

## **REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA**

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**Lecture 12: Understanding South Asian Migration Taslima Nasrin's Lajja Narayan  
Wagle's Palpassa Cafe**


Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to start our discussion on a new novel entitled Lajja by Taslima Nasreen. So, Lajja is a novel originally written in Bengali by the writer-activist Taslima Nasreen, who is from Bangladesh. The word Lajja

which is common in various Indian languages, means shame in Bengali. So, the title of the novel Lajja means shame. The novel was first published in 1993 in the Bengali language and was subsequently banned in Bangladesh. In the preface of the novel, Taslima Nasreen asserts that the reason behind writing Lajja was her detestation of fundamentalism and communalism. The novel is based on the events that occurred in Bangladesh soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India, on 6th December 1992.


So, before we proceed further, we would like to look at who Taslima Nasreen is. Taslima Nasreen was born on 25th August 1962. She is a Bangladeshi writer, feminist, secular humanist, and activist. She is known for her writings on women's oppression and has vehemently criticized the dogmatic nature of religions and the indoctrinations they preach. She is known for

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For vehemently criticizing the dogmatic nature of institutionalized religions. And her works have time and again faced the brunt of harsh criticism by the orthodox sections of society for their strong stances, for their strong points of view against sexism and fundamentalism. So, this novel *Lajja* subtly suggests that in the aftermath of the event of the demolition of Babri Masjid, there were violent repercussions seen in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, communal feelings were on the rise, and secularism was under threat, under shadow.

And this had led to the steep drop in humanistic feelings and secular values. So, we see that Bengali immigrants have trickled inside the borders of India at various periods, against different historical backdrops, at different junctures in history, in the immediate decades following the partition. First, we see hordes of Bengali immigrants coming during and after Direct Action Day in August 1946, Direct Action Day, which is also known as the Great Calcutta Killings, as well as the Week of the Long Knives, after the Muslims had forced the two-nation concept. So, these Calcutta killings had happened after Jinnah had established his two-nation theory. And then we see that in 1948, further immigration happened after the annexation of the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad.


In 1949-1950, it further happened with the anti-Hindu riots in states such as Khulna and Barisal. In the mid-1950s, it happened with the national language issue and the adaptation of the Islamic constitution. And then we see further Bengalis emigrating from what is today known as Bangladesh because of the theft of the holy hair from the Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir in 1964. And then finally, there was a great exodus during the War of Liberation, also known as the Mukti Yuddha and the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. So, Direct Action Day, then the annexation of Hyderabad, then the riots in Khulna and

Barisal, the national language issue and adaptation of the Islamic constitution, and further the theft of the holy hair from the Hazratbal Mosque—all these factors

have periodically led to the immigration of Bengalis from what is today known as Bangladesh at different junctures in history. So, the Bangladeshi government banned this novel titled *Lajja*, written by Taslima Nasreen, two months after the book was published. Regarding *Lajja*, Taslima Nasreen proclaims, and I quote: The book does not speak of religion. It speaks about humanity.

*Lajja* speaks not of hate, but of love. *Lajja* asks for equality, empathy, and freedom, unquote. So, this is what Nasreen proclaims in the preface of *Lajja* in the 20th-anniversary edition, by Taslima Nasreen, which has been translated by Anchita Ghatak. According to Pranjol Pratim Barua, Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* qualifies as an essential study within the collection of trauma narratives,

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- Regarding *Lajja*, Taslima Nasrin proclaims “[the book] does not speak of religion, it speaks about humanity. *Lajja* speaks not of hate but love. *Lajja* asks for equality, empathy and freedom” (Preface of *Lajja*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition by Taslima Nasrin, translated by Anchita Ghatak).



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because it recounts the horrid experiences of displacement and the disillusionment and anxiety that befell the displaced victims. Through this novel, Nasreen portrays the diverse shades of communal riots that happened in Bangladesh as a reaction to the Babri Masjid incident. It is worth mentioning the strong characters presented in the novel, who have negotiated their socio-communal identities in the face of political crisis and a serious situation. So, against the devastating fallout in Bangladesh, Nasreen dedicated the book, I quote, from *Lajja* to the people of the Indian subcontinent, unquote. And beginning the text with the words: 'Let another name of religion be humanism.'

So Nasreen begins the text with the following words. Let another name of religion be humanism. Nasreen states in *Lajja*, I quote her here. Ironically, all religions point toward

one goal: peace. Yet it is in the name of religion that so much blood is shed and so many people have suffered.

It is indeed a pity that even at the close of the 20th century, we have had to witness such atrocities, all in the name of religion. The most interesting part in this novel is the seamless entanglement of the twin threads of fact and fiction in an articulate manner. So this literary device, where fact and fiction are interspersed and run parallel, metamorphoses the idea of reuniting the opposite forces, poles in order to arrive at a focal point where it is almost a challenge for the reader to clinically separate fact from fiction. So, they are so well interspersed, so well interwoven—the fact on one hand and the fiction on the other—that it is very difficult to separate the two, to tell fact from fiction.

So, one can even understand or read *Lajja* as a factual fiction. A factual fiction refers to a category of fiction where the story is heavily influenced by historical events or real-life occurrences. But it is crucial to understand that these facts are always incorporated into the work of fiction. So, in other words, to increase the effectiveness of the fiction, of the story, or to delve further into a certain subject or issue at hand, the author makes use of artistic choices and may deploy poetic freedom regarding timelines, characterization, and events. Although factual fiction may not strictly adhere to historical records, this blending of fact and fiction can provide an intriguing and very strong narrative point of view, and factual fiction can present certain viable perspectives that speak to real-life problems in our society.



So, *Lajja* opens at a juncture where there was an immense amount of crisis in the lives of the Hindu families living in Bangladesh. The manner in which the novel opens lays the scope for the readers to directly look into the psychological underpinnings of the characters amid a series of socio-political events whose epicenter is outside the

geographic and political borders of Bangladesh. So, *Lajja* is not just a political novel as it apparently seems to be, but it is also a psychological work as it carefully examines the psyche of each character in order to portray their fear, trauma, and hysteria from within. The plot of the novel generally revolves around four characters from the Datta family. The protagonist named Suranjan Dutta, his father Sudhamay Dutta, his mother Kiranmoyee Dutta, and his sister Nilanjana Dutta.

So, we see that Suranjan is born and brought up as well as gets his education in Bangladesh, and so he does not want to get dislocated in the face of the turmoil. The dislocation will disrupt and disturb his sense of seamless harmony, and it will change his perceived identity of himself, and it will actually unsettle his locatedness in the socio-historical context of time and space. So, a person builds his or her identity through an intricate connection with the homeland, with the place where one has, you know, taken birth, where one is born, and where one has grown up. where one has received education and training. So, this will all change in a day if he has to leave Bangladesh in the face of turmoil and if he has to emigrate to India.

And he really does not want to do that. In spite of millions of Hindus migrating out of Bangladesh to save their lives against the brazen assault by the local radical masses, The novel shows that the Datta family has the nerve. They have the determination in not being thwarted down in the face of crisis. They choose to stick to their homeland.

They choose to maintain their claim and their ownership. They choose to maintain their sense of ownership and their claim to the homeland where they were born and where they grew up. So, that's the kind of crisis which is at the heart of this novel, *Lajja*. Suranjan's father, Sudhamay Datta, thinks that one should live

and die in their own motherland rather than abandon their innate native identity, accept displacement and dislocation, and further end up being a refugee on some railway platform. So, Suranjan's father echoes his sentiment. Sudhamay Datta feels that it is better to live and die in one's own land where one was born rather than be displaced and be reduced to a refugee who is begging for some doles and ending up on some railway platform in India. On the other hand, in the novel, we see the female members, such as Kiranmoyee and Nilanjana, They have a rather different perspective about displacement.

They feel that one should get along with the current situation, with the demands of the current circumstances, and they should deal with their current problem with a practical outlook rather than an emotional one. So, Nilanjana is of the view that rather than being

sentimental over the nostalgia that has seemingly flooded the mind of Sudhamay, one needs to address the current situation at hand with some degree of judiciousness. So, the situation that the Dutta family is facing requires them to either seek immediate refuge in some other household, essentially that of a Muslim family, or they would be required to leave the country altogether and become a part of the community, the mass exodus, the Hindu mass exodus. According to Nilanjana, in the face of such an imminent existential crisis that the family is going through, remaining trapped in the quagmire of nostalgic belongingness, remaining trapped in some kind of nostalgic sentimental feeling, and clinging to one's past memories in the homeland

is nothing short of a suicidal decision because it could become a deadly decision at that point in time to stay back in Bangladesh for a Hindu family such as the Dattas. It would be more pragmatic for them to emigrate to the Indian part of Bengal, which is the West Bengal. So Kiranmayee being the mother in the family tries to negotiate the varying standpoints of the family members in order to arrive at a consensus. Despite the differences in opinion, a common feeling that connects and binds them all is a sense of resentment and so, a sense of resentment towards losing one's identity and a looming, hovering fear of being killed.

Regarding Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja*, Pavel Mukherjee comments, I quote Mukherjee here at length, Nasreen takes the pain to keep a record of numerous newspaper articles, incorporate them within the narrative to show the shame, the *lajja* of humanity. It was not only a matter of communal violence that drove the Hindus out of their homes in Bangladesh. It was also a serious breach in the faith one person can have on the other. The shame lies not in raping women only, but taking women as the easiest target for crude physical satiation in the name of religion and ideologies.

*Lajja* addresses the dark realities of the violence, which is not an innocent, spontaneous outburst against a community, but has along with it the ulterior motives of gratifying the greedy desires of property, money and women. Unquote. So, here at this point, in the light of what Pavel Mukherjee very correctly asserts, we need to understand the difference between spontaneous communal tensions and a pogrom or a riot. So, a popular sentiment of communal disharmony and hostility, which is by and large immune to open assaults, is fundamentally different from calculated pogroms and riots which are pre-organized, premeditated by major actors and involve economic and physical capital.

So, the isolated incidents of religious tiffs and prejudices result in a sense of anxiety and fear about the rival community. So, we see the rival community through the lens of certain exaggerated myths and we see them through a negative lens, you know, and consider them in terms of certain negative pejorative values, which are not true. So that can amount to the popular sentiment of communal hostility. However, such hostile feelings or such, you know, rivalrous attitudes do not automatically lead to structured pogroms and riots, right?

In order for pogroms and riots to happen, the state actors sponsor the events, and they are very, very calculated and premeditated. A riot and a pogrom, by virtue of its characteristic disorder, make accommodation for the realization of individual goals under the guise of collectivity. So what we see is that among the members of, you know, troublemakers, or the members that are enacting or perpetrating violence, there are different underlying motives. So we see that beneath this guise of collectivity and mass pogroms and riots, there are certain underlying motives.

It could be looting and pillaging houses. It could be abducting women. And so the personal motives inciting the crimes during these pogroms and riots are given religious, caste, class, or ethnic meanings. Some persons, for example, who are part of a rioting group might not be interested in the religious ideology but are interested more in looting shops and making some economic benefits out of the entire, you know, tumultuous situation. So, from Lajja, now we move on to our next text, which is Narayan Wagle's novel, Palpasa Café.

The Palpasa Cafe exists as a new narrative treatment in the history of Nepalese literature. It is for the first time that Narayan Wagle who is a journalist residing in Nepal and who writes for a Nepalese newspaper explores Nepal and writes about Nepal. So in the prologue Wagle tells that he is planning on writing a book which is inspired by his friend Drishya who gets kidnapped. So Drishya's story begins with his meeting a Nepalese girl named Palpasa, who has come for a trip to India. Drishya and Palpasa have a number of meetings and there seems to be a spark, an immediate spark between them.

