

## **Caged Bodies, Raging Minds, Dissident Voices: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Taslima Nasreen**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyse the mental state of Taslima Nasreen and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, writers that are primarily celebrated for their rich casket of fictional narratives, through poems written at a juncture in their lives when they were dealing with the pain of separation and displacement from home and country. As a consequence of defying their respective governments through their revolutionary writings, such a separation is accompanied by the loss of a stable identity. Although they do not share the socio-political context that resulted in exile, the commonly felt strains and fissures of exile have guided their perspectives through particularly intimate landscapes, so that it is possible to describe their poems' meaning in a wholly decontextualised manner. They both are, in a way, separated from conventional contexts: exile is an alienating experience, and home, no longer homelike, is perhaps an even more estranging place.

*Keywords:* Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, dissidence, exile; identity, Taslima Nasreen

“For a country to have a great writer...is like having another government. That’s why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones.”

(Solzhenitsyn, 1968, ch. 57)

Bathed in unapologetic sarcasm, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn’s poems express his disgust for being imprisoned and subsequently sent into internal exile by the Soviet regime. His exile was punishment for giving a voice to and telling the truth about the million victims who had spent their lives in unimaginable torment at the forced labour camps. These camps, collectively known as “Gulags”<sup>1</sup>, were set up by Lenin and reached their peak under Stalin, from the 1930s to the 1950s. According to a newspaper report published in *The New York Times*, the Soviet Union stripped Solzhenitsyn of his citizenship and deported him to West Germany for “performing, systematically, actions that are incompatible with being a citizen.”<sup>2</sup> After Leon Trotsky’s deportment and subsequent exile to Turkey on the orders of Stalin, Solzhenitsyn was the only major Soviet intellectual that kept the Soviet government under constant evaluative scrutiny.

Exile has often been used by various administrative, political, religious and social powers to threaten and still the voices of dissent rising against them. To safeguard the privileges of power, the powers of the state need to detach from the social fabric those writers who rebel, as was the case with Taslima Nasreen, one of the most controversial South-Asian woman writers of the postcolonial era. In her review of Nasreen’s collection “Jailhouse Poems”, translated by Susmita Bhattacharya (2008), Debjani Chatterjee gives an apt introduction to the poet in exile: “Love her or hate her, literary heroine or *bête noire*, Taslima Nasreen is a major personality and an important voice in contemporary feminist literature” (2009, p. 244). Though Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Taslima Nasreen do not share the same socio-political context that resulted in their exile, they both speak in their verses about the politics that made their real home seem less homelike. In the Preface to *Exile: A Memoir*, Taslima vents out her frustration, disappointment and helplessness at not being allowed to live in India:

Without a single political party, social organization or renowned personality by my side, I had been a lone, exiled, dissenting voice up against the entire state machinery with only my wits and determination at my disposal. [...] Why wouldn’t I, a citizen of the world, be allowed to live in a country I love? Why would a nation that prides itself on being a secular democracy bow down to the diktats of a section of dishonest, misogynist, intolerant zealots, and banish an honest, secular writer? [...] It is a moment of crisis for democracy when a citizen is robbed of their right to speak and express their opinions. (2016, n.p.)

Solzhenitsyn also derides the immoral apparatus that commits violence in order to uphold a lie: the communist system. Under the veil of being the “Ultimate Truth”, the system has been established by those in power to keep the “power-less” citizenry in check. In his 1973 Nobel Prize Lecture, he states:

<sup>1</sup> The term “Gulag” is an acronym for Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei (English transl.: Main Camp Administration). The number of these labour camps grew exponentially after Stalin came to power in 1924 after Lenin’s death, though they were first established in 1919.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, H. (February 14, 1974). Solzhenitsyn Exiled to West Germany and Stripped of His Soviet Citizenship. Accessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/14/archives/solzhenitsyn-exiled-to-west-germany-and-stripped-of-his-soviet.html>

Violence can only be concealed by a lie, and the lie can only be maintained by a violence. Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping in mind the critical mental landscapes Solzhenitsyn and Nasreen share in terms of their imposed exile, and in order to arrive at a critical significance that extends beyond presuppositions fostered by superficial commonalities, it is important to analyse their poetical work with regard to links between form and content and how they relate to subjectivity and identity.

Though Nasreen did not face formal, rigorous imprisonment like Solzhenitsyn, the reaction of both the poets to the changes in their native land is comparable and speaks volumes. Moreover, the manner in which they deal with the trauma and disillusionment resulting from this unprecedented change in their life (exile) is empirical material that is essential to a critical analysis of their work. Were the respective state machineries completely successful in silencing these rebels' voices by sending them into exile? Did the physically imposed exile affect their creative faculties and put their minds to "exile" as well? Finding answers to these questions will guide the course of this study.

### **Musings of An Exiled Woman: Taslima Nasreen**

Though born to a Muslim family, Taslima Nasreen's upbringing took place in a moderately liberal environment. One of the most renowned women writers of South-East Asia, she has repeatedly voiced her protest and struck at the roots of patriarchal hegemony through her writings. She has also brought Indian women's narratives into the limelight, works hitherto unknown amongst the dominant circles of feminist literature.

The major reason behind the controversy surrounding her work *Dwikhandito* ("Split: A Life"), is that it deals with the notion of sexual independence from the perspective of a woman. The misogynist mindset, a by-product of patriarchy, has always considered women as procurers of sex and objects of desire, and hence it became quite difficult for Bengali intelligentsia to accept that women, too, have physical desires. Along with the allegation of contributing to the fracturing of the sacrosanct image of a woman, Nasreen also came under the wrath of Islamic fundamentalists for her criticism of the Islamic oppression of women. That got blown up to such an extent that the Government of Bangladesh immediately issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against Taslima for "outrageous" writings that offended religious sentiments.

In spite of being recognized internationally on repeated occasions for her body of work, Taslima's compositions were banned in Bangladesh and India several times, and in order to appease the Islamic fundamentalists, she was ordered to leave her native homeland without any guarantee of return. Like a pendulum, she was tossed around by the governments of various states in India, including West Bengal, Rajasthan, Kerala and Delhi. Moreover, her repeated requests to be allowed to stay in Kolkata were disregarded. While Taslima was completely isolated in a secret location in Delhi (22nd November, 2007 to 19th March, 2008) before permanently leaving India, she wrote to convey her angst at the separation from Kolkata, where

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Lecture. Accessed from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/>

she had left behind her entire world - her books, her memories, her casket of priceless memories along with her rescued stray cat, Minu:

When I die, take my corpse to the mortuary of the medical college in Kolkata where I have donated my body. The city will not accept me alive. Hopefully, my beloved Kolkata, you will welcome me in death! [...] Minu is not just a cat, she is my daughter. I have had to leave her behind in Kolkata. She has been waiting for a long time, still sits listlessly by the window, counting days. She had to spend the winter alone this year without my blanket and my warmth. Hopefully, the summer would be different. (Nasreen, 2016, p. 123)

These experiences have been shared by Nasreen in her memoir, in the chapter titled “Poems from a Safe House”, with a prose-like structure bolstered by short, numbered paragraphs. There are forty-six poems in the chapter, and they deal with the various facets of her psyche as she discusses and writes randomly about her thoughts regarding the rotting democracy and fading secularism in India. Furthermore, she expresses her extreme loneliness and repeats the plea to return to Kolkata, the City of Joy. She even wonders at the sea change that both Bangladesh and India have undergone:

Neither West Bengal nor Bangladesh is any longer what it used to be. Its golden sheen is now dim, rusty and hapless. Fundamentalists dictate terms and the scared populace walks by with their heads bent - a land of ghouls. Bravery and honesty have been banished, [...] I will cry my last tears for Bengal with the hope that one day the land will again be fertile enough to grow people.” (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 122–123)

Herein the poet makes Kolkata the subject of anthropomorphic treatment, dedicating a few poems as well as another collection of her poems (*Aye Kosto Jhenpe, Jibon Debo Mepe*) to the city, addressing it as one would a long-lost friend with whom she desperately wants to meet as soon as possible:

[...] I have not killed anyone in any way, never pelted anyone with stones - you detest me simply because I have spoken a few uncomfortable truths in favour of humanity. And for that you have taken from me my language, my country, my people, you have taken my history, and my home, my last refuge in this world. So what if I am not well! I wish you well, Kolkata [...] Be happy, Kolkata. Dance and make merry. Laugh and let the world witness your greatness.” (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 129-130)

When shall I meet you again Kolkata? In the ensuing winter or the following spring?” (Nasreen, 2012, p. 78, translation mine)

Taslina’s frustration at not being able to return to her homeland reaches its peak in one of the poems titled *Can’t I Have a Homeland to Call My Own?*, translated by Samik Bandhopadhyay. She wrote it during that period of seven months in the so-called “safe house” in Delhi, where her movements were restricted and public and private interactions prohibited:

Am I so dangerous a criminal, so vicious an enemy of humanity,  
Such a traitor to my country that I can’t have a homeland to call my own?  
[...]  
Blindly from the northern to the southern hemisphere,  
Through mountains and oceans and rows and rows of trees,  
Blindly in the heavens, in the moon, in the mists and in sunshine,

Blindly groping through grass and creepers and shrubs, earth and mankind,  
 I have gone searching for my homeland.  
 [...]
   
 You have gouged my eyes,  
 You have lashed and bloodied my body, broken both my legs,  
 You have pulverized my toes, prized open my skull to squash my brain,  
 You have arrested me, so that I die,  
 Yet I call you my homeland, call you with infinite love.”<sup>4</sup>

When she finally left India on 19th March 2008 due to failing health, she acknowledged her regret at having to leave in spite of the many battles endured, wishing to return at the earliest: “I am leaving because I don’t wish to die. My darling India, if I am alive, we will meet again for sure. We will meet no matter how much you try to suppress or silence me. No matter what you do to end me, I will always love you” (Nasreen 2016: pp. 304–305).

Her exile gives us multiple instances of her ever-increasing longing for India, as is evident in several poems from the collection *Nirbashito Narir Kabita*. In one of these, *Bhumaddhasagorer Sea-gull (The Seagull of the Mediterranean)*, Nasreen asks the bird to create an opportunity for her, so that she could unite with her long-lost homeland without letting the world know of her secret desire: “Seagull, I shall fly with your wings in the wee hours of dawn, in hush, / Will you take me to the Bay of Bengal, beyond the realm of the Mediterranean, someday?” (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 55, translation mine).

In *Rong Bodol (Changing Colours)*, she echoes the same motif of longing with reference to her stay in Scandinavia, and declares that even the unbearable cold of the place cannot inflict more pain on her body than the pain of imposed exile in a foreign land: “How much the biting cold of Scandinavia can pierce the tender skin of a tropical girl, / When the angst of my solitary soul digs its teeth deeper into my mind like a wildfire?” (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 59, translation mine)

### **The Voice of Justice and Conscience in Russia: Alexandr Solzhenitsyn**

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was a soldier in the Russian army when the Soviet Union was invaded by the Germans in the initial phase of World War II. He was very much aware of the problems presented by the Stalin regime and the dangers that a strongman dictatorship posed to his native Russia. Thus, when Hitler broke the Non-Aggression Pact with Stalin and waged war against Russia, it led to the deaths of millions of his countrymen.

Solzhenitsyn first raised his voice to challenge power when he corresponded with a school friend named Vitkevich, under a pseudonym, and criticised Stalin’s lack of preparation in facing Hitler’s attack on Russia. As a result, he was arrested and sent to a work camp. He continued writing critically of the Soviet regime and consequently spent considerable time as a political prisoner in the “corrective” labour camps, or “Gulag”. Besides writing multiple novels that had been inspired by his experiences as a captive, he wrote poetry. His verses are collected in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, a text that chronicled his efforts to keep his sanity without succumbing to the unimaginable torture and hardship of the prison, a suffering that was aggravated by the profound distress caused by the separation from his home and his loved ones.

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<sup>4</sup> Can't I Have a Homeland to Call My Own. Accessed from <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/cant-i-have-homeland-call-my-own#:~:text=I'm%20a%20traitor%20because,my%20life%20my%20own%20homeland>

Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1970 “for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature.”<sup>5</sup> Brought up in an intellectual Cossack family in Russia, as a child Solzhenitsyn had a passion for writing, though he did not consider his early writings to be of much literary merit. Spending eight years of his life in the work camps, his education at times gave him an edge over the other prisoners in that at times he was sent to “privileged” camps, although he was always returned to the worst ones. After his stay in the work camps, he was placed on internal exile for nearly three years, from 1953 to 1956. Quite similar to Nasreen’s predicament, Solzhenitsyn was forcefully re-settled within Russia, in Siberia, without control over his physical movements and forbidden to have interactions with the outside world and with his family. He was still a prisoner, but without bars or the deplorable condition of the work camps.

Primarily remembered as a novelist, he started his literary career with *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, placing him in the international spotlight. This was not just a beginning, but a continuation of a series of “secretive literary activity that had begun in prison, camp, and exile and that intensified after Solzhenitsyn’s return to “freedom” in 1956.”<sup>6</sup> His break with communism and his return to youthful patriotic convictions began at the time of his arrest in 1945. The poems written after this year are collected in *Poems: Prison, Camp and Exile*, and they are autobiographical, chronicling his terrible experiences and diminishing will to live. This reflects the mindset of prisoners, and evokes Taslima Nasreen’s perspective on exile as the foundation for building highly resilient and strong minds: “If only for the sake of experience, everyone should live in exile at some point of time in their life. It is only in enforced captivity that one can truly learn to appreciate freedom” (Nasreen, 2016, pp. 136).

A relevant poem comes from *Poems: Prison, Camp and Exile* and is titled “Prisoner’s Right”, translated by Ignat Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn raises a very pertinent point in this poem by saying that in spite of living in these prisons for such a long time, prisoners are not entitled to make claims against their inhumane conditions. The prisoners are entitled “Not to pulpits. Nor lecterns. Nor glory./ Nor power. Nor halos of saints./ nor in memoirs to mix with fatigue/ our ashen complaints.”<sup>7</sup> The illumination and enlightenment, Solzhenitsyn adds, that the souls of these prisoners have experienced during their imprisonment, are unparalleled – he compares this experience to the “loftiest gem of all earthly gemstones”.

As the poem approaches its denouement, the poet doesn’t want prisoners to harbour any feeling of malice or hatred in their hearts for their country, Russia, as they possess only one “right” and that is to be the “rancorless sons of our luckless and sad Russian land”. Even if the hearts are filled with overflowing grievances, we would still look to “Russia’s fatigued countryside”, which has been awaiting a fulfilling sunrise for so long. What Solzhenitsyn wants the readers to understand is that Russia, as a country, had suffered no less as compared to the trials and tribulations faced by the prisoners in the work camps, and their native homeland is sharing in the disastrous aftermath of World War II.

The second poem, “Acatistus”, was written in February 1952 and first appeared as part of *The Gulag Archipelago*, part IV, chapter 1, “The Ascent”. Solzhenitsyn wrote it while recovering from surgery in the camp clinic at Ekibastuz. He was happy to get a new lease on life post-treatment, although he was not yet aware of his imminent bouts with seminoma. This poem

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/summary/>

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile>

brings to our attention a very significant transition in Solzhenitsyn's faith: he had rejected lifelong religious convictions after being introduced to the world of "bookish wisdom", predominantly Marxist-Feminist ideologies. But after undergoing much disillusionment with these ideologies, he returned to the faith of his fathers after realizing the futility of the life he had chosen:

Then I passed betwixt being and dying,  
I fell off and now cling to the edge,  
And I gaze back with gratitude, trembling,  
On the meaningless life I have led.<sup>8</sup>

After realising his mistake, he began to proclaim his faith, once again, in the Providence of the living God. The mental strength with which he was fighting back all the difficulties in his life, is referred to as a gift of the benevolent God, who had not left him in his hour of need, even though he had withdrawn from his faith:

Now regaining the measure that's true,  
Having drawn with it water of being,  
Oh great God! I believe now anew!  
Though denied, You were always with me....

The third poem to reference is "Death - not as Chasm", as it is the last poem that he wrote. He was keenly aware that he had only two more weeks to live at the time of writing, according to the doctors at the regional centre in southern Kazakhstan. Writing from the perspective of a dying man, Solzhenitsyn was not as much saddened by his own approaching death as he was by the death and decay that Russia was experiencing. He looks at Russia for the very last time in her "lows" as well as her "glory" and acknowledges her "daily life's fight". As mentioned by Solzhenitsyn in "Prisoner's Right" as well, he holds "no rancour or spite" against Russia as he places a much higher value to Russia's struggle as compared to his own life struggles. He regrets dying without seeing a "resurrected" Russia: "No more shall I see you thus: crucified; / No more shall call Resurrection t'your side..."<sup>9</sup>

### **Interrogating the experience of Exile: Taslima Nasreen and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

Nasreen and Solzhenitsyn faced exile for two different reasons: the former victimised by religious intolerance and the latter due to his protest against the ideologies of the State. Though both of them experienced their exile in different places, their concern and undying love for their homeland provides them with comparable ideological systems of reference. As we have discussed earlier, the hostility faced by Nasreen in India and Solzhenitsyn in Russia does not eradicate their longing for the well-being of India and Russia. Their paths, characterised by supporting what is right and condemning what is wrong, are evidently parallel. The works of both the writers, quite coincidentally, got international acclaim from foreign publishers – this small ray of encouragement helped them energise their pens to write more boldly than ever before, but the psychological trauma of being away from home never left them.

