

# Representation of Violence in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

Arun Kumar<sup>1\*</sup> Dr. Arvind Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, K.K. Jain (PG) College, Khatauli Muzaffarnagar

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, K.K. Jain (PG) College, Khatauli Muzaffarnagar

**Abstract – On 15th August 1947, a day when a strong nation was divided on religion and boundaries were drawn overnight. Religion which has a motto to unite the people became the cause of separation of the two countries. How strange was our independence too, the one that came with the division of our country, the largest and possibly the most frequent migration in human history, which took the worst blood bath in memory of the subcontinent? This was done extensively by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalists. At this juncture our nationalism had become a nationalism of mourning; a kind of legitimacy, what we saw was not just British policy of divide and rule, which was certainly there, but a conspiracy to break the unity of our own civilization. We had a desire to kill that civil ethos and break a moral bond with one another, without which human community was impossible.**

**The word 'Partition' brings frightening pictures of a nation to our mind and it tells the story of deteriorating relationships, communal discord, and disorder, feelings of loss as well as being personal, professional and emotional. A tragedy like partition cannot be changed in the field of data alone. Inclusion of the effects of genocide, riots, looting, arson, bloodshed and rape had become a feature of partition. Let us not forget that partition was not a natural disaster but a deliberate conspiracy. Freeing ourselves from colonial rule but imprisoning ourselves within the borders of nations and enslaving ourselves to communal hatred is the irony of situation. Partition shook the conscience of civilized people, destroyed human attitudes and turned people into wild animals who committed extreme barbaric cruelty against their partners, friend and decades-long relations. This division was not of nations, but of communities, values, memories and dreams. This is a phase in Indian history when Hindus won, Muslims won, colonial rulers won, freedom fighters won, political deadlock won, but humanