

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF TASLIMA NASRIN

Ketaki Kushari Dyson

I have been reading the messages on Taslima Nasrin with considerable interest, and offer a few thoughts, for what they are worth. Lopa Tasneem has been asking me for some time to write something touching women's issues, and hopefully this essay will be relevant in that way. Thank you, Lopa, for giving me the space!

It is true that Taslima generates contradictory emotions in those who read her or about her. No one can deny her courage in speaking her mind, and she has a very individual writing style in Bengali, recognizably her own. Her situation as an exile cannot be comfortable and elicits sympathy from most decent people; few except hardened bigots would deny her compassion. But by courting political exile she has indeed cut herself off from Bangladeshi grassroots, which means that she cannot put her talents to a more direct service of those social causes which some had genuinely hoped she would go on to serve.

It was her writings which had led people to foster that hope. After gaining fame as a promising young poet, she came into prominence as an outspoken columnist who was a champion of women's rights and bluntly critical of the way religious orthodoxies oppress ordinary people, particularly women. Many thought that she would go on to play a role as an activist in those spheres. In this they have been disappointed, and I can well understand that disappointment, – especially the disappointment of those who feel that had Taslima stayed on in medicine, without necessarily giving up writing, had she combined the two activities into a two-pronged fork, she could have achieved so much more on behalf of women in a direct, tangible, solid way, – but at the same time I agree that it is not for us to tell her how she must live, and if she has decided that writing is going to be her sole or principal form of activism, then we just have to accept that.

Unfortunately, several of her books are banned in Bangladesh, which in itself limits her potential for activism-through-writing in her home territory. And there are some genuine problems for her in playing such a role in the English-speaking world. She is diffident about her English and does not write directly in it, though she is getting translated. I heard her lecture once, at an event organized (I think) by Amnesty International at Oxford, and it seemed to me that she did not have such a good grasp of the complexity of the history of the subcontinent in colonial times. Because she cannot write fluently in English, Taslima cannot become another Arundhati Roy. Be that as it may, Taslima is now a celebrity; she travels and attends events at libertarian venues; she may be exerting an international influence through such appearances, in addition to what she is achieving through the translated versions of her books.

In 1992 I was one of the first people to review her *Nirbachito Column*, welcoming her exceptional courage and candour. Her entry into the Bengali literary world was like a breath of fresh air blowing through it. My article was re-printed (without anybody obtaining my permission!) in a selection of articles for and against her, entitled *Taslima Nasriner Pokkhe Bipokkhe*, published by Ankur Prakashoni of Dhaka. My article is in fact the very first piece in that anthology. Taslima dedicated one of her later collections of columns (*Nashto Meyer Nashto Godyo*) to me, and says she respects me, a compliment which I accept with humility.

It is as a writer that we have to evaluate her, not as an activist. Within writing, she seems to excel in certain genres and to write less well in others. For instance, I would not call her a feminist intellectual. We do not see her writing in an analytical style, not even within the ambit of a magazine like *Jijnasa*, which used to have a primary focus on essays and did nurture quite a few female essayists. Taslima was made welcome there, and the editor has always been her champion. Yet Taslima never really became a fully-fledged feminist essayist or polemicist.

When Taslima was persecuted and had the *fatwa* put on her head, she was hijacked by the media. It became difficult for us to discuss her books from an honest literary angle. Certain sections of the media began to pretend that somehow she had invented Bengali feminism, that she was the first woman writer in Bengali displaying a true feminist consciousness. Some lip service might perhaps be paid to Rokeya Begum, but those that did so hurried on immediately from Rokeya to Taslima, without even mentioning, *en passant*, Ashapurna Devi or Mahashweta Devi, never mind anybody of a younger generation. Those of us who had been influenced by the new wave of feminist awareness ushered in by the seventies dared not open our mouths in case any criticism we made of any aspect of her writings was interpreted as personal jealousy of her media success. It became politically incorrect to criticize her, just as once it had become politically incorrect to criticize Salman Rushdie.

Personally, I think that the autobiographical or confessional mode, as evinced in the two volumes of her memoirs published so far, is Taslima's *forte* as a writer. The most intelligent review of *Amar Meyebela* that I have seen so far, thanks to a posting in another e-forum, is that of its English version, written by Meredith Tax, an eminent American feminist, whom I happen to know. This was a much more balanced appraisal than any of the Bengali reviews that came my way.

