some better cause that merely burning it to ashes. Whatever remains be spent on planting a tree or tending a garden which can give its fragrance all the year round. Just because we require food, it does not mean that we cannot ask for a rose? In fact, we need both.

. Puja touched my life on several occasions. To be precise not Puja but the festival... There used to be several public Pujas in our locality. The mikes blared forth the whole day. A hundred mikes played a hundred different tunes—Hemanta, Manna Dey, Satinath, Jaganmoy Mitra. I swam in a sea of happiness, listening daylong to their incomparable tunes and words of the lyrics. I do not know who was responsible for piercing our eardrums by songs from all sides, but still we listened to those songs, hummed those tunes from morning till midnight—sitting on our rooftop, or on the raised terrace or the verandah, in the fields, or sitting by the window. In a house where the rule demanded that you stick to your desk and chair, with your school text book open in front of you, I was wild with delight for these few days, as if *Shani* the evil Saturn, had been banished from this house. Even after the Pujas were over and mikes were silenced, they continued to buzz in our ears, with the undertone of Satinath's voice faintly.

It was not as if the songs were all that the Pujas meant for me. I danced with excitement at the prospect of doing the rounds of the different Pooja pandals. When the permitted we held their hands and went out in the evenings. Thoughts like what was the festival about, to what end, never crossed my mind then—I would only think of the images of goddess Durga and the magic touch of the sculptor-artists.

After I grew up I thought about these festivals. If their source is religion and barbarism I would gladly stay away from them. And I stick to that. But I am not suggesting that all, temples, mosques and churches be demolished in a spreading wave of hatred. Roaming round the world, I have been captivated by many a temple,

mosque and church. By their unparalleled architectural beauty and magnificence. I have, in my mind, paid homage to those brilliant artists whose imagination conceived these, and not to Ishwar, Allah or God.

Now in my exile I am totally unaware of the beginning of the Puja or the Eid. I only hear about them when they are over. There is no need for Eid or Puja in my life, yet this deathly silence of my exile, makes me pine , just for once, to get in touch with my childhood days filled with the commotion of those festivals, the lit up neighbourhood, houses ringing with laughter, hundred kinds of song, and the tumult all around. My atheism does not confine itself within a bundle of reasoning. I love, I cry, I let myself be carried away by meaningless, irrational things and activities. I dive headlong into pure happiness and cross over the endless shore. I adorn the shapely body of rationalism with seamless emotion. I still desire people to have sense and intelligence free from the religion of the deceivers, free of ugly superstitions. Let people live without jealousy, hatred and barbarism. I dream of a mankind happily living and preserving their species in a corner, however small, of this huge universe. This is my dream. I dream of the beautiful. I go on dreaming, that is all that I am left with...

2004

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**BAT TALAA\* AND HAAT TALAA\* WILL FLOURISH AGAIN!**

It does not make sense. Does it? The Book Fair used to be held in the heart of Kolkata. Now the heart has been pushed out near the foot. Nowhere there is such a to-do about a simple fair. Was it not a matter of great pride that the Book Fair was held in the city centre?

It is annoying to see such a fuss being made over pollution in a city which itself is a polluting city. As though the environmentalists will make Kolkata a clean city overnight, just by stopping the Book Fair! We simply love to see, feel, smell and read books. However far the Fair is held, we shall certainly go. But will we find there the same sense of grand space, the same hubbub, the same liveliness? Maybe in the beginning we shall miss everything. But soon enough it will flourish again like the fairs under the banyan tree where books are sold cheap or in the stalls on the market day in our villages.

In my teens the Book Fair was the fair after my heart. I was known as a bookworm. The days of the Book Fair passed in a daze. For me the choice was between the Book Fair and the rest of the world. I chose the former.. I have seen many book fairs abroad. There is brisk buying and selling of books, no different from the big Sales of furniture, household goods, clothing etc. Books are a great item of commerce. But in Bengal the Book Fair still remains something different. It still smells of the earth. Where else do you have such a Fair under the open sky? Everywhere they are confined within four walls under a concrete roof. You need a heart as wide open in order to get an open sky for yourself. I am reminded of Tagore's song "Who is it there in the open sky doling out love with both hands?"

The *Maidan* stands alone, a ground filled with emptiness. When I go past it, I feel the disturbance in the air, the wailing in the wind. My heart breaks. Its soft cry wafts in the air, on the wings of a still night One can hear it in one's heart not by one's ear. Amending another Tagore song slightly "I keep my heart open, O my dear, to hear you again and again in the deep recess of my heart" (In the original it is "I keep my *ears open*..)

Does not the *Maidan* also miss the meeting of lacs of people? Those making a show of their concern have left the *Maidan* naked; seem to be totally callous about the feelings of the *Maidan* itself. Does not earth exist just for man? So is the open forest. If there were no human beings what would these hundreds of green fields, hundreds of open grounds and stretches of earth celebrate? With whose happiness will they swing in harmony? Man loves the earth. He loves a display of green, loves clean air. It is not man who spreads pollution, it is only the polluted politics of a few which does. The kind of politics which spends millions on senseless luxury, instead of spending it to ensure a pollution-free environment!

As a child, I used to go to the fairs, holding my father's hand. We used to buy so many things—bamboo flutes, puffed rice, horses and animals made out of crystallized sugar, clay dolls, mangoes, jackfruits also made out of clay, and palm-leaf fans. Today I have the same excitement about visiting the Book fair. Ageing does not necessarily mean fossilization. I still jump with joy and make a din, on any happy occasion. The rules about what to do or not do at a certain age, are just redundant; these are the perverted creations of some conservative people.. Even now I tremble with emotion at the prospect of a Book Fair as I did in my childhood for the local fairs. I do not write any book with the Book Fair in mind, because I am still unable to think of it as a commercial exhibition. Books sell well at this Fair, So most writers try their level best to get something out for this occasion. Just as they put themselves out I withdraw myself, and put by my pen and papers. I want to enjoy myself at this time, not to write.. I write only when I must. I shall write when I am in deep pain for those unfortunates who suffer in the hands of those who deceive and torture them. I weep as I write and go on writing as I wipe my tears. These may be published any time of the year. I do not target the Book Fair, others may. The Book Fair happens to be my joy, my festival, the breath of my life, my childhood, my candy horse...!

Of the myriad stars in the sky I do not know which one is my father. Does he know that I think of him, can he see me wipe my tears in secret when I go buying books, flutes as go round the fair ground?

Why have I started living in Kolkata now? I did not lack fame, reputation honour, or money in the West.. I left all that to return to my own soil--Bengal. Bengal is one, merely that some people have erected a barrier between its two halves. I am borderless, bound for the infinite. Barriers between countries, between states and even between different localities: I do not feel like crossing so many barriers! I long for a world without frontiers. not that you can have it for the asking. But let the longing be. Now I am here in this West Bengal, because I love Bengal, because *Bangla* is my mother-tongue, in which I speak and write The culture of Bengal is my culture within which I grew up. Everyone should have the freedom to live in any part of the world one likes. Can I convince the higher-ups, with a hundred reasons as to why the area known as Bengal is a vital necessity for a Bengali writer? If I could I would have got my citizenship in a trice. Europe saved my life. By allowing me permanent residence India can save me my writer's identity. But will they? If they do not then I shall have to go and live one of those dead cities in an alien land. In those towns where Book fairs are held within the confines of four walls under a roof of concrete; where there is no open sky. Can a human being survive without an open sky?

2005

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\_\_\_\_\_ . \**BaT*=the banyan tree *talaa*=underneath, ground. The reference is to the local fairs held under its shade, where cheap editions of popular books are sold

\* *HaaT*= open marketplace

\* Maidan=A large open field. In the centre of the city of Calcutta, adjacent to the Fort William barracks, there is a very large field, which was originally used as a parade ground for the troops. Now, known as the "lungs of Calcutta", it is the venue of amateur football and Cricket games and events of many kinds like the Book Fair for instance.

## DAYS GO BY, AND SO GOES THE FUTURE OF FAIRS!

In my childhood, in Mymensingh, there used to be fairs both on the days of the *Rath*\* and the *UltoRath* festivals. The fairs used to be held on the pavements of the Swadeshi Bazaar., on the *ashtami* (the eighth day of the lunar phase). Holding on to my father's fingers, I used to move freely all over the fair, deeply happy.. My father used buy us puffed rice of the season and toys made out of sugar. We made childish demands for clay dolls, bamboo flutes and colourful elephants and horses. What excitement in those days, those fairs, my childhood days!

Later in my teens when my heart was dedicated to poetry, I used to listen to stories about the Book Fair. Confined to a life at home in the small town of Mymensingh it was truly beyond our dreams to visit the Book Fair in the city of Dhaka illuminated with red and blue lights. Somewhere along the line, what was beyond dream actually became a dream, lying in wait in the deep recesses of my heart. After an interminable wait, this shameless, impertinent dream of mine came true. I did visit the Book Fair at long last.

From then on it is always me and the Book Fair; I started to soak myself in the smell of books. I ran through the time, from the month of *Chaitra* (mid-April, the start of the Bengali New Year) till Magh (the end of the Bengali year), only waiting for *Falgun* (springtime, usually when Book Fairs are held) to come. I suffer these eleven months only on the promise of one whole month's enjoyment. I have no religious belief. I have always kept myself away from religious festivals. I do not think that all the pleasures of Paradise that I have heard of can ever match the pleasure afforded by the book fair of the Twenty-first February... Every year a book of mine comes out; I have a great time with my writer friends, exchange views with my readers and recite my poems from various platforms. In the midst of these tumultuous days a *fatwa* is issued by the wise, learned Book Fair Committee, banning the entry of my books at the Fair. The reason for this order was stated to be prevention of the vitiating atmosphere caused by the regular burning of my books and attacks against

my person, at the Book fair. Year in year out the Fair is held, all my friends revel in it, only I stay a prisoner in my home; all the while. My mind on the Fair

Afterwards I have been to many a book fair—all abroad. Not only was I banned entry to any one of them, I was actually invited to attend. Not just a simple invitation, I was often asked to inaugurate large important Fairs in many European countries. I have been a Guest of Honour, or a Special invitee.. In spite of such welcome abroad, I still miss the Book Fairs at Dhaka and at Kolkata. A ground full of dust, dotted with little huts, books heaped on a rickety table, books poorly printed poorly bound; yet my heart lies in this fair alone. Book Fairs in no other country draws me the way the Fairs in Bengal do

In the glittering Book Fairs abroad, beautifully produced expensive books by famous writers are published, serious learned discussions ,in depth are held, everything is perfect, flawless, still my heart longs for the dusty Fairs of Bengal. I have addressed this question to myself and always come up with the same answer every time. The answer was that the Fairs in Bengal are vibrant with life. the like of which I never found in any Book fair anywhere in the world. After having been to the resplendent Fairs in the rich countries, the Fairs of this poor country has seemed to me to be the richest. When I inhale the air of the fair here, I breathe the air of life. Not just because it was the love of my childhood and my teens, but this Fair has a scent of its own which reminds me about my self, my own identity. It is the fragrance of the earth. Being away from the soil far too long we forget how much we owe it. Abroad, any sizeable Fair takes place within four walls, never on a field or close to the ground. You cannot get a glimpse of the sky even if you wanted it. The object of a Book Fair there is buying and selling of books, the aim is one of trading; both the author and the publisher count their monies. But Book Fairs in Bengal do not smell of such commerce, at least not to me. The great thing that fascinates me, beyond the trivial financial transactions is Love, the true love between Literature and Man. I can smell the excitement in the air that new writer feels when his book comes out after the labour of one full year.. It is a crowd of thousands of people; those who cannot afford to buy books come at least for the pleasure of looking at books, smelling them, those who have saved money in their piggy banks for a whole year only for this day; people

who have come from far away, by bus, train or on foot. I see their faces here. The Book Fair is something more than just books. It is as though one can embrace the whole of Bengal's culture in a single afternoon, on one ground. It is indeed a Fair for our union.

.When an alien culture consumes our own then we cling lovingly to our proud heritage. In the same way we have taken unto our heart this Fair. The vibrancy of this Fair reminds us we are still alive, alive in an intense fashion. This Fair is not all about Bengali identity alone, but it is also one of universal awakening. It is a Fair of free thinking, of freely opening your heart and speak out, in the open air, under the open sky.

Bangladesh has shut its door to me: I can never attend the Book Fair in Dhaka even if I die longing for it. Now West Bengal happens to be my motherland. The Kolkata Book Fair is my book fair. I do not believe that there are not hundreds of Sharmilas to embrace me lovingly, just because a few Mallikas are kicking me in a fit of rage. I do not think anyone will rush to blacken my face or behead me, just because there is a *fatwa* against me. There is no reason for them to do so, I have committed no crime!

My greatest sorrow is that in a city which is dearest to me, a city where I get the greatest of love and affection, I have to live guarded by the police. I cannot roam around the city as I please. I want to walk all by myself in the midst of the crowd, but I may not. The Government of India allowed me visa on condition that there will be a pilot car in front another police van behind my car; I have to bear with the torture of their sirens. I have pleaded that I have no need for security, and the answer was, in that case there is also no need for me to visit India.. But here in Kolkata, on many occasions, I have been disobedient and went out with my friends defying their vigilance. Even that little freedom was such a pleasure. I am a very ordinary person, and I want to mix with the common people in the normal way. I want to share with them their joys and sorrows. I want to write about them. Besides I do not want a single person disturbed, or a single pie of public fund be spent on my account. I come to Kolkata to lead a peaceful life. I come to Kolkata for solace, sick and tired in body and mind, like a person who has lost his way and roamed round many countries,

for many days. I drink to my heart's content, the cool clear water of Kolkata, like life-giving nectar. I revive. I dreamed of living in Kolkata, in a little room of mine own in one corner of the city. Alas it never came to pass.

I cannot be a permanent resident here, because I am supposed to be a foreigner. I have been trying for over a year but with no success so far.

I have a dream which holds me in a trance from the moment I set foot in Kolkata—that just like many others I may also have the liberty to move about at will; let anyone meet me if they so wish, reach me and touch me, that I may be able to convince them I am not a rare person, I am their own and I am related to them all.. Let these two hands and this shoulder of mine be blessed by being able to lighten the burden of even one sad woman. Let me be spared the shame of moving around with a vehicle with sirens, in this beloved city of mine. Let me roam about in the Book Fair like any other visitor. Let me not be circumscribed by laid down limits. Let me not ever need the services of security men. Let the people's love be my only security!

2006

## **THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR HOMES.**

“Freedom is always and exclusively, freedom for the one who thinks differently”

--Rosa Luxembourg

After trudging through many years of my life, I look back and see them in unrelieved grey. Out of that grayness suddenly a forgotten dream appears before me, now and then. Or a particular memory sneaks into my solitary, silent room, shakes me up, makes me cry and drags me towards those random days. On those moments, is it possible for me to resist retracing my steps among those lanes and byelanes, part the layers of darkness and pick up a few frozen pieces of memory? But what is the use? What is lost is lost forever! What is the point of picking them up gently with soft fingers, clearing the cobwebs and layers of dust, those dreams that are dead for a long time so that they can longer be recognized as dreams even. What is gone is gone for ever! I know all that, yet my exile has, time and again made me look back and I have retraced my past in a trance. Like a nightmare, a particular night has cast its pall of sorrow on me. It is then that I started recounting the story of that girl. A shy, obedient girl who grew up within the narrow bound of strict family control and exploitation ; one whose little desires and indulgences were crushed and thrown out into the garbage heap; one who had to repulse the lusty hairy hand again and again, it is her story that I have narrated. I have told the story of the girl who as a teenager began to nurse a few modest dreams, one who fell in love all of a sudden, and in her youth wanted to secretly get married and lead a simple life like so many other ordinary girls. I have related the tale of that girl who was deceived by the person she loved most—her own husband, the girl whose house of trust collapsed like a house of cards, the girl who shrunk out of intense grief, regret and pain and driven by extreme shame and torture and even thought of taking the grim path of suicide. I have told the story of that grieving girl. That girl who gathered up the broken pieces of her shattered dreams

in the hope living again, begged for a small corner for herself, within a cruel, heartless society; the one who was compelled to submit herself to the care of a male guardian, as the social mores demanded, and still had to suffer blow after blow, the kind of blow that destroys the foetus in the womb, which draws her blood night after night, the blow of dishonesty, cruelty, mistrust and humiliation. I only wrote about that trampled, bitten, pitiable woman. But the unhappy woman pulled herself up again with whatever strength she was left with, this time, without begging anyone for a standing room. This time she fought her own battle all by herself, lived herself, was her own support; this time she has not submitted herself to anyone, has not renounced the world because she was deprived; she turned her back on the censure of others. I have written about this turnaround. This girl cared a fig for the multifarious social taboos, every fall taught her the lesson that helped her to be up on her feet again, every stumble took her on the way to walk straight and she found her true path by losing her way ever so often. Gradually, she realized a new understanding and confidence grow within her. That her life was entirely her own, not anyone else's. She alone had command over her destiny. I have described the development of that person, about the environment and neighbourhood that shaped and built her, the person who, was not burnt to ashes by the fire of patriarchy, but came out as tempered steel.

Was I wrong? I may not think so but to many others it was a grave trespass on my part. I committed a grave offence by exposing this story. I am being put on the dock before the public for my crime. It might not have been treated as an offence had I not disclosed that the girl whose tale I told was none but me, me Taslima. I could indulge in anything in my imagination, I can depict falsehoods, I may even write about a girl different from the rest. All that may be tolerated, but in the world of reality, here and now, no one will stand the arrogance of a real woman who proclaims that she is the woman of the story, that she has overcome her sorrow and resolved to live her life as she pleases. Such affront does not behove any woman. Truly I am a misfit in a totally patriarchal ambience

In my beloved country, in this West Bengal, I am a forbidden name, a banned person, a proscribed a book. My name must not be uttered, I may not be approached, and I shall not be of the read. Pronouncing my name might spoil the

tongue, touching me will pollute the hand and reading me will be loathsome.. That is me. For a long time, not just now.

