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## Shifting Identities across Mutable Borders: Identity (re)imagined in the Novel *Lajja*

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### **Abstract:**

The paper will attempt to re-imagine Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' and question the sanctity behind the imposed binary of fixity/fluidity that the citizens subjected to the process of the integrative/(dis)integrative national imagination have to negotiate through, to accommodate their respective identities vis-à-vis the shifting contours of geopolitical visions and 'customarily' vacillating configuration of power politics in the contemporary times. This trend of freezing the process of culture evolution or culture arrest is holding pace in recent times, and see our society getting consumed in the fire of non-accommodation in maintaining the sacrosanct sanctity of the border. It is rather imperative to introspect upon the euphoric stance to legitimize a deep-seated antagonism against the 'other' across the border, totally obliterating the history preceding the bordering process. The borders need not be perceived as national borders, but the borders; within communities, culture, gender, and society at large. This hints at the importance to locate the negotiations of the distorted psyche to realize the mitigated sense of the new identity vis-à-vis the older one in the context of the imposed border and the manifestation of its inherent materiality therein.

**Keywords:** Nationality, psychosocial border, minority, outsider, other, Identity.

The idea of nationality and what it means to belong to a nation is a crucial idea captivatingly captured in the narrative of Taslima Nasrin's 'Lajja'. The novel 'Lajja' discusses the life of the Dutta household, a Hindu family, caught in the cross-fire of communal rage that burns ablaze almost entire Bangladesh physically and the whole of humanity metaphorically.

Benedict Anderson propounded a seminal idea of the nation:

[Nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.(Anderson 2006, 6)

The idea stood the scrutiny of time and in the case of the novel the imaginings of the nation and nationhood as reconfigured in such a manner that the fractures created in the (re)imagined identities vis-à-vis the communal dissidence threatened the cultural synergy to freeze with irrevocable consequences.

Identity is a socially constructed definition of an individual. As socially constructed, the definition of an individual makes use of culturally available meanings and distributes them according to rules of interaction and patterns of stratification. The meaning of an individual, then, derives from these socially constructed definitions- that is, his or her identities. (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge 1986, 34)

The novel shows how the Dutta household's identity as Hindu suddenly emerges with the unfortunate news of Babri Masjid demolition on 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1992. “[S]ymbolic representation of identity are never stable. Instead, they are in constant need of negotiation.” (Dusche 2010, 84) The friends and families who have been in cordial terms with the Duttas have not only turned their back but have unconsciously perceived the Hindus as ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ in the ambit of newly forming Bangladeshi nationalist discourse.

Since patterns of ‘perceiving’ the ‘other’ are cultural constructs, they can be empirically challenged and analytically deconstructed. Thus, while the cultural reference frame includes stereotyped patterns of ‘perceiving’ the ‘other’, the system of culture production also provides the means to critique and limit them. (Dusche 2010, 53)

Unfortunately, the discourse registers much of its euphoria with the split communal dividend and nationalism becomes an overt justification to the subsequent communal conflagration.

Nationalism is in substantial part a psychological phenomenon, involving felt needs and dispositions, in contrast to the nation-state, which is an institutional phenomenon... The significance of nationalism in the modern world, I think, is quite clearly related to the decline of tradition and to the fragmentary character of the everyday life in which lost traditions are partly refurbished. (Giddens 1984, 171)

The Dutta family eventually gets alienated in the normative structure of social recognition as they are soon realized as ‘outsiders’. “[The] social dimension of personal and collective identity formation... is based on the insight that human beings normally thrive under conditions of mutual recognition. That is, they cannot form stable personal or collective identities without ‘others’ recognizing them.”(Dusche 2010, 84) The Muslims who form the majority in the demographic composition of Bangladesh, by flouting the secular mandate of the socio-cultural consciousness, saw the minority Hindus as ‘outsiders’ and spark of the meta-marginalization aspect of ‘insider-outsider’ within the debate of majority and minority.

The fact that secularization is a dynamic process and therefore new minorities may emerge without much warning. This process, by which minorities are created, unbeknownst to them, is what has been termed here as *minoritization*. When minoritization takes place the communities that are picked on for persecution are decided upon by the majority or those 'others' who are on the outside. (Gupta 1999, 52-53)

From the Dutta household's perspectives, who symbolized the Hindu community in Bangladesh, it was rather incongruous as their identity as Bangladeshi national was questioned overnight vis-à-vis the communal identity, which was one of the micro aspect in shaping a larger and comprehensive macro-national identity.

Alienation, albeit one that makes full use of the metaphorical association of being a foreigner, outsider or stranger in one's own land, occurs in much philosophical and cultural commentary on the condition of modern society. Alienation may readily be associated with the experience of exile as in some sense paradigmatic of the experience of the twentieth century. Thus existentialism may tempt parallels to be drawn between alienation and such ideas as anxiety and inauthenticity. Similarly, alienation may be associated with Durkheim's concept of anomie, or with Weber's confrontation of the modern individual with the iron cage of bureaucracy... [Anomie], key term in Durkheimian sociology referring to the loss, on the part of an individual or group, of norms to guide social interaction. The concept serves to illuminate the relationship of individual behaviour and experience to the social structure. Norms mundanely constitute a framework that restricts the aspirations and goals of individual members of a society, so that they are coherent with the means available for their realisation. (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, 10, 12)

The alienation was a form of tacit injustice to which the Hindus were subjected to, based on the act of certain Hindu organization involved in the conspiracy of Babri Masjid demolition in India. Suranjan found it rather strange to find his friend refer to the Babri Masjid as 'ours.' He found it perplexing to find his friend's religious and communal identity take prominence over his national identity. The situation got worse when Suranjan's religion was dragged in to identify him as a 'Hindu'

[Suranjan] thought about what Belal had been repeating over and over again. Something like 'Why did you break our Babri Masjid.' Suranjan wondered why the Babri Masjid should be Belal's. After all, it was in India and the property of the Indians. And could anyone say that Suranjan had broken the mosque? He had never even been to India. Was Belal looking at the Hindus in India and those in Bangladesh in the same light? Just because the Hindus had brought down the mosque, did it necessarily follow that Suranjan had destroyed it? Was Suranjan to be identified with the Hindu fundamentalists in Ayodhya? Wasn't he like Belal, Kamal and Haider? Or was his only identity that of a Hindu? How strange that he,

Suranjan, should be held responsible for the demolition of a mosque in India. Did religion supersede nation and nationality? (Nasrin 1994, 176)

Religion, in principle does not lead to violence, but a distorted practice of the same with conservative and cliché maxims in nationalist fervour lend it an anachronistic distinction that justifies violence to be mindlessly unleashed. The fundamentalism emanating out of such dialectics of paradoxes, leaves the topic of religion in a highly debated space and renders violence as the most redundant and regressive fall-out to it. The aspect of religious fundamentalism exposes the futility of violence and marks how glitches in the micro-realities can wreak havoc to the sensitive macro-imagination of India's plural and composite culture.

On television, CNN had shown in vivid detail the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992... Suranjan had never been to Ayodhya, nor had he seen the Babri Masjid. How could he have when he had not even stepped out of Bangladesh? Whether the demolished structure was the birthplace of Rama or a sacred mosque was a matter of little significance to Suranjan. But it was evident to him that the demolition of the sixteenth-century edifice had struck a savage blow to the sentiments of Muslims in India and elsewhere. The act of destruction had damaged the Hindu community as well for it had been nothing less than an attack on 'international harmony and the collective conscience of the people' in the words of the newspaper.(Nasrin 1994, 3)

The damage inflicted on the collective unconscious(Jung and Read 1969) of the whole of the Muslim community across the globe and the counter-shock waves that spread could be felt in the selective appropriation of religion with a singular denominator.