But neither of them pursue the relationship further. So, the narrative further moves ahead with the protagonist Drishya moving to Kathmandu. At Kathmandu, Drishya has a chance meeting with Palpasa again. So, we see that they start seeing each other at Kathmandu but neither of them takes the relationship further. After some time, Drishya has a by chance meeting with his friend from college named Siddharth,

who says that he is a Maoist in hiding and asks for shelter. So, this friend from his college named Siddharth is on a hideout and he asks for shelter from Drishya. Drishya and Siddharth are talking with each other regarding the current scenario of their nations and they both disagree on many points and finally Siddhartha challenges Drisha to meet the world that the Maoists have created. So, they both disagree on many points during their discussion and finally Siddhartha challenges Drishya to visit the world that the Maoists have created.



So, we see that Drishya accepts this challenge and wrecks the hilly regions under insurgent control. He visits many villages, including the village he belongs to, and soon finds that his childhood friend had died due to the war. So, it's a very morbid kind of situation or scenario where Drishya goes back to his native village. Near the end of the journey, Siddharth gets killed in front of him because Drishya mistakenly points him out to the army. Drishya is heavy-hearted on his ride back to Kathmandu, and there again he meets Palpasa.

So, we see that Drishya is very heavy-hearted about the entire incident, and on his way back to Kathmandu, he meets Palpasa again, who is on her way to make a documentary about the war. However, in the course of this narrative's progression, we see that Palpasa gets killed when the bus explodes due to a mine. And so, Drishya survives because he was out of the bus. He survives accidentally. Following Palpasa's death, Drishya returns to Kathmandu and tries to continue with his life.

However, Palpasa's death continues to haunt him for a long time, and he feels a bit at peace only when he completes a series of paintings titled Palpasa Cafe. So, Drishya returns to Kathmandu and tries to continue with his life. However, Palpasa's death haunts him for a long time, and he feels a bit at peace only when he is able to complete a series




of paintings titled Palpasa Cafe. Later, he gets kidnapped, and his whereabouts are unknown.



In the epilogue of this novel, writer Wagle meets with a girl named Gemini, who is searching for her lost friend, who happens to be Palpasa. So, At the beginning of this novel, the characters' tourist ventures start in Goa, which happens to be one of the prime locations for travelers who visit India from all over the world. Drishya and Palpasa visit the historical museum of Goa, which depicts the theme of postmodern travel. So, postmodern travel narratives cross geographic, cultural, and textual boundaries.

Rather, we could say that they transcend these boundaries here, thereby offering new ways of mapping geographical and textual spaces. So, postmodern travel literature focuses on the inability to orient oneself in a world where boundaries have already blurred. So, Drishya and Palpasa's journey to Kerala defines displacement as a continuous action and both of them hope to see each other back home in Kathmandu.

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- In the beginning of the novel, the character's tourist ventures happen to start in Goa, which is one of the prime location of travellers worldwide
- Drishya and Palpasa visit the historical museum of Goa, which depicts the theme of postmodern travel. Postmodern travel narratives cross the geographic, cultural and textual boundaries, offering new ways of mapping the geographical and the textual spaces. Postmodern travel literature focuses on the inability to orient oneself in a world where boundaries have blurred.
- Their proposed journey to Kerala defines displacement as a continuous action, and both of them hope to see each other in Kathmandu, back home
- There is a reference to the modern travel in which the traveller finally reaches the destination from where he starts. Travel metaphors the journey from birth to death, from the starting point and to be back to it



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So, there is a reference to modern travel, in which the traveler finally reaches the destination from where he had begun. And travel as a metaphor refers to the journey from birth to death, from the starting point and then returning to it once again. So, in the novel, Drishya tries to create an imaginary homeland where he goes. And this is substantiated by the following statement. "We Nepalese can't do without rice, no matter where we are."

So, it's not the 'I' who speaks here. Instead, through the statement, the collective nostalgia for any Nepalese in another place outside their homeland is portrayed and kind of celebrated. Palpasa, unlike other women travelers who are believed to be transgressive, appears as a determined woman, with a desire to travel. Her nostalgia for her homeland is

evident when she says that she would prefer east to west for the gap that it provides, to enhance her creativity.

So, she is a determined woman, and she has her own preference. She prefers east over west because it offers a gap between, which enables her to enhance her creativity. So, the travel made by Drishya to the countryside after getting inspired by the words of his Maoist friend Siddhartha tends to be a back-home experience. This is the time

in the novel when he is visiting his native village. So, unlike the journey he made to Goa, Drishya's desire to travel rests only as a motivation to explore and to study the conditions back in his native village after it gets struck by Maoism. And Drishya narrates, I quote at length from the book, 'Everything in the village brought back memories.' I remembered the harvest season when I used to sleep on a bed of hay, beneath a blanket of hay.

We used to whip our ox to make it walk faster on the grain and to jump on coal to produce mustard oil. In winter, we used to drink hot sugarcane juice. I looked at the mound where the coal used to be. Tears came to my eyes, unquote. Travel, displacement, and nostalgia are the elements, the chief elements, which function trilaterally in the previously mentioned lines by Drishya.

The journey acts as a displacement to his geographical setting, and it also acts as a revisiting of the mental setting about the old image of his countryside. Drishya laments the beauty of the past, which results in a feeling of nostalgia for his homeland. Drishya declares himself to be the ambassador of future growth in Nepal. According to critic Susan Robertson, I quote, travelers are people who put themselves, if only for short periods of time, in the situation of being strangers and who derive enjoyment from this status, unquote.

So, travelers who portray a sketch of their own homeland are likely to exoticize the place and their own position in that once-known place. The whole experience is very exotic, very, you know, out of the familiar, very different from the familiar. So, the whole experience is very exotic and a departure from the familiar. The displacement sought through travel gives the tourist the confidence to reveal and explore themselves. The mental and spiritual freedom experienced is a way of momentarily forgetting and getting away from the worries of human life.

Drishya states, I quote from the book again, 'My forgetfulness was probably a combination of the relaxed atmosphere, my own mood, and the fact that I had drunk so

much wine.' 'These things happen in a place where you lose your identity and become just another anonymous tourist,' unquote. So, travel equips Drishya to conceal his identity for some time and be a stranger in the land. The traveler in the novel posits an ambiguous position by recounting the first-person narrative with another name. This 'I' in the novel is hidden between the writer and the traveler's identity.

Seeing things for oneself, therefore, becomes the greatest motivation for travel. So, Palpasa, on the other hand, wishes to be a nun and wants to be active in a nunnery if she fails in documentary filmmaking. She states, I quote, 'I want to understand things.' 'I want to know myself.' So, exploring spaces and places becomes a metaphor and a pretext for exploring the different aspects of oneself—the hidden aspects, the hidden possibilities within oneself.

Palpasa admits that it is the first time she has revealed her identity to another person. Thus, the status of being two strangers enables Drishya and Palpasa to understand each other and ultimately to become free humans. The traveler-writer often has a feeling of alienation in the new world, or in the foreign environment, which reflects in his or her subject of writing. This feeling of alienation and newness in the foreign land signifies that there is a mental and physical displacement or dislocation that occurs when the traveler visits a foreign place.

Encountering a new culture could be seen as a method of conditioning and altering all the preconceived ideas that the traveler-writer had, previously held about a new culture. So, traveling becomes a way of altering and revisiting the preconceived ideas about a new culture that a writer-traveler has through the many experiences he undergoes in the course of travel. So, these reflections and discoveries make notable changes, in turn, in the texture of the travel narrative. So, what the traveler is undergoing in terms of experiences—the changes in the traveler's ideas, the changes in the traveler's understanding about a new culture—reflects

in the texture of the travel narrative. With this, I would like to conclude our lecture here today, and let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

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- This signifies that there is a mental and physical displacement or dislocation that occurs when the traveler visits a foreign place
- Encountering a new culture could be seen as a method of conditioning and altering the traveler/writer's preconceived ideas about a new culture, through the various experiences that he/she had
- These reflections and discoveries make notable changes in the texture of the travel narrative