Even if I am minced to a thousand pieces, I shall never admit that it was wrong of me to have written *Dwikhandita* (Split in Two). Is it a crime to write one's autobiography? Is it a sin to reveal the deep secrets of one's life? The prime condition of writing an autobiography is that everything should be in the open; nothing should be hidden under the carpet. Autobiographies are meant to reveal secrets hitherto unknown. I have tried honestly and faithfully to follow this condition. Even though there was no controversy about the first two volumes of my autobiography—*Aamaar Meyebelaa* (My Girlhood), and *Utal Haowa* (The Wild Wind)—this third volume has become the subject of debate, here in West Bengal. I did not start this debate; others did. Many have opined that I have myself chosen an excitable topic. But in whichever context such questions may be valid, it cannot be relevant in case of an autobiography. I have only narrated the events and varied experiences of my growing years.

There are many definitions of an autobiography. Most people take to the kind of autobiography which presents beautiful sermons and ideal examples. Usually the savants write their autobiographies, in order to, illuminate others with his ideals of life. to perceive the truth, and guide them on the right path. I am no savant, or an intellectual nor a super person. I am nothing; I do not write my life story with the noble object of illuminating the blind. I am only exposing the wounds, the frustrations of an insignificant individual.

Even if I am no great literary figure or a celebrated personality, I can not deny that there have been remarkable events in my life. It is surely not a commonplace existence, if my life incites thousands of people demand my head, on account of my ideals and beliefs, if my books are banned one after another because they are contrary to established opinions, if the state machinery robs me of my right to live in my own country, it is just because I tell the truth. As this particular life has been discussed and presented in many ways by gossip and hearsay, should I not take the responsibility of presenting it in its entirety? After all no one knows better than me this life of mine.

If I do not open up myself, reveal myself fully, and specially do not expose those events of life that distressed me, if I do not lay bare my good and bad points, faults as well as good qualities, the good and the evil in me, my all the in the know now is lawyers and the U.N. joys and sorrows, my cruel and generous aspects, then it is no autobiography—at least not to me! Literature for the sake of literature is not the last word for me; there is also something like, honesty which I value a great deal.

Whatever my life has been like, however inferior, however blameworthy, I am not going to deceive myself, when I start writing about my own life. Regardless of whether the reader hates me or feels like throwing me out, on reading my life story, I shall have the satisfaction that I am not cheating my readers. I am not presenting a made-up story to the reader on the pretence of an autobiography. I am narrating unhesitatingly the whole truth about my life, even if the truth may not be always decent and palatable. Whatever has taken place in my life has already happened; I can neither alter nor deny you need to know did you see a long and only ten oh them by claiming that they never happened. I accept the ugly as well as the beautiful equally well.

Darts of ridicule are being aimed at me; I am being drowned in the slush of insult and calumny—for one and only one reason, that I dared speak the truth. Everybody can not face the truth all the time. They could tolerate my '*Aamaar meyebelaa*' and '*Utal Haoa*' but the truth in '*Dwikhanditaa*' proved too much for them. In the first, when I narrated the story of my humiliation, people felt sorry for me. In the second volume, where I was deceived by my husband, even then people sympathized with my plight. But when in the third volume I talk about my promiscuity, they condemn and reject me. This can only mean one thing. It is only when a woman is tortured; when she is weak, helpless and suffering that she is an object of pity and affection. But the moment she is no longer tortured or helpless, the moment she stands straight and asserts her rights, breaks the social taboos for the freedom of her body and mind, then she is no longer likeable, but becomes an object of hatred. I was aware of this character of our society; still I did not hesitate to present myself in the open.

A major issue in the debate about *Dwikhanditaa* is sexual liberty. Deeply mired in the prejudices, most men in our society feel annoyed, offended and angry when a woman proclaims openly her sexual liberty. The sexual freedom I talk about is not just a belief for me, but in my own life I have established it. Yet no man will have me just because he desires me! This society is not yet ripe to accept such a to the right for any woman. They are not prepared to accept that a woman can have pleasure with men of her choice and yet strictly maintain her sexual purity.

Our rich and famous writers are having a grand time calling me a fallen woman, only proving thereby their opportunistic male supremacy, in a terribly grimy patriarchal society. They satisfy their lust with the fallen women and at the same time do not lose any opportunity to use the word 'fallen' as a term of abuse. Using women as sex-slaves is an age-old practice. In *Dwikhandita* I have talked about my struggle against the male-dominated society, I have talked about protesting against the oppression of women and minorities by such a society. But no one has uttered a word about that; they only talk about sexuality. They ignored my tears, my sufferings; their only concern was with my sexuality then. Their attention was focused on my relationships with men; they only noticed my arrogance in opening my mouth on a deeply secret and nasty subject like sex!

History shows us that in a unenlightened society, any woman has rebelled against male domination, declared her independence, wanted to break her shackles, she has been branded as a 'fallen woman' Long ago I also wrote in the preface to '*Nashto meyer nashto gadya*' (Poor Prose from a Naughty girl) that I like to call myself fallen in the eyes of this society. It is well-known that if a woman wants to be rid of her sad plight, if she stands up against the rotten rules of any religion, society or state, protests against the many means of suppressing her, if she is conscious of her rights, then the gentlemen of the society is sure to dub her 'fallen' It seems that the first condition for a woman to be emancipated is to become a 'fallen woman'; there is no way to be free of the grip of a python society, The woman whom the society brands as 'fallen', is indeed a truly healthy, pure human being, I still believe that if a woman truly wants to earn her freedom and become a real person then she has to be a 'fallen' one in the eyes of the society. Of all the encomiums I have earned, I consider 'fallen

woman' the highest. I have earned this sobriquet because I was able to effectively hurt the wicked corpus of the male-dominant system. This is my life's achievement as a woman and as a writer.

Because of this book one Bangladeshi writer has filed a suit for libel, against me. Someone in Calcutta has also followed suit. They did not stop with the court case but also raised the demand for banning the book. I fail to understand how one writer can ask for another writer's book to be prohibited. Many lies and imaginary gossip have been spread against me, but I did not run to the court on that account. I believe in Voltaire's words "*je ne suis absolument pas d'accord avec vos idées, mais je ne battrais pour que vous puissiez les expirer*" (*I may not agree with your views but I shall fight till the end for your right to express yourself*).

So many people have written their autobiographies; they did not distil only the sanitized aspects of their lives for their narrative. In any real person's life there are bound to be some slips, some mistakes, some dark spots, some thorns—something or the other.

Even the great ones were not free of blemishes. Christian religious leader Augustine (335-430) did not hesitate to write frankly about his anti-social, immoral reckless life. He did not hide anything about his sexual profligacy, his fathering an illegitimate child. Even Mahatma Gandhi has admitted how he tested his *brhmacharya* (vow of celibacy and continence) by sharing his bed with young girls in undress. Let us take the case of the French author Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) who in his 'Confessions' has narrated all that he has done, without reserving anything unsavoury in a secret chamber for himself. In his days there were few who could accept Rousseau's ideals. That mattered little to him describing without restraint all his misdeeds. Apart from Madame Gautier and many other women, even Madame de Warren whom he addressed as 'mother' was the object of his sexual arousal. Benjamin Franklin (1709-1790) in his autobiography has describes the tumultuous, wild days of his youth and mentions how he brought into his family his illegitimate son William. Bertrand Russell has talked about his illicit relationship with different women. The relationship that Lady Ottolin Momel had with T.S.Eliot's wife Vivian is no secret. Leo Tolstoy made no secret about his encounter with a prostitute at age fourteen,

sexual relationship with women of the lowest strata of society and with married women. He also wrote frankly about his venereal disease. One may well ask why they had to publicly present facts which were unacceptable to the society. There must have been a reason for it. Either they did not hide their true character from the public or they narrated these as significant events in their lives. Did they become outcasts because of this or does anyone today, call them undesirables? No one thinks so, not only have they retained their position in society but are today glorified as apostles of truth.

Man-woman relationship is no longer kept under cover in the Western countries, for quite a while now. Recently a Frenchwoman, Catherine Millais in her book 'La vie sexuelle' has written about the unbridled sexuality of the sixties and a sensational story of her affairs with many men. Throughout the book there is vivid description of sexual union. But has it made in difference? Has the book been denied a place in the shelf of Literature? The answer is no. Gabriel Garcia Marquez in 'Vivi par Contrala' has left nothing unsaid about his frolics with other people's wives. Will anyone call Marquez a bad character or rush to the court to have his books banned?

Biographies of eminent people are being published all the time all over the world. The biographers write them after years of intense research. Every secret of their lives is being dug up. Even Rabindranath Tagore's family secret is not spared. Are the public aware of the reason why he, a strong critic of child marriage, arranged the marriage of his own daughter at a tender age? The point is that, need the readers be aware of such facts of the author's life, at all? If it is totally irrelevant to find out who did what, where or what was his lifestyle, then why is so much research to establish such facts? As a result of these researches the biographers present hitherto unknown facts in a celebrity's life, and it is possible to analyze and reevaluate not only the man but also his creative works in the light of the new facts.

Quite a number of Bengali male writers are not averse to secretly play the game of lust and love with many women. Even though they lightly pass over such facts in their own story of life they do not hesitate to visit the characters of their writings with the same. But nobody questions them. The question arises only when a woman writes about sexuality, be it in her autobiography or her novels and stories.

Sexuality is a man's exclusive inheritance from his father. I am not allowed to write the same way as a male writer can, I have to cover it up.. Because I am a woman! Only a man has the right to play with or write about woman's behinds, breasts, thighs and sex. How can a woman also have those rights? This male-dominated society did not give this right to women. All these objections are, because defying the taboo, I still wrote, however pitiable, however tragic my tale was. I trespassed beyond my rights

For a man, it has been always a matter of prowess as to how many love affairs he has had or how many women he had slept with.. But let a woman put down in black and white about her own love affairs or sexual experience, she becomes immediately, a traitor, and a depraved adulteress. I have said things in my autobiography which must not be said. I have crossed the limit; I have overdone it. I have been obscene, indulged in raking up filthy, ugly matters. What takes place behind closed doors, by mutual consent must not be talked about. Those are not important enough. But I think they are, because these very events and disasters are the basic elements for the task I am engaged in, namely, to reconstruct this Taslima, with all my beliefs and doubts, my opinions and ideals and my culture and mores. I am no upstart. This person, contrary to a paragon of virtues, is every bit, the product of her social environment. I feel this self-analysis is essential for understanding my own self.

I may have disgraced myself but I have no reason to tarnish the reputation of others. I am only writing about my own life, not anyone else's, yet many have raised the question of bringing into disrepute the family and social prestige of others. I am not clear as to why men who are so touchy about their prestige commit such acts that they well understand, will hurt their reputation. They say I have been unfaithful! But have I promised anyone that I shall not reveal anything ever? They assume that there is an unwritten understanding! In truth, this excuse about 'understanding' is brought up exactly by those who fear their divine character will be blemished, if their secrets come to light! And so they threaten with red eyes that if I trespass my limits then, I shall be properly punished for breach of trust..

But in case I consider it proper to publish something and proceed to do so, what then? May I know who will teach the distinction between right and wrong and to whom? .What if I consider something not to be obscene? Who indeed is the

venerable arbiter between what is unprintable and what is not? Whose responsibility is it to draw the lines of limit? Is it not for me to decide what to include and what to exclude from my own autobiography? Or is it for some Tom, Dick and Harry—some Maksud Ali or Keramat Mian or Paritosh and Haridas Pal—to tell me what to write and how much.

Critics want to mark my freedom as willfulness. The fact is that all our values—vice and virtue, taste and the lack of it, beauty and ugliness—are the result of eons of patriarchal training. The characteristics of a woman, namely her softness, docility, submissiveness, chastity, beauty and patience all follow from this teaching. This is why our conditioned consciousness panics at the prospect of facing the rude reality. We close our ears to any rude words, our gorge rises. And that is exactly what is happening with some critics. Questions have been mooted as to whether I have the right to pen my autobiography and serialize it. To be honest everyone has the inalienable right to publish one's autobiography. Even the self-conceited journalist who feels there is a grave risk in allowing me to write, has his rights. I am being blamed for being extremely irresponsible.

I may be irresponsible and unreasonable but still I am unwilling to give up my rights. George Bernard Shaw said "A reasonable man adapts himself to the world. An unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to him. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man." I Taslima am one of them. I am an insignificant writer. I do not make such a stupendous claim that the whole world's progress depends in the least on me! But I would gladly welcome the decision of the wise that I am foolish and unreasonable. It is because I am foolish that I did not seal my lips and spoke out the unspeakable and did not stand aside even when an entire society spat at me. Because I am a fool, I took a stand firmly against the onslaught of the big sharks of patriarchy.

Perhaps my ignorance, my stupidity and my unreasonableness are my greatest assets.

The question of religion has been raised also. Those who know me are aware that I speak out against all kinds of religious tyranny. Religion also from the start has been male-dominated. The custodians and followers of the patriarchal system

can not possibly, tolerate anything against religious personages or books. It is these great men who have had me exiled! I have paid with my life the price of speaking the truth. How much more do I have to suffer still?

Banning of my books on the pretext of possible riots is not new here in West Bengal, the same excuse was used in Bangladesh too. .My books are not the cause for the constant clashes we see in this sub-continent. The reason lies somewhere else. I am not at all a factor in the oppression of minorities in Bangladesh, the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, the harassment of Biharis in Assam, the attack on Christians in Orissa or the clashes between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan Even as an insignificant writer I do write for humanity,. I write with all my heart the truth that all people are equal and every one has the right to live like a human being, regardless of religion, race or gender. No, no such calamitous events like riots take place because of my books. If any such thing happens it happens to my life alone. I am punished for my writing, no one else. It is my house which is set on fire. My poor self has to lose my home everywhere.

2003

## **YOU FALLEN WOMAN--YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO SPEAK!**

From the time I set foot in Kolkata, strange things are happening, one after the other. I would not say they are happening spontaneously. I have been noticing for quite some time that little by little my entry into the literary world of Kolkata is being prohibited.

Festivities and poetry-readings are being held all over; every poet has been invited bar one—me! Only one has been banned—that is me! My last invitation was three years ago. When I reached the Nandan auditorium with my invitation letter, the convener informed me that my name was not on the list of poets, so I may have no chance to read my poems

No, I am not in the least eager to be on any dais. I am beginning to feel in my bones, something familiar, and something I have experienced before. This conspiracy to gently remove me from every agenda, to push me out of the dais is but all too familiar. I know this process of turning me into a prohibited matter, only too well. I have experienced indifference at close quarters. In Bangladesh, I have been thrown aside, rejected, ostracised. Gradually, I began to lose my friends, lived confined to my room and lived like an exile in my own home; until that night of horror arrived when I was driven out of my room, my family, my society and even my motherland! Those days remain with me more as unbearable nightmares than as mere memories. The poet's of this Bengal welcomed lovingly a banned person from the other Bengal. But that was in the beginning; after sometime started the chase... There are many reasons and many ways of throwing one out. In Kolkata I am not confined so much but I can feel trouble brewing. Bad days will follow; sometimes silently, sometimes with clamour. My books have been banned and with both official and private encouragement my name is creeping into the list of undesirables. Sometimes I am alarmed to think that perhaps I am back in Bangladesh. I fear that maybe little by little, this Bengal also wants to become like Bangladesh. Maybe it does!

In Bangladesh, I was banned to enter the Book fair. Here the dust and din of the Book Fair is not yet out of bounds for me. I still have some place to breathe

in and out. I maybe banned out of Government offices and stables, from the prominent areas of culture, but I am still welcome to the very ordinary people--to their hearts. They are the ones who keep me alive. Even now, the talk of the Book Fair makes the blood rush through my veins. I come from beyond the seas, to this dusty city of Kolkata just to see this Book Fair. I come as it pulls my heartstring. I have always held that there is no book fair anywhere in the world, quite like the Kolkata Book Fair. But despite all this excitement of the Book Fair now, how long can it go on?. I dread to think of its fate a hundred years hence. Most of the new generation can not read or write Bangla, many can not even speak it, or if they can, they do not or do not wish to speak the language. They have no love for Bangla in the least. Perhaps a Fair of Bangla Books may survive for quite sometime amongst the poorest of peasants in some remote villages. If a Book Fair is held at all it is likely to take place in the open fields in the village landscape. The Bangla language is slowly becoming the language of the untouchables, the language of the downtrodden. I am prepared to give up all for the sake of Bangla, but the language of the exploited is destined to disappear according to natural law. That there was a language called Bangla, will someday become a matter of history, at least in West Bengal, if not in East Bengal. Maybe, maybe not; I see more chance of the former. The Bengali appears to be embarrassed about his own tongue. Usually, when I am in Bengal, I never speak to any one in any other language than Bangla. I carry on in Bangla with a Bihari cabman, or a Marwari businessman or an artist from Uttarpradesh, all living in Bengal. I do not believe in the theory or excuse that otherwise they will not follow what is being said. The truth is that they follow all right, but no Bengali wants to give them the chance to speak it properly. All languages are beautiful, and I respect all languages but being in Bengal I want to savour the pleasure of speaking its language and also share it with others. This does not diminish one's worth, but enhances it. If one has no respect for oneself then he can not also bring anything worthwhile into his own life. In the same way if one does not love this language then he will fail to give anything of worth to the land or its people whose language it is.

I had long talks with publishers of Bangla books, and I was surprised to find that in spite of people being glued to the TV, Computer, MP3 and DVD the

sale of books did not go down, as feared. After e-books came publishers were sure that nobody would buy books anymore; but that did not happen either. It is however true that the advent of the internet the sale of books went up in some ways, but it also came down in other ways.

Combing the bookshops you got some titles you wanted but others were just not there. No end of such problems. But in the internet shops we get titles from any country in the world, with just a few clicks. A few clicks more and the book arrives at your doorstep. The system of gift presentations is also wonderful. Clicks and clicks and the book is sent to whomever you want, wrapped in a gift paper of your choice , even, adding a few words that you wanted to write. This way the sale of books has increased. Yet the sales have also decreased because you can access any information you want. If one is interested in a particular topic it costs both time and money to track books on the subject, in the internet and then buy them.; but you can read up all about it in the internet. It saves both time and money. The clever ones choose this path.

The largest bookshop in the world 'amazon.com' is now on internet.. In 1994 the founder of Amazon Co, Joseph Bijoes , noticed that internet business is increasing at an annual rate of 2200 %. So he decided to put his shop in the net, and in no time his sales spread to more than 160 countries and well above the home sales figure of 130 billion .Amazon .com has more than 5 million books, CDs and DVDs, comprising 3 million books alone. Today, there are many Bangla book sellers on the Net. Credit cards are also gaining ground; so why lag behind? There is indeed no reason: still I feel like going around bookshops, handling books, searching for titles and buying books

Maybe not today but some day in the distant future even the internet bookshops will vanish specially, if the shop sells paper books. If books are sold at all it will be electronic books on the internet. That is what I gather from the air all around. But the heart refuses to accept it. I wish that such fairs be held month after month, year after year.

Let there be a host of Fairs, let it be a game of being lost forever, and let it be the time for love! But my wishes will not stop the progress of Science. I am by no means anti-science; on the contrary I am a believer in science perhaps a bit too much.

But that does not mean that I would like to see the world overrun by robots. If one depends too much on machines, then the mind too gets to be mechanical. I shall certainly pity the children of the future if they are deprived of the unique pleasure of turning the pages of a book whilst savouring a snack of roasted puffed rice and a cup of hot tea. There are certain things for which there are no substitutes.

What is the situation in West Bengal? Selling books to Bangladesh is nearly at an end. But does it mean that no books are sold any more? Books are still being sold but the growth in the number of readers lags behind the rate of growth of literacy. Who are the majority of readers? Some publishers were unanimous in their answer-‘it is the women’ followed by the children who read a lot now. Men are the least among them. They read little but write a lot more. The women on the other hand read a lot more than they write. So amongst writers, men outnumber the women. Men tend to dispense more knowledge than they imbibe. That is where the problem lies.. Women are far more observant than men, yet they write less. Lack of time is the only reason for it. Women have to manage the family and the household. Looking after the children, cooking meals for everyone, and hundreds of such chores handicap women physically, mentally and psychologically. They get much less leisure than the men for creative activities like writing or sketching. In fact, for women, such activities are still not considered as work proper. Household is the first priority, and only after that, if the husband or his family permit, them to take up a job or any other profitable work (not all kinds of work but only those considered suitable for women) can be thought of. Somehow, with great reluctance, it may be tolerated, but a stylish activity as writing is just out of the question. On the part of women, it is nothing but fashion, coquetry and indulgence. Therefore women consciously restrain themselves from appearing to be overtly forward. Patriarchy seems to be resting more on the support of women than men. After all it is not for long that women have been literate. A male-dominated society did not even give them the opportunity.

If one observes carefully, the difference between West Bengal and Bangladesh is disappearing to a large extent.. There used to be a lot of piracy on the other side. As soon as a novel appeared in the Pujya Annual magazine here, it would

appear in print as a book there. Who is going to stop whom? There is no law against it and even if there is, it is not enforced. I was led to believe that there may be piracy elsewhere but not here in West Bengal.! But in the book area of College Street pirated books are selling like anything, under the very noses of the publishers. I am stunned at the absence of any concern about this booming sale of pirated versions and at no voices being raised against it. A poor helpless writer like me has no way to find out who is or are the printers and publishers of these pirated books. I hear that books worth a hundred rupees fetch as much as a thousand and five hundred. The people in Lallbazar (the police headquarters in Calcutta) seem to be particularly kind towards these merchants of pirated books and not in favour of any action against them. Many complaints have been made that these illegal traders are selling illegal books in an illegal manner, but the administration showed no interest in proceeding against them. The book '*Dwikhandita*' has been out for over a year and it is still banned in this state. When it was banned in West Bengal there was some protest, but it was fruitless. The West Bengal government did not lift the ban. This banned item still remains so. The government has robbed, with ease, the writer of his/her right to express his/her opinion and also robbed the reader of his right to read whatever he likes to read. I fear that if pirated books are sold like this, easily without let or hindrance, then it will become a habit to distribute only such pirated editions. It is certainly difficult to imagine a scene where the College Street is inundated with pirated books, infested with thieves, robbers, liars and black marketers! If corruption is tolerated, malpractices are bound to be rampant and beyond control. In Bangladesh too it started with a few publishers of pirated books, and now they have the upper hand.. In the Banglabazar area of Dhaka, most publishers have given up; a few still cling to their trade and others have themselves engaged in piracy. West Bengal could have, at least learnt a lesson from this. It is in this state at least it is possible to raise a voice against piracy. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya who has promulgated this ban could at least see that it is enforced strictly. Or was the real intention behind this ban was to take away the rights of the legitimate publishers and hand it over to the pirates. The legal edition is rotting in the Lallbazar police lock-up whilst the market is flooded with the pirated edition. The illicit is triumphant everywhere. The banned never had it so good.

A few popular writers from West Bengal often come to Bangladesh and enjoy its Mughlai cuisine and generous hospitality, offered in mansions attended by many retainers. But they never utter a word against piracy there, maybe for fear of losing all the lavish comfort. There is another object of delight awaiting the visitors—female company! The company of Muslim women. The whole thing is quite exotic! Women who were supposed to be hidden under a *burqa* are freely walking about, in a sari with a vermillion dot on the forehead, smiling and talking: the very sight makes you shiver! Some Hindu intellectuals here are extremely angry with me. They have, of course, joined hands with some Muslim writers in their clamour for banning my book. This stance serves many ends—part of the onus of the ban was shifted to the Muslim writers, the mask of secularity was well maintained by expressing an admirable anxiety to save Islamic religious codes and at the same time ensure the luxurious hospitality on visits to Bangladesh; also meting out proper punishment to me, for not following the diktats of the patriarchal society.

I believe in freedom of expression. Even the fundamentalists, all over the state, who were baying for my blood, have, I personally hold, the right to speak as they like and write whatever they feel in their hearts. The Bengali magazine from Kolkata was banned here when it carried a story by Sunil Gangopaddhyay, *Pratham Manabi* (The Primal Woman). I protested against the ban, yet the same author led a strong agitation for banning my '*Dwikhandita*' Sunil Gangopaddhyay was worried that I had written disparagingly about the Prophet in my book which will hurt the Muslim sentiment and he firmly believed that this will lead to great violence throughout the state.. Anyway after a great effort the book was successfully banned here. Soon after that the Bangladesh government banned the *Desh* magazine because they thought that a story by Sunil Gangopaddhayay had cut to the quick, Muslim feelings! The news made headlines in every newspaper in Bangladesh, but not a word was published in West Bengal papers. I have no idea as to who were behind totally suppressing the news from the local media.

Here to I find that male writers and intellectuals are not in favour of freedom of expression for any one else. So is this right only for you, and not for me? There must be something behind it. Something working clandestinely. May be without

anyone knowing about it I shall also secretly become wholly untouchable. Still turning a smiling face towards me these powerful enemies will prevent me from coming anywhere near the Kolkata Book Fair, as it was done in Bangladesh. Some day perhaps, all points of entry- to this country will be closed for me. I can feel this fear slowly creeping up my backbone. This fear does not stem from the fundamentalists, but from the free-thinking intellectuals, from the famed male writers of this state. It is true that I was hounded out of Bangladesh by the fundamentalists, but more frightening was the icy silence of the writer-intellectuals. Such silence is more harmful than the shouting of the fundamentalists. Perhaps that silence was the real reason behind my exile. If their silence is so potent, then I cannot even imagine as to what well of darkness I may be thrown into by the eagle-eyed intellectuals.

I do not belong to any faction. I have no party or any clique. I do not think of even those who take me to be their born enemy, as not being my friends. My innate nature is like that. Whenever I see Sunil Gangopaddhyay I go out of my way to meet and talk to him. I have heard that the well-known writer Samaresh Majumdar has abused me because of '*Dwikhandita*'. So what! I greet him also when I meet him. I have never had any reason, nor have I now, to spoil my relationship with writers like Kabir Suman, Ashok Dasgupta, Dibyendu Palit, Azizul Haque, Subodh Sarkar, Krishna Basu, Hasmat Jalal, Syed Mustafa Siraj and others. It is entirely a matter of their personal ideals, beliefs and taste that their being writers themselves they should write in the papers, give Radio and T.V interviews advocating the banning of books by a fellow writer. We may differ in our opinions but I see no reason why that should make us ferociously jump at each other. There is always room for healthy debate between different points of view or within the same opinion. Every human being has the right to speak. But I observe that it is politically incorrect here, to talk about any unjust or indecorous behaviour on the part of any famous male poet or writer. The accepted norm here is to defer to them; any deviation is at your own peril. The disciples earn their right to exist only by paying due homage to their mentors. Men of name and fame wield a great deal of power in this area.