Menon (2000), while discussing how women's silences are structured through censorship that is indirectly sponsored by the state apparatus, argues that state-censorship "rarely occurs in the

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile>

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/poems-prison-camp-exile>



absence of political compulsions”, irrespective of the gender of the concerned individual, but she also agrees that some “added implications” are a given when it concerns women (p. 3). Menon specifically points out the core reasons behind the ban on Nasreen’s work, *Lajja* and the subsequent forced exile from her motherland: “Taslima’s fault was that she defied the boundaries set by society by breaking the socially structured silences that women are supposed to observe. What is more, she overstepped her limits by discussing religion and sexuality, placing women at the centre of both discussions” (2000, p. 4).

On the other hand, Ansari adds another dimension to the case of Taslima Nasreen’s exile by criticising her for celebrating “bold defiance of traditional Islam” at a time when Islamophobia was being implanted into people’s minds “under the influence of far-right Jewish-Christian anti-Islamic crusaders who could have supplied non-contextual even distorted texts of the Book [The Quran] and the Traditions whose traces are discernible in *Dwikhandita*” (2008, p. 17). Ansari cites adjectives like “scoundrel”, “rapist”, “ruthless murderer”, and so on, from her autobiography, *Dwikhandita* (Split in Two) used to refer to the Prophet Mohammed, that have further hurt and enraged the “billions of innocent Muslims worldwide who have done no harm to her, whom she characterises as potential terrorists” (2008, p. 18). Keeping aside all the contradicting viewpoints of various secondary critics working on Taslima’s life and works, it is difficult to justify the Bangladeshi government’s refusal to let Taslima enter her homeland after her mother passed away. Even Ansari, in spite of criticising Nasreen for her Islamophobic views, called it a “distressing experience” when her mother couldn’t get a final ritual prayer before her burial only because she was Taslima Nasreen’s mother (2008, p. 17).

In the final analysis, even though both writers experienced internal exile, Taslima did not face the trauma of being at real prison in a work camp, but Solzhenitsyn was spared the pain of leaving his homeland without any hope for a return in the future. Although Taslima was ignored by her contemporaries in her homeland, she enjoyed the support of many Indian writers and intellectuals, including Mahasweta Devi.<sup>10</sup> Quite unlike Nasreen’s predicament, Solzhenitsyn’s struggle was even more difficult as a poet in forced exile because of the lack of support from “high-level writers” in Russia who wanted to see him exiled. According to a newspaper report published by The New York Times on February 14th, 1974, written by Hedrick Smith, important names from the Russian literary circle like Sergei V. Mikhelkov and Rasul G. Gamzatov supported the government’s decision regarding Solzhenitsyn and said that he should not be a part of the system, and he was vehemently criticized for his “treasonous writings” (n.p). In the final years of his life, Solzhenitsyn had politically distanced himself from a Russia that valued state power and self-preservation far more than individual rights.

The similarity in the exile experiences of Nasreen and Solzhenitsyn becomes evident in their writing style – there is no particular rhythm or metrical form in their poems and they are written mostly in prose. Solzhenitsyn’s poems have been referred to as “prose poems”. Nasreen’s poems, which highlight her harrowing experiences of being deported from one place to another continuously without any valid justification, also lacked the typical “rhythmic” quality of poems. The lack of metre and rhyme in their poems indicates the lack of coherence and stability in their lives as a result of the physical and psychological separation from the literary, cultural and social practices of their homeland, ultimately hampering their innate sense of self and identity.

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<sup>10</sup> In her review of Taslima Nasreen’s “Jailhouse Poems” (translated into English by Susmita Bhattacharya), Chatterjee (2009) quotes Mahasweta Devi, where she voices her support for Nasreen: “Taslima deserves our support and refuge and she should be given citizenship” (p. 245).

## Conclusion

The agents of power and authority, in their zeal to crush the mental strength and sanity of these two writers, could not hinder their imagination or their productivity. They do not adhere to any literary convention to give form to their poems; their life experiences are inspiring enough to elevate the status of their work. Their bodies could be made captive, but neither their souls nor their feisty pens could be paralyzed by the edicts of state-sponsored censorship, whether directly or indirectly. Menon (2000) had rightly pointed out that censorship is not for “keeping people away from reading a particular work, it is to keep them from writing it” (WS-3). Without bending in the face of the state apparatus, they boldly penned the story of the bloody and shameful reality they experienced, thus giving their readers a plethora of new directions to ponder upon with respect to narratives and narrators of exile across various geopolitical spaces.

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