The intricacies of plural groups and multiple loyalties are obliterated by seeing each person as firmly embedded in exactly one affiliation, replacing the richness of leading an abundant human life with the formulaic narrowness of insisting that any person is "situated" in just one organic pack.(Sen 2006, 20)

The categorical backlash materialized by aggressive assertion of the Islamic identity as the exclusive criteria for the erstwhile nationality to be legitimized and recognized, which eventually turned out to have detrimental consequences in encounters with other religion. Especially with the Hindus, the animosity equation got sternly pronounced and profoundly amplified as the Hindus in Bangladesh were perceived as analogous to the perpetrators of the Babri Masjid demolition case. The psychological upheaval characterised by the Muslims as a knee-jerk reaction to the perceived ontological assault on their community is explained by Babru as:

[T]he psychological breakthrough, the release of repressed psychic energy characteristic of all periods of social disorganization, As the control of a rigidly organized community weakens, the individual falls back on his own sources by taking his basic impulses and wishes as the sole point of reference for his

behaviour... [As a result] the outbreak of social anarchy epitomized by the Revolution is yet another symptom of the same socio-psychological condition... Nationalism is closely connected with individualism. This is, however, a dialectical relation, for, as de Tocqueville notices, in modern society the taste for powerful central State grows hand in hand with the taste for individual freedom and assertion. This amounts to saying that the modern State, the nation-state, is not only integrating institution and a brake put on individual freedom, but also a cumulative effect and a synthesis of a powerful release of primitive appetites. This explains a great deal of its dynamic and aggressive character and particularly, of its expansionistic, self-fulfilling and often messianic impulses. In other words, the modern national State as a corporate body is guided by the same competitive, self and status-orientated ethics as the individual.(Babru 1966, 188)

Suranjan could understand the destructive potential of the upheaval as evident in the changing demographic data reflected by the trend in the census. The threat perceived in anti-Hindu movement translates in the dwindling Hindu representation in the demographic representation. The possibility of appropriation of religion as Islam is also apprehended with the representation of other religions plummeting down to a minuscule proportion.

'In 1941, the Muslims were 70.3 per cent of the population, while the Hindus were 28.3 per cent... In 1991, the Muslims were 87.4 per cent, and the Hindus approximately 12.6 per cent. What do you understand from this? ... Do you know the latest about the new census? Apparently Hindus and Muslims will not be counted separately... Because, the Hindus are dwindling so rapidly they may as well be clubbed with the Muslims, instead of being considered a separate entity,' KajalDebnath said sarcastically.(Nasrin 1994, 189)

At the cross-roads of the Hindu identities being threatened to be wiped out finds a vivid expression in form of its systematic deletion in the established parameters with statutory legitimacy. "[W]ith "identity disregard," there is a different kind of reductionism, which we may call "singular affiliation," which takes the form of assuming that any person pre-eminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only- no more and no less."(Sen 2006, 20) Removal of the term-Hindu from the religion column of the census is tantamount to alienation legitimized in favour of the Muslims which will eventually jeopardize the identity equation.

The survival of a cultural community does not entail preserving some notion of cultural purity even if some practices and values can be identified as more central than others to the community's way of defining itself... Rather, the point is that a comparison between the impact of discrimination on individual identity and the impact of changing one rule or one tradition on the distinctiveness of the group is unlikely to yield results that favour groups in cases where the identity-related interests of individuals are seriously jeopardized.(Eisenberg, Identity and liberal politics: the problem of minorities within minorities 2005, 268-269)

Suranjan could extrapolate the magnitude of the conflagration and requested his father to agree to leave the country. But his father, Sudhamoy, had a different idea of the nation with strong emotional connection.

I am not leaving the property of my forefathers. Coconut and betel nut plantations, yards and yards of rich paddy fields, a house that stands on over two bighas land.... I cannot leave all this to become a refugee on the platform of Sealdah station... 'Why should I leave my homeland and go somewhere else? If I live it will be on this soil, and if I die it will be in this very same place.'(Nasrin 1994, 7)

The novel deals insightfully with the psychological dilemma that Sudhamoy undergoes to deal with the conflict of the ideal and the practical. Initially, he feels it is a shame to run away from one's homeland but later finds the idea of 'homeland' uprooted with his identity at doldrums with the shifting sense of nationality.

[Suranjan says] I know you will not accept my suggestion but I'm begging you to. Please, Baba ... please. Come, let's go away [to] India.' Sudhamoy looked disgusted... 'Is India your father's home or your grandfather's? From your family, who the hell stays in India? Do you want to run away from your homeland ... doesn't it make you feel ashamed?'

'What homeland are you talking about, Baba? What has this country given you? What is it giving you? What has this country of yours given Maya? Why does my mother have to cry? Why do you groan all night? Why don't I get any sleep?' (Nasrin, 1994, p. 213)

In the context of crisis, Suranjan's suggestion is a form of nationalistic identification of India as a nation that belonged to the Hindus and the imminent necessity to seek refuge in India was the viable option to counter the communal juggernaut of (mis)identified nationality trapped in the bizarre quagmire of religious fundamentalism.

[N]ationalism [is considered] as a psycho-historical phenomenon, as a collective reaction to social and psychological crises produced by periods of transition from a traditional, agrarian to industrial, urban social structure, and by periods of cultural retardation and prolonged political and cultural oppression. The reaction to such crises leads to a highly emotional social solidarity and a highly idealized image of the group.(Babru 1966, 196)

The ideals of the freedom movement of 1971 stood the scrutiny, and anachronistically religion, which was not the criteria for national identity, became the sole criteria for the new emerging perceived national identity.

Starting from 1947 and stretching upto 1971, the Bengalis witnessed wave upon wave of bloodshed and trouble, all of which culminated in the Freedom



movement of 1971. An independence that was earned at the cost of three million Bengali lives, proved that religion could not be the basis of a national identity. Language, culture, and history on the other hand were able to create the foundation on which to build a sense of nationality. (Nasrin 1994, 8)

This ubiquitous perception distorted the Hindu community's sense of belongingness towards the nation as they were strategically marginalised. "The differentiation of society into separate groupings becomes social stratification when these groupings can be seen as forming a hierarchy." (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008, 318) The marginalisation made the disengaged Hindus from the socio-cultural core entrenching upon the dominance of the dominant ideology of the demographic and communal majority.

The process of identification of 'national heritage' did not necessarily involve negotiation and consent from all family members. In the past, dominant strands of society claimed ownership of the national heritage. The elite determined which elements of heritage were worthy of affirmation or preservation in the public space at the national level... This can be aligned with the notion of 'cultural capital' as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu pointed to the capacity of the ruling elite to exercise power in the process of selecting and determining dominant ideologies. (Logan, Langfield and Craith 2010, 12)

The situation of disengagement got profound when Suranjan was targeted by some boys whom he had known for years. All of a sudden he found his association with the larger commune, beyond his Hindu community, shattered and a psychosocial border being created between the communities. Suranjan felt ashamed not only for the loss of his identity but in the need to reconfigure it with due acknowledgement of psychological border that seems to have extended out of the mutable national border that was geo-politically created.

Just as Suranjan entered a bigger street, a group of boys shouted out, 'Catch him, he's a Hindu.' The boys were his neighbours. For the last seven years he had been meeting them at least once a day. Suranjan knew a couple of them personally... They were often in his house asking for all sorts of help; and free medical treatment. And it was these very same people who were threatening to beat him up today because he was a Hindu! Suranjan walked briskly in the opposite direction, not out of fear, but out of shame. He was truly ashamed and anguished by the thought of these boys beating him up. And his sense of shame and sadness was not directed towards himself, but aimed at those who would be beating him up. Shame most affected those who inflicted torture, not those who were tortured! (Nasrin 1994, 27)

He also felt ashamed of the people who consented to the cessation of age-old camaraderie, the plurality of cultures and internalised the monolithic conception of identity misappropriated in the guise of communal divide and idiosyncratic intolerance.