Maybe this power comes from the patronage of some political party or the other. Once you became the target, the terror of politics in literature is bound to get at

you however small you are. The mafia is everywhere. If those honourable intellectuals who earn their living by selling their intellect and whose influence make and break many things in society cannot rise above their low meanness their inferiority complex, then they cause more damage to the common man than possibly to themselves. Because, the common man takes his lessons from the intellectuals

Then, around our loves and jealousies, our hates and pride, the festivals come upon us in a rush. Fairs occupy the whole of winter here in this Bengal. The Book Fair is starting. Everyday the huge ground would be swarming with booklovers crowding the brightly lit stalls. Like the last year, this year also many will look for the banned book *Dwikhandita*, only to be disappointed. None of the big guns of the Fair Committee will think of doing something against the banning of books at least during these few days of the Fair. It will not cross the minds of neither our intellectuals or the votaries of socialism and freedom of expression. We tend to forget many things too easily. Perhaps we forget selectively those things that we do not wish to recall.

So many unjust things are being perpetrated in our society, so many misdeeds we overlook. People are unable to live with their minimum rights. Still we accept such dire poverty; we do not deprive ourselves of tasty dishes just because millions are starving. We are accepting the globalization of capitalism, accepting ugly patriarchy, accepting the lies of the politicians and accepting corruption in the administration! A small thing as banning of books would not hurt people who are prone to accept all these. It is but a commonplace occurrence to them. I too am an unalloyed Bengali, then why do I startle, like a fool, when a book is banned, or is it just because it is *my* book?

2004

## A FARE OF BOOKS

When I was in Bangladesh I waited eagerly for a special month—the month of February, the month when the Book Fair took place. The Book Fair was not just a fair of books; it was a concourse of writers and readers. It is lit up with all of a Bengali's, joy, his indolence, impulse, the bull sessions, and his pseudo-intellectualism, his fussing nature, his egotism and even his malice! Come what may, I had to go to the Book Fair every evening. I came back home late at night, only after the fair was over. The Book fair pulled me strongly, like a magnet. On the ground itself, or in one of the food stalls, we sat in a circle and had marathon sessions of gossip and discussion on every topic under the sun--politics, art, literature, love and lack of love, feminism or male chauvinism, education and culture! Every evening there was a programme of poetry-reading, singing and literary debates. I loved listening to the poets reading their poems, sometimes half-leaning on the grass, sometimes standing or just leaning against a tree. On these Twenty-first February Fairs, all poets were given a chance to read their own poetry. The Fair lasted the whole month, but the Twenty-first was the most crowded. because the Fair was in commemoration of the day. Bengalis shed their blood for their Bangla language on this very day in 'seventy-two. On the twenty-first the fair ground overflows with the entire population of the city; it seems the entire state is assembled here. I recall how on the twenty-first morning we used to go the Fair, placing wreaths at the Shahid Minar (the Martyrs' Tower) all the way singing the song 'this is the twenty-first of February, painted red with my brothers' blood...' This is quite different from any other book fair in the world. This Fair is in the memory of the lives laid down for the love of their language by the Bengali people. No one who is unaware of the history of the Bangla language or has witnessed the spectacle of this Fair will ever be able to grasp its significance. To me the Book Fair in Bangladesh is the most significant fair in the world, however small, inconsequential and poor it might be.

Most civilized countries do have their Book Fairs and I have been to most of them—Frankfurt, Paris, London, Gutenberg, Leipzig Book fairs, the Baltic book fair, Maastricht, Madrid and Malta. I have seen the book fairs in Norway, Finland, Iceland and Denmark. I have seen them in Switzerland, Austria, Spain and Greece. Yes, over many years, in the countries of Europe, I have seen book fairs large and small, in their cities, townships and villages. Books are sold and bought in these fairs. The authors themselves sit in the stalls behind a heap of books. Even the established writers do not hesitate to sit and sell their own books in this way. From the selling of books, to the seminars on literary subjects arranged for promoting sale of books, everything is serious, grave and mirthless. No open grounds, no getting lost, no yelling and shouting, no boisterous roars of laughter! As though we were visiting a shopping mall for books.. Counting of money, the sound of running credit cards through a machine are all that you hear. The shops are heaped with books. It could have been a fair for any commodity, other than books, such as cooking accessories or a computer fair. The only reason for not calling the foreign book fairs as malls is that the stalls are not permanent. As soon as the fair is over they will be taken down or destroyed. In all these fairs, people go round examining articles, buy them, load their bags and go home, be it summer or winter there is always a roof over your head out of reach of rain or sun.. No, this is not in the least like a Book fair in Bangladesh! I have looked for it in every book fair on the earth but never found one quite like it. That flavour is missing; the aroma imparted by the flute player of Bangladesh, the Poets' contest, the drummers, and the *Chhau* dancers. Even now, Book Fairs whether in Dhaka or in Kolkata are more like the village fairs, full of great delight and liveliness, wary eyes, frankly flippant, simple and guileless, like teenagers!

There is a vast difference between a Book Fair abroad and the *Boi Melaa* of Bengal. A Book Fair abroad can be compared with any trade fair—shoe fair, suit fair, boot fair or a brute fair! *Boi Melaa*s of Bangladesh and Kolkata are more akin to any local fairs for handicrafts, *baul* songs or folk dances. Kolkata is trying its best to be modern, international, every year seminars of higher standards are being arranged, different countries are being chosen as the theme for the Fair, yet I find them

similar to the Book Fairs more in Bangladesh than in those held in Europe or North America.

The last time I could go to the Book Fair in Bangladesh was about thirteen or fourteen years ago. The Kolkata is bigger in size and in the number of books and in the volume of sales but otherwise they are just the same. The biggest similarity is that they both meet under a vast open sky. People brave the sun and rain and buy books. People wait for one another to meet at the end of the day and look forward to the debates, gossip sessions and roaring time they are going to have. There will be sulks and joyous reunions. This is indeed a fair of unions. After a whole year's wait, a month arrives for the bookworms, those who like to smell books, those who just love books and even those who do not. They learn to love books, to get their feel with shy fingers. I gather that some people buy books to fill the racks and impress others. Whatever may be the reason people do buy!

In modern times nowhere do people read much. There are many gadgets available now which reduce the attraction to and dependence on books. In short, the future of books is dark. Yet the Bengali buys Bangla books, reads them—even now! Even at a time when the might of English has pushed Bangla into a corner where it finds itself disabled, and insecure. But even now the Book Fair pulls at their heart strings; whether they buy books or not they still come to the Fair. Let this habit of thronging at the Book Fair be with them forever

Perhaps the face of Bengali Book fairs will also change with the passage of time. Perhaps they will be held within four walls like the commercial book fairs of Europe and America.. It will then look like the city book stores such as the Crosswords or the Oxford Book Stores extended a hundredfold in length and breadth. The rasping sound of credit cards passing through machines will be heard loud and clear. Those who come to the fair will come with the intention of buying books; .there will be no commotion, no songs will be heard on the mikes, no child will wet the grounds, tea and snacks will not be consumed endlessly, the buyer of books will no longer be crushed by the crowd of non-buyers, the mood of love and festivity will simply not be there. When that day comes, I do not know how many people will shed tears, reminiscing the Fairs as they are today! I certainly will.

2004

### THOSE GOLDEN DAYS....

Today many a learned men will speak at length about the poetic genius and immortality of Shams-ur-Rahman. I only wish to recount those memorable days I spent with him. We were introduced in the late eighties, but in the early nineties we became close friends for three or four years. Sometimes even an acquaintance of three or four years does not reach such depth. There was an unusual similarity in our ideals and beliefs, our thoughts and insights, in our concerns. We were strong atheists and both of us were genuinely non-communal. We were real comrades-in-arms in the fight against fundamentalists. We used to dream about a society without inequality. We used to try our level best to free people from superstition and become scientifically minded and rational human beings. We fought together for a state free of religion where secular education would be spread all over the state, and for creating a healthy secular society. These were the main topics of our debates and informal gossip sessions. We confronted immense obstacles but our spirited race ahead was unstoppable. Our vitality was robust.. Shams-ur-Rahman had many such fighters as friends, many writers were his followers with whom he participated in movements against the fundamentalists. But many of them were believers, so he could not open his heart to them. It is only with me, in my house that he became his young self, boisterous and light-headed!

Shams-ur-Rahman has always stood by me in my trials and tribulations. At a time when the male chauvinist society was hacking me to pieces, my writings were being slammed; he wrote a long column headed "Blessed be Her Pen". The piece was like a lash of whip on the back of my critics. When my book *Lajja* (Shame) was proscribed he wrote 'Personally, I am against banning of any book; because I do not think that any book can harm a society. Books which incite and encourage people to genocide, or sing the praises of fascism, are of course a different issue. How is it that the book of a writer seeking Truth and Freedom is banned in a country where miscreants move about freely, medicines are faked, illicit trade is

rampant and even food is poisoned by adulteration? Is it because a writer is vulnerable? We writers, who believe in freedom of expression for writers, demand of the Government that the ban on *Lajja* be lifted. We hope that by doing so they will confirm that they really stand for freedom of speech and democracy.’