However, a political agenda of the West is already visible in the edition that has been made available in America. Even the title betrays it. The American publishers of the book have released it under the title *Meyebela/ My Bengali Girlhood/ A Memoir of Growing Up Female/ In a Muslim World*. But the original title is quite simply *Amar Meyebela*, and the Indian edition of the English version, published from Delhi, is likewise titled *My Girlhood/ An Autobiography*. In the American edition the word 'Bengali' has been naughtily slipped in. This adjective serves a political purpose: it manages to

stereotype us Bengalis, and robs us, those Bengali women who *have not* experienced a girlhood as damaged and damaging as Taslima's, of our own reasonably normal, happy, and positive childhoods. The subtitle, 'A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World', is even naughtier. Apart from the dangerous stereotyping of a Muslim upbringing, the phrasing, in juxtaposition with 'My Bengali Girlhood', almost erases the existence of non-Muslim Bengalis. This is a mischief that is rampant in Britain too. The word Bengali is being increasingly identified with a Muslim identity. Many ordinary people think that all Bengalis are automatically Muslims; Bengalis from West Bengal or Bangladesh who belong to other religious faiths have been obliterated from the map of their consciousness. I myself have not read the American edition of *Amar Meyebela*, but I believe there are some small but significant differences between it and both the original Bengali edition from Calcutta and the English edition from Delhi.

Where Meredith Tax says: 'There is no adult consciousness in *Meyebela*; the voice is that of the child Taslima', I would argue: 'Yes, that is how Taslima purports to speak, but does she succeed?' I think Ms Tax is nearer the truth when she says: 'Taslima finds it hard to get her bearings, and the reader has the same problem: the narrative voice and time frame seem to tremble from time to time, like a lantern flickering...'

Let us look at a passage that Ms Tax quotes: 'they lift the mosquito net and look at you, lust and desire pouring from their eyes Keep absolutely still when they flash a light on your face, your chest, your thighs. They must see that you are not yet fully grown, you are not even an adolescent, your breasts have not yet appeared!' This is not a child's testimony. It is the adult writer writing. The problem is acute in the original Bengali book, where the passages describing her experience of childhood sexual abuse do not ring as words spoken in a child's voice. They are clearly written in an adult fictional technique, designed to grab the reader's attention. I am afraid they have certainly had a titillating effect on a mass audience. People have been reading the memoir to scan those lurid passages, for the sake of the *frisson* they afforded. Is that what Taslima wanted?

Can an adult woman who has had a vigorous sex life since she grew up recreate with autobiographical authenticity those early unsolicited sexual experiences and the bewilderment they presumably caused? Can she give representation to the original viewpoint of a young inexperienced child? This is an interesting 'post-modern' question, because she has changed in the interim, hasn't she? She is no longer the innocent bewildered kid; she is now full of the knowledge of men, a bitter knowledge, and the fire of anger against men. And she has a thesis to prove; she must show how bad men are, how they oppress women. The audience of a statement, and the purpose for which it is made, must always be taken into consideration. When writing *Amar Meyebela*, Taslima is not speaking to a counsellor or to the tape-recorder of a fact-finding mission. It is her own book that she is writing. She hopes, by means of her recollections, to give flesh and blood and bones to a book which will capture a market and establish her literary reputation. In the original *Amar Meyebela* it is not the innocent child's voice that

I hear, but the voice of a grown-up woman writing in a deliberate, well-considered, fictional style.

What I am trying to say is that Taslima did have a choice in the matter of styles. Let me explain. For ten years I was a member and research associate of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women at Oxford, and sat through many a seminar given by distinguished professionals drawn from diverse disciplines: historians, sociologists, social anthropologists, medical anthropologists, social workers and others from many parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. I was an editorial collaborator with social anthropologists, attended international conferences on women's issues, and from time to time I still attend seminars on fertility, reproduction, and sexual health at the University's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. I have listened to the papers of many women, on subjects ranging from the condition of women in rural Bangladesh and contraceptive techniques amongst the tribal people of the Amazon basin to female circumcision in Africa, how in Saudi Arabia mobile phones enable women to talk to their boyfriends while in the same room a zenana party is going on, and how hard it is for young men to find brides in Singapore. I heard from NGOs working in Bangladesh how Taslima Nasrin's books had made their own task of helping women in remote rural areas harder than before, because the local mullahs were now vehemently opposed to anything that might help to liberate women from their clutches. I have personal friends amongst scholars whose roots are in the Middle East, who have done field work in Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, and so on. From my accumulated experiences I can testify that there is another way to talk about these issues, a more calm and dispassionate way. As a qualified medical practitioner, a mature Taslima could have entered that realm of discourse, but she chose not to. She chose to write a literary autobiography instead.

As Ms Tax herself says, Taslima, in addition to her breaking of religious taboos, 'opened the closet door on a whole world of subterranean sexual experience and feeling, much of it abusive, and none of it considered fit to be discussed. She wrote about sex and religion and state politics all together, and she did it at a bad time, when fundamentalism was on the rise. The combination did her in.' That is a good summing up. She is also spot on when she says that the '*fatwa* put on Taslima Nasrin in 1993 must now be seen as an early warning signal that this globalized, politicized form of Islamic fundamentalism was growing more aggressive and looking for an opportunity to test its strength in Bangladesh.'

But where do all these things lead us? Sure, it is good to see the girl from Mymensingh up on the dais in New York, launching her book, and we may all feel a legitimate pride for her achievement, but let us not forget the West's agenda in all of this. Ms Tax observes astutely that the coverage of the Western press is 'a double-edged sword'. She knows that 'Nasrin believes in being shocking', that the book will become 'a classic of controversy', and she says further: 'Nasrin thinks attacking religion will bring about a world change in consciousness. I have my doubts; perhaps the anger in *Meyebela*

distracts me from its message. I keep wondering how much of this story can be reduced to the unresolved furies of a mistreated child.' In my humble opinion, much of it does indeed have a deep connection with those furies. I too find it hard to believe that a head-on collision with religious authorities can bring oppressive structures down.

Ms Tax points out that '*Meyebela* will be problematic as an educational tool in the United States today, where people are constantly being told that Muslims are evil. In a society that knows little about any variety of Islam, the dark picture painted by Nasrin may be universalized, and welcomed all too eagerly.' After September 11, is there not a real danger that there may be a cultural fallout from this kind of literary representation? Especially if Taslima keeps insisting, in the interviews she gives, that the sexual molestation of children goes on within every family in Bangladesh, but is not talked about. That just cannot be true, can it? Innocent Asian Muslims living in North America may well be demonized as a result of such statements. And when a group is demonized, there is an inevitable backlash. I always fear the chain of reactions that extreme opinions may unleash – not only in the West, but also in the subcontinent itself. The more religious bigotry rises in Muslim Asia, the more right-wing Hindu nationalism will rise in India in reaction, and this really makes many of us deeply worried about the future of communal harmony in the subcontinent, which is mortgaged to the global situation. So no matter how Taslima may try to wriggle out of her own responsibility in starting off such a chain reaction, this is a scenario that needs to be understood by cultural entrepreneurs such as publishers. Publishers should not just think of raking in the profits, when *people's lives* may be endangered by certain kinds of statements, as happened after the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Authors must accept some responsibility for the consequences of their words, just as motorists have to accept responsibility for accidents and injuries they may cause by bad driving.

There are aspects of Taslima's writings which I find disturbing. The rage that burns in *Amar Meyebela* burns through her other books, her poetry and novels, and *Utol Hawa*, the second part of her autobiography, which I think shows her writing skills at their maturest. The two main targets of her rage are religion and men. Yes, I understand there is an anger boiling in her pot, but raw anger does not necessarily make good art. The raw passion has to be transmuted. There has to be an act of alchemical transformation, and some distancing from the original experiences. Taslima has written some fine poems, but the range of themes and styles in her poetic output is limited. She tends to say the same thing over and over again. In one of her poems she says that she would like to buy juicy young men in the market, use them thoroughly, ransack them, then 'kick their crinkled balls' and order them 'to piss off'. It is a shocking poem. As the mother of two young men, I felt its ghastliness even more, and was impelled to write a poem which is a kind of reply. I am enclosing this poem of mine as a PDF file.

Taslima's memoirs will always have an intrinsic value as books documenting a girl growing up in an extremely dysfunctional family in Bangladesh in the second half of the 20th century, but many of us cannot help wondering how her family have reacted to the

way she has portrayed them. Yes, those books are banned in Bangladesh, but surely copies have been smuggled in and members of her family have turned the pages? Her father comes out as a violent man and a bully, whose neglect of his wife and cruelty towards her were criminal. But it wasn't just Taslima's domineering father who neglected his wife, the children of this marriage too sadly neglected the welfare of their mother. She wanted to carry on her studies and wanted a little support in this project from her children, but they ignored her requests completely. The poor woman was suffering from blood loss from the bowels, and everybody around her told her that there was no treatment for haemorrhoids. Nobody would help her, neither her doctor husband, nor her daughter who was studying medicine, nor her grown up sons. Eventually she died of bowel cancer. I have not understood one thing: if Taslima could go to Dhaka and treat herself privately with antibiotics when she contracted venereal disease from Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, why could she not take the initiative and take her mother to Dhaka by train and arrange some treatment for her bowel condition? It is heart-rending to read how the poor lady begged pathetically to have some nourishing food to compensate for her blood-loss – a little milk, a few eggs – and it was not that the family could not afford it, but they simply paid no attention to her requests! This is unbelievable, and brought tears to my eyes when I read *Utol Hawa*. It wasn't as if a famine was on and they were all begging in the street, or anything like that! Taslima states several times that in the parental conflicts she witnessed she tended to side with her assertive, authoritarian father rather than with her submissive, ill-treated mother. As a girl growing up, she modelled herself on her father, a figure who symbolized power, while her mother was a crushed, defeated being. I really do not know how the members of this family face themselves in the mirror. Do they feel guilt? (Taslima has indeed dedicated the first part of her memoirs to her mother, which I suppose is a ritual expiatory gesture.) No matter how else women are oppressed by their families in a traditional society, especially by their autocratic husbands, can it be typical for children to treat their mother in this careless, callous way? Is it not atypical? Social anthropologists will know that one case study does not validate a generalization about a whole society, and the story of this family is just that, one case study, that of a particularly brutal and brutalizing family, but really what kind of effect is it having on lay readers, on the general public? Are they thinking this is how all Bengali Muslim families treat their mothers? Several times as I read *Utol Hawa*, I recalled with affectionate nostalgia what a friend from Dhaka used to tell me about his relationship to his mother. 'Amma's slightest wish is a commandment for me,' he used to say with complete conviction and enormous pride. I never doubted for a minute that this was the general pattern of behaviour in families in the subcontinent, no matter whether they were Hindu or Muslim, Jain or Christian, Sikh or Parsi. The burdensome legacy of her past that Taslima has inherited, the past that has shaped her – can it be a secure foundation for an enlightened feminist philosophy in her maturity? She must unlearn so many lessons! How to be kind to others, how to empathize with others, how to focus on others rather than on oneself all the time: these are not lessons one learns easily within the framework of a damaging, dysfunctional family.

It seems to me that something like a post-traumatic stress syndrome runs throughout Taslima's literary output. She could have definitely done with expert psychological counselling, and maybe writing these books is helping her to get the poison out of her system. But Taslima's obsessive dwelling on the dirty details of life makes me wonder whether all her shit-and-vomit details represent working through the unfinished businesses of her life – and we all have some of those – or are they a streetwise kid's strategies to maximize her readership and sales? Was it really necessary for her readers to know how one of her elder brothers used to scratch his balls, how he farted, how he rolled the dirt of his skin up into little balls and sniffed them? It's all there in *Utol Hawa*. Is this some form of sibling revenge? Such details show her deep hatred of this brother as well as the crudity of her own literary judgment. When detailing the infection she says she got from Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, she spares us none of the gory details. Rudra's friends will not find his portrait in *Utol Hawa* particularly flattering. And the bloke is dead and cannot come back and defend himself against any unfair charges. There is no way we, the vast majority of readers, can check the facts. Yes, I have read the interview she gave to *Saptahik 2000*, but no detail in that article is as disturbing as the information Taslima herself retails about her own life in *Utol Hawa*. It does not matter to me whether she chain-smokes or what kind of company she keeps: those facts belong to her personal life, and I would respect her privacy. But it is she herself who asks us to be immersed in the seething pot of her private life, with all the messy juices swirling in it, because in the end it is that pot, and not any feminist analysis, that is her real literary capital, what she lives off.

It is not surprising that Taslima's novels are deeply problematic. I have read a few, and they all repeat the same theme: how bad men are. She manipulates her characters to bring this message home again and again. In the beginning, when she was writing columns only, I myself had defended her against the charge of being a man-hater. But those of her novels that I have read are pathologically man-hating. In *Lajja*, she makes her Hindu hero rape a Muslim prostitute in revenge for the killings of Hindus in Bangladesh: an extremely manipulated fictional conclusion. In another of her novels, a man suspects his newly married wife to be carrying someone else's child and forces her to have an abortion; she then 'takes revenge' by getting herself impregnated by a neighbour and presents this child to her husband as his own. Sweet revenge is one of Taslima's favourite fictional themes. She laces this theme of revenge against men with the spice of sex, and the formula sells: it has the seduction of a horror movie. Men seem to like the lurid concoction.

I would have said that Taslima was trapped and imprisoned in her rage, but what is interesting is that she has found a way of marketing it. Apart from comments and paragraphs *en passant*, I did not write at length about her for a long time. Until, that is, I encountered *Phorasi Premik*, her latest novel, which was published in both Dhaka and Calcutta for a change. That is to say, it was not banned in Bangladesh, because there is nothing against Islam in it. This book, however, is her *magnum opus* in man-hatred.

I have written a long review-article in a Toronto print magazine discussing the poetry and fiction of eight diasporic Bengali writers, four men and four women. The roots of seven out of the eight authors are in Bangladesh. In that essay I have included a long critique of *Phorasi Premik*. I would urge all interested readers to take a look at that essay. The details are as follows: *Bangla Journal*, edited by Iqbal Karim Hasnu, April-August 2002, Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2. The editor can be reached at the following address:

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Taslima has read this review and admits that it contains fair criticism. Curious readers may also find some food for thought in an article of mine on Salman Rushdie which was published in a previous issue of the same magazine (August 2001, Vol. 3, No. 2).

In *Phorasi Premik* Taslima tried to do what was extremely difficult for her to do: she portrayed her heroine as a Hindu girl from contemporary Calcutta, and gave her wild sexual adventures in Paris. She superimposed a lot of details from her own Mymensingh background, her own father and mother for instance, on this fictitious heroine. Unfortunately the strategy doesn't work. It generates inauthenticity. A middle class professional Bengali Hindu family, a doctor's family in Calcutta, does not operate like the family portrayed in *Amar Meyebela*. As a result, the characters, barring the character of the French lover himself, are cardboard cut-outs, and all characters are manipulated by the author to prove how bad men are everywhere from Calcutta to Paris. As a novel, it has elements of what in Britain would be called a bonkbuster. I took each prominent social and cultural inauthenticity and showed why it was inauthentic, why it didn't work. I kind of deconstructed the book and showed why and how and where it was going wrong. In particular, I tried to compare it with Washington-based Dilara Hashem's *Hamela*, published in the same year as *Phorasi Premik*. In my opinion *Hamela* is far superior as a work of fiction. Dilara is a superb storyteller, and can make her characters come really alive. She can draw both male and female characters with wit and compassion, with ease and elegance. There is no lack of feminist awareness in her writings, but it is not confrontational. She is able to see life as a whole, and to show us, with great psychological astuteness, the minds of the characters she creates, so that we can identify with them without effort. She is one of the foremost Bengali women novelists of our times, the author of classic novels such as *Ghar*, *Mon*, *Janala*; *Kaktaliyo*; *Amlokir Mow*; *Ekoda Ebong Ananto*; *Stobdhotar Kane Kane*; *Mural*; *Shankhokorat*; *Sadar-Andar*; *Hamela*; *Setu*; *Chandragrahan*; and many other titles; and she writes poetry and short stories, and playscripts which have been televised; but she does not

get half the attention that Taslima gets! It is truly amazing that when discussing Taslima, critics do not bother to compare her with this distinguished woman novelist of the Bangladeshi diaspora! Dilara Hashem's is a humane and humanistic art, enriched by lively settings, vivid characterization, and a great capacity for vicarious experience, all tremendous assets for a writer of fiction. A novelist must be able to identify with others so that she or he can create characters with whom we can identify as readers. Dilara does this with astonishing felicity and stylistic fluency. It is high time that critics began to discuss Taslima in a proper literary context, alongside other Bengali writers of our times, men and women, instead of pretending that she is a unique event and does not need any such comparative assessment!