Re-constituting the human invites some anxious attention to forms of normative and lived struggles to what Hannah Arendt named in a difficult and poignant phrase ‘the rights to have rights.’ Writing in the wake of Holocaust, Arendt [in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*]enunciated this right as against the loss of belonging to a ‘polity’, where the stateless person or entire communities suffer not merely ‘a loss of home but the impossibility of finding a new one’, constituting thus an expulsion from ‘humanity’ itself. This expulsion is a marker not usually thought of as denial of any rule of law regime but of the fact that ‘no law exists for them’(Baxi 2007, 27)

Sudhamoy could not really convince himself with the need to migrate as he could not understand the gain in the entire equation. He felt it was a totally inexplicable to reason out the inexorable communal antagonism against the Hindus, for the deeds of people across the borders who were coincidentally Hindus. The only similarities that the Dutta family had with the Hindus in India was their religion which seem to have superseded the comprehensive idea of nationality altogether.

[Sudhamoy] could not understand what people hoped to gain by going away. If the total number of Hindus in the country decreased any further, they would only be persecuted the more. In fact, it was a no-win situation in which those who remained and those who left both lost. It was a loss for the poor, a loss for the minorities. Sudhamoy wondered exactly how many more Hindus in this country must suffer and die, to pay for the sins of the Hindus in India, both past and present. If he knew, perhaps he could have committed suicide, so that by doing so some measure of peace could accrue to the Hindus. (Nasrin 1994, 196)

Sudhamoy had to face the dual challenge to his identity when is seen as meta-minority owing to his dual identity as a Hindu and an old man with financial constraints. Till he was young and served as a doctor in Mymensingh, he had an identity of a definite repute but now his identity as an old man magnifies is identity as a Hindu to be passive subject victimization in the massive communal onslaught. This aspect got evident when he had to remain a passive spectator to his daughter’s abduction right from the sanctified domestic boundaries.

The phrase “minorities within minorities” alerts us both to parallels and potential collision. It suggests a symmetry between groups that have been minoritized by virtue of their race, ethnicity, religion, language or culture. And sub-groups within these, minoritized by virtue of age, sexuality, gender or class.(Phillips 2005, 113)

Sudhamoy could not really understand the sense of border; a psychological and a socio-cultural one, till he faced the blatant reality which was gruelling enough to shatter his illusion and identify with what Suranjan, Kironmoyee and Maya had been saying all through. The novel portrays an instance when one of close acquaintance of the Dutta household unconsciously diffuses the idolatry of socio-communal cohesion.

Aleya Begum took in the destruction in the room and Sudhamoy's semi-paralyzed condition, heard of Maya's abduction, and expressed her sympathy and her concern. At one point, she asked Kironmoyee, 'Boudi, don't you have relatives in India?'

'Yes, we do. Almost all our relatives are there.'

'Then why are you stuck here?'

'Because this is my own country.'

Aleya Begum could not conceal her surprise at Kironmoyee's answer. After all, how could Kironmoyee say as confidently as Aleya herself that this was her country? Sudhamoy understood at that moment that Kironmoyee and Aleya, despite being women and citizens of the same country, could never be regarded in the same light. Somewhere, a fine line of distinction had been drawn. (Nasrin 1994, 197)

The psychological border gets pronounced are the identities, owing to its dynamic nature of its recognition or to be identified, gets stifled in the evolving normativity of abhorrence. The psychosocial borders emanate and diffuse when paranoia meets euphoria to selectively appropriate an obsession towards an excess, validated in the ambiguity identified with nationalist fervour to elusively identify and misidentify objective-subjective divide. Nairn identifies the problems of excess in understandably uncompromising and resounding manner.

"Nationalism" is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as "neurosis" in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies) and largely incurable. (Nairn 2003, 347)

"Identity is one of the most fluid socio-cultural constructs; it affects material realities and in turn, is continually affected by the ebbs and flows of material processes." (Grewal 2007, 191) A sense of fluidity is rendered to the new identity that is re-imagined with individuals being made a subject (Althusser 2001), to subtly accommodate with the 'loss' of the erstwhile identity alongside the newer socio-political realities, with shifting contours of time and space and variation in the dynamic idea of nationalism.

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