*Lajja* still remains proscribed in Bangladesh. But Shams-ur-Rahman and the freedom-loving people were vocal against the ban. At a time when the opponents took to the streets demanding in unison that I should be hung and quartered, Shams-ur-Rahman wrote poems supporting me and dedicated the book of poems to me. His support was a great source of strength for me. He used to say that he did not possess my courage. Maybe he did not, but he wrote many poems, instilling courage into the youth and inspiring them. He was a dreamer and his touch, made many share his dream. They still do so

Shams-ur-Rahman wanted to say much more, do much more, but perhaps it was dampened somewhat when the country made him their Poet Laureate and placed him on a high pedestal. I found in him a wild teen-ager, an angry youth and at the same time a tender heart, a pair of humane eyes.

Shams-ur-Rahman was beside himself when he saw with his own eyes how I became a victim of the raging fury of the Government. Once a group of poets was going to attend a poets’ assemblage in Kolkata; including Sham-sur Rahman, myself and few others. Every one had their permits for leaving the country, except me. Shas-ur-Rahman’s kindly eyes were filled with tears. In a tearful voice he said he was going to stay back with me. ‘He will get the permit from the Government somehow or the other and take me with him to Kolkata. He will not leave without me. In the end he had to go without me’. But, he said that for him there was no pleasure in that trip. He has been deeply pained whenever he saw me being wrongly humiliated by the government and being crushed by the system of misgovernment, and when on the previous occasion, he came back and found that the government had not returned my passport which they seized at the airport. Months have gone by and a whole year too, I still have not got my passport back. Then, started a huge commotion in the country. Millions of people were going round in procession demanding death penalty for me, *fatwas* were being proclaimed against me every now and then. A price on my head

was being declared. The Government instead of taking action against these people made me the target. They sued me for hurting the religious sentiment of the people, sent out a warrant for my arrest. So I had to flee the country to save my life. For two months I had to go into hiding, moving from one house to another. Shams-ur-Rahman was worried about me, enquired about me and my welfare. Once he, even, came to see me in the darkness of a small cell. On that day I felt as if those golden days were still there, days when a few of us met every afternoon dreaming of making our state, a democracy, of making the society healthy and exquisite and to do something so that people can love each other forgetting their religion or gender .

The last time I met him was in France, in the year 2000, when I was staying in Paris. He was putting up with another Bengali in the suburbs of Paris. He did not want to die without seeing Paris! So he came though he was confined to a wheel chair. His host traced my telephone number with much effort and rang up to say that Shams-ur-Rahman was in Paris and wanted to meet me. From ‘ninety-four’ to ‘two-thousand’, I have been away from home for seven years! This long exile was simply unbearable! I was going to meet Shams-ur-Rahman; I should have been bounding with joy but I was not. Was I sulking? Yes I was. Such a strong personality, such an eminent poet, such a powerful voice, such a great friend who has been fighting against injustice day in day out, why does he still keep silent about this gravely unjust decision of the Government –a decision that has pushed one of his fellow writers, out of the country and closed all points of entry for her! But when I stood face to face with Shams-ur-Rahman, and a pair of kindly eyes met mine, all my sulk vanished .We got into the *adda* mood and I felt again that those golden days are not lost to me. Any time I may get them back. At night when we parted he embraced me and wept, his eyes were bathed in tears, I could not see them. Both of us knew that this might be our last meeting. Perhaps he was crying for the pain of my exile and for his own helplessness

My car was speeding towards Paris, leaving behind Shams-ur-Rahman, leaving behind my golden days, the relentless struggle, my dreams, my father, my motherland. I was also affected by his tears.

He was a poet, as well as a fighter—and like a vast open sky!

2006

**.....STAINED WITH THE PAIN OF MY MOTHER AND SISTER!**

I was taught one language; by my mother—her own tongue. I grew up learning it and have become a human being only through learning the same language. Because of this language I could talk, express myself when I was hungry or thirsty, could talk about my wishes, and articulate my desires. I said aloud ‘I am must have my due’ It made it possible to sing, write out my protest on the wall and in my personal diary. It did not remain personal for long; it spread like wildfire throughout the country. It is the language which made me more powerful day by day. I was no longer that docile goody goody child. I was no longer the girl walking from one railway crossing to another or spend the whole afternoon playing the game of Touch and Run. I was no longer the one who would sit on the terrace all by herself, counting the stars. I was now walking with thousands of people, breaking down barriers, and busy uprooting innumerable poison-trees. I did not now belong only to myself; I was loudly voicing the demand of millions for their rights! This made some so angry that they wanted to choke my voice and strangle me. They snatched my pen away from me and threatened to rob me of my language. They burnt me but I did not become ashes, I came out as steel! How can they take away from me the power which my mother gave? Can anyone ever wrest from some one that which is deeply within oneself? Can they tear it with bare teeth and sharp claws? Can they win love this way? Language is in one’s blood, can the blood cells be ferreted out?

I was punished-to be exiled. I had then no one with me, no family, no friends. only the two of us, me and my language. In a foreign country, amongst alien people we two exchange our deep thoughts in quiet solitude. We keep awake the whole night. I do not let my language be pummeled by mailed fists, or be crushed under hairy legs. I protect my simple innocent language, I keep watch over it. I save it with love I clean the dirt on it with my tears. I care for it like a mother, like a sister, like a brother. My beloved language lived in exile for ages, dark and frozen, it lived

for ages in my heart though not in my lips and ears. Like me it lived in a solitary corner for ages.

Slowly the language begins to be ill in the frosty ice; I try to save it with the warmth of my breast. I nurse it sitting imprisoned in an enemy camp It is my close relation then, it is my friend it is my mother. Years pass, so many people go away, so many near ones; go away disappearing beyond the boundary, beyond one's ken It is a distance that can never be bridged. So many left, only I am here alone bereft of all I had. It is because of our language that I can still talk, in my mind, with those dear departed. It is only because of my language that I can write a few poems and prose pieces about the desolation all around me, about my loneliness. On days when the pain is intense I can bury myself into its bosom and cry out my grief. As long the language is there, I have someone with me.

But a language must have somehow, local habitation, a country; it needs warmth and articulation. It is because of the language that I am here today crossing the seven seas, in order to save this language—My language!

“My language has seen the Sun today, she is now a sunflower in bloom

“She plays happily in the fields in the afternoon sun  
No more gloom.

“ The damp slime falls off her body as she swims in Ganga ,flowing into the Bay of  
Bengal”

Me and my language are now here safe in this land on the western border of my country, at the end of a long long sojourn in foreign lands. I love my language as my mother. My mother is no longer there for me; some say she has become a star in the sky. My language is looking after me like a mother, the language in which she used to love me, used to cry for me and used to beg of me to come back to her lap. I embrace her closely and tell myself ‘you are my mother’. I can smell my mother in her. My mother's possessions were meagre, and even that has gone to rack and ruin. All that remains is the language, lively, vibrant. Every day I am talking to my mother. Her name is on my lips. I want to pronounce it in my own language till my last breath. I will love you as long as I live and come back to you every time. O my language,

please look after me, I am for ever homeless. Please give me courage, give me strength, just as my mother would, when I bend down beaten and hated by people

I am persistently penning my protests, moving the stones that block the road, so that it becomes a proper highway. Our rights have been gobbled up totally by the crooked males, leaving us the women of today, dumb without a tongue. Each time we want to speak they gag us, pour poison down our throats; every time we speak our lips are sealed, and tongues are spiked.

How shall we let the world know that we, the women today are not at all well! For thousands of years we have carried bruises on our backs, spent sleepless nights robbed of our speech. Now, let them speak up, let them become sparks of fire, and spread all over like wildfire. Let them be steeled by the fire. .Let the woman be empowered

Speech, you are my mother,

Speech is you and me

Speech, you are my sister!

Women today are articulate; they are voicing their protest. Her voice is now sharp and strident; she is expressing her love for women

My language and I are now moving in the open let no one come near us to shackle our feet, let no one stifle our free voice, let no one stab our love.

Powers that be—

Keep your distance from us

Do not throw stones at us

Do not block our way

Do try to be a human being

Be human, be humane.

Allow me to live my life as I please, without interference, with love, with my own language. Let me live with my mother. My mother's tears will wash all my dirt. My mother's lap will be there for me always to come back to, in happiness, in sorrow. My mother always wanted me to return to her bosom.

## **KEEP WELL MY BELOVED COUNTRY!**

All religions enjoin you to love your neighbour and treat them as closest to you... But even the most religious person has been unable to follow it always. If your heart does not accept your neighbour then is God's writ alone is binding? Does the dictates of the heart count for nothing?