Feminism itself was a well-established trend in Bengali writing by the time Taslima appeared in the scene. I should know, because after all I am also a Bengali writer and deeply involved in my times! Let me pause and pose a rhetorical question. In 1992, why was I asked to review *Nirbachito Column* in the first place, and why did the editors of *Taslima Nasrin's Pokkhe Bipokkhe* decide to begin their anthology with my article? Because I was regarded as a feminist writer and critic myself. Apart from my many essays on women's issues and women writers, my books such as *Nari, Nogori, Noton Noton Pairaguli*, and *Rabindranath o Victoria Ocampor Sandhane* deal with the lives of women from diverse cultural backgrounds, viewed from a contemporary woman's perspective. *Nari, Nogori* was first published serially way back in 1965. *Noton Noton Pairaguli* was written at the end of the seventies and serialized in 1981-82. It is possible that the word *pitritantro* to mean patriarchy was first used in this book. In this novel there are streams of first-person testimonies given by women, and there is a portrait, among others, of a Muslim woman from Algeria, whose father was forty years older than her mother. *Rabindranath o Victoria Ocampor Sandhane*, written over 1981-82, is embedded in a kind of deconstructive feminist discourse which I pioneered, and I suffered at the hands of some critics for my audacity in mixing the story of Gurudev and his Vijaya with a modern love story. My first play, *Raater Rode*, written in 1990 (though published later), is actually being taught in English translation as a 'postcolonial feminist text' at a British university. I am mentioning these facts not out of any egomania (far from it!), but for the simple reason that many readers in this forum may not have much information about me. As these facts pertain to me, I can vouch for their accuracy, and by mentioning them I am hoping to gently remind readers of this forum that Taslima Nasrin has not sprung out of a cultural vacuum: there is indeed a history of contemporary Bengali feminist writing. By her date of birth Taslima could be my daughter, and I very genuinely admire her talents and abilities, but she *is not* the first Bengali feminist writer of our times! Since Taslima has decided that she is not going to be an activist and wishes to be considered as a 'mere writer', from now on she should really be set and seen in the correct literary context. Many able women are now writing in both the Bengals: poets, novelists, writers of short stories, feminist critics. Few of us can retail memories as colourful as Taslima: we may not have been sexually molested by our male relatives in childhood, or been given venereal disease by our partners, but that does not necessarily make us inferior artists! Each of us can only create from the context

of our lives and personalities. Critics should stop treating Taslima as a unique phenomenon unrelated to a peer group. She should be assessed not by her smoking habits, or how much alcohol she consumes, or the company she keeps, or the clothes she wears, or her hairstyle, but by *the quality of the texts she generates*. What are her special skills, what are the areas where she excels, and what are the problematic areas/pitfalls for her? How does she fit in with the other writers of our times, say, alongside other Bengali women writers from Bangladesh and West Bengal, and all those in the Bengali diaspora: personalities as various as Dilara Hashem, Selina Hosain, Nasrin Jahan, Vijaya Mukhopadhyay, Gita Chattopadhyay, Navaneeta Deb Sen, Bani Basu, Kona Basu Mishra, Suchitra Bhattacharya, Joya Mitra, Anita Agnihotri, Krishna Basu, Mallika Sengupta, Chaitali Chattopadhyay, Mandakranta Sen, not excluding my humble self, to pick just a few names at random from a rich scene! There are many others! I happen to be more familiar with the names from West Bengal, but I am sure there is a stream of interesting women writers in Bangladesh too. And how does Taslima's autobiographical writing compare with similar texts by women (and men!) from other countries? There must be many memorable texts out there! The first example that springs spontaneously to my mind is the 6-volume autobiography of that great Argentine woman, Victoria Ocampo, which I had to plough through in the original Spanish for the sake of my research work!

Somebody could do a research project looking at Dilara's *Kaktaliyo*, an autobiographical novel, comparing and contrasting it with Taslima's techniques in fiction and autobiography. Another project could compare Dilara's *Stobdhotar Kane Kane* written long before Taslima's *Lajja*, but touching similar communal issues on the other side of the border, dealing with a Muslim family's decision on whether or not they should leave West Bengal after communal troubles (they don't!). Where are all the researchers on Bengali women's writing? There is much interesting work to be done, but it is not getting done! Nothing is more exasperating than to see the cult following of this or that writer to the complete neglect of equally talented artists in the same field! I do not hold a chair at any university, or else I would have set a few projects in motion by now!

I must confess I am bemused to see Taslima, the iconoclastic freethinker and redoubtable champion of women's liberation, thriving on a manipulation of the book market by the publishing empires of modern capitalism. I think there is profound irony in this. English translations of other Bengali classic writers of the 20th century, Tagore himself, and all the stalwarts of the post-Tagore period, could never expect to get a posh launch in New York! I hasten to add that the English *Meyebela* has not been released or reviewed in the UK. The two countries may have been allies in the war against Iraq, but at the moment do not seem to share a passion for stories of growing up female in a Muslim world. British publishers probably gathered enough relevant experience when they dealt with Salman Rushdie, and it is likely that they do not want to hold in their bare hands another literary hot potato who is a critic of Islam!

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