Neighbours are an entity you can not do without; at the same time they are also a source of friction. They are very helpful in times of distress and need, but sometimes they go too far prying into your personal affairs. But whatever one might say human beings need the company of other humans. Does anybody wish to live all by himself in a desolate area devoid of human habitation? There may be no union of hearts, they may be miles apart in their taste and ideals, yet people do feel at ease living near one another. Neighbours can be of varied sort, there maybe some with whom one is at loggerheads and there is no exchange of smile or words; there maybe others who are totally enamoured of each other. In our time it was the trend to fall in love with the boy or girl, one glimpsed in the neighbour's terrace or window

Whatever be his faith, be he an utter atheist, or speak a different tongue or have a different colour of skin, a neighbour is a neighbour! No one with a mature sense cares for these differences. But before reason dawns these differences become the cause for violence. Differences in race, religion, language are never barriers to the union of hearts and minds. No one today thinks that two persons of differing temperament and mindset must accept each other just because they belong to one particular sect with a common ancestry. The heart is paramount. A relationship without it can never last long. Some people, of course, can compromise and adapt with any situation. They nod their assent to everything. They give up their character and personality in order to coexist for its own sake. I can never do so if our minds do not meet.

I do not know my neighbours too well. Some I do not recognize even. With most of them I have only a nodding acquaintance, limited to a greeting smile or a

“How are you? I hope all right” kind. If I take the initiative to make friends, I am not sure what trouble I may get into. After all no one takes me for a native, they think I am a foreigner.

I a complete atheist am taken by some people without any sense, as a Muslim simply because of my name!

Even with my great love for this city, it does not accept me as its own! Even those with whom I have developed a close friendship take me to be a visitor, a guest of India for the moment. They ask me about my temporary visa. It has been extended by six months; it expires on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August. Supposing my plea for extending my stay in India is not granted? Then I have to leave this country as well. .But I see no one being perturbed over it. Maybe they are even planning a suitable farewell for me the day before I leave. Not that they do not love me, but considering the matter of my permanent residence or citizenship a political issue and a governmental affair, they perhaps put it to my misfortune and bad luck, and so keep quiet..

But I really do not know where to go if I am refused permission to stay in India. I may have to seek shelter in some far off, icy cold country. Such a thought is akin to me as thinking of death! I could have gone to a neighbouring country. But how do I get back? Anyone may set foot there barring me. As if I am a sworn enemy of that country and they must close their door for me for ever. I never thought that to talk about humanism or human rights was wrong. In the eyes of the rulers, the die-hards, the fundamentalists, the blind believers, of course, it is an unpardonable offence. I was given the sentence of exile ages ago; much time has gone by since then. Even a life sentence has a limit. My punishment has none. Maybe it will end only with my death.

I look wistfully towards this neighbouring country; barbed wire fencing separates us. Clouds float from the west to the east; I send them a few drops of my tears, to be shed on the tin roof of one house by the shore of the round pond. Birds spread their wings as they fly from the east to the west. All problems arise because we are born as humans. Would it not be better to have been a bird? No borders to be crossed. No bother of passports and visas. No worry about citizenship.

Someone whispers in that soft twilight hour between sleep and awakening,  
to me-

‘Now you are no longer within yourself. You are inside out. You are an outcast; you have to live your life away from home’ I have been floating far away from where I was born, grew up; where my heart lies. Now I have to stay for good, in Bengal. Bangla was once undivided, but now she is her own neighbour. I am sure I would not be exiled if it was an undivided Bangla and I would not become my own neighbour. This country belongs to me, yet it is not mine. If it was indeed my home then would I be knocking at its door for twelve long years? My own state is the neighbour, though not quite. A neighbour at least would have responded, come out and opened the door. I do not believe that nobody wants me. But why those who do want me, open it for me? I have been asking this for many years now. It is a strange life for me, I am a neighbour of my own country and at the same time a neighbour’s neighbour! Then which is my country? I do know, so does my country; it lies in my heart

Am I the neighbour of only myself? No I am also the neighbour of my parents, my brothers and sisters, friends, relations, all of them. I was away for a very long time, in transatlantic foreign lands, thousands of miles away from my own country—beyond anybody’s reach. I should be thankful that I am at least, the neighbour of my own country now. I feel relieved that my country is there; close by, next to me. I can hear her breathing, I can smell her. Do I not also keep awake, like silence after everyone has gone to sleep? I can not touch her but I can watch her sitting near her. I may not go too close to her just now, but any time the moment may arrive that will take me safely to her. I shall then cross the courtyard and enter my room—known to me for years and years. This is the dream that keeps me alive and kicking! It is no small mercy for me.

Will that moment ever arrive in my lifetime? I lead my life in this deep uncertainty. Like a knife-wound old memories bleed me. My school friends are just within touching distance. My college, the college canteen, the corridor, my doctor friends, and my poet friends they are all close by. So are my uncles and aunts, my relatives whom I have known since my birth, my homestead, my *karitalaa*, my river

Brahmaputra; my writing corner—a long life of thirty-one years spent there. I recall my joys and sorrows, my protests and my ceaseless struggle for bringing about a healthy society free of religion, of superstitions and free from all forms of discrimination, that filled those years. I am stretching my hand but can not touch any one. They are all my neighbours, the trees, houses, people, my loved beings, but I have no power to touch them .A strong wall separates us. If it were just a brick and mortar one, it could have been broken down, but it is a wall erected by religion, politics, corruption, hatred and *jihad* I can scratch. the wall but to break it is beyond me. I am an ordinary human being, I write.

I write to live and live to write.

My country may be a neighbour, but cannot the neighbour slowly become my country as well? No, it seems very unlikely. So I am an alien in every country. I had to live like one even in my own country! I am an alien in an alien country too. And here where people speak my tongue, look like me, share the same culture, remind me, all the time by their manner and hints that I do not belong to them, I am different, and I am a foreigner. If the people do not make me their own, can I do so by myself?

Whenever I meet an old acquaintance, I am asked “when did you come to Kolkata?”

My answer is “But I stay here!” The conversation proceeds like this—

“So then, how do you like Kolkata?”

I reply with a smile “Very much”

“How long will you stay this time?”

Embarrassed, I reply “I live in this city, I have a household, and I have an address.”

“Will you stay for sometime?”

“I am staying on”

“But when do you leave?”

“I am not leaving.”

“Oh I see.”

Nobody seems to be very happy with my answer. They would like me to come now and then like a guest, praise everyone here, will want to strike roots here but actually do not do so. Once you stay for good your value goes down. As long as you are a guest you are more than welcome. If I stay far away, very far, in some foreign land in whatever condition it may be; but when I come back home on a visit everyone will crowd round me in great excitement. But whenever I expressed a desire to settle permanently, then the same crowd turn their faces away and lose interest in me. When you meet less frequently they shower on you fulsome praise, but if you live here and roam about you become the object of malicious gossip. The person who stays back may be very generous, very sincere, honest and devoted but she is no longer likeable... Naturally, after all she is only someone who lives next door.

Only a stateless person knows how she lives on. I have lost my country, a well set-up homestead, my favourite garden, my friends and all that I called my own. I cried a lot, but now my tears have dried up. Losing every time, I have lost the sense of loss. I console myself by telling myself 'I may have lost my country, now the whole world is my home! I also say to myself, what I also sincerely believe that one need not have country of one's own—one's heart can be one's safe haven. Sometimes I say with great despair, 'If having a country means safety, then in that sense women have no country of their own, because nowhere in the world are women absolutely safe. As for myself I have no country, in every sense of the word... I do not have it because I have been fighting for women's liberation; and because I am a woman!

Whenever I think of my native land, I think of my mother—the one wearing a *dhanekhali* sari, one who spent herself with love, the oppressed one, the one who was ignored and neglected all her life. My daily dream that I cherish is that I am back home and my mother is holding me to her bosom, petting me all over, tears streaming down her cheeks. She is feeding me with her own hand and will not let me get out of her sight. I fall asleep gently as she runs her finger through my hair telling me so many stories she has nursed within her all this time I have been away. It seems thousands of years have gone by since I saw her. She fell ill crying and waiting for me watching the flying planes wistfully. Every time she saw a plane she thought it was bringing me back. So did pine my suffering mother!. Others may have spurned me, not

my mother; they may have forgotten me but not my mother, they may not love me any more but my mother's love was always there for me. I never had a more reliable haven than my mother. Now my mother and my country have somehow become one. My mother is no more. I shall never be able to embrace her again in my life. It is the same with my country. I have lost my mother and so have I my motherland. Sometimes I feel they are very near me, but the next instant I realize they are miles and miles and miles away.

I do not believe in separate states, or in partitioning them. I consider myself a child of the universe. But others do not think that way. They feel comfortable to live within bounds. As my reach spreads I lose sense of a distinct country of my own, or any neighbour. In a bird's eye view everything appears tiny, the big skyscrapers, the people, the factories, the minarets raised by religion, all appear insignificant! In this wide universe I myself am nothing but a speck. But what horrific spectacle of clawing apart each other, just for this infinitesimal life which will be extinguished in a fraction of a moment.

No country, no neighbour, nothing that I may call my own remains; but I have no regrets. If in some corners of the wide world I have a few friends, I shall be able to spend the rest of my life happily. I may remain an alien everywhere. So what! After all everyone is not destined to claim a bit of the earth for oneself, nor does everyone have the good fortune to see their mother alive forever!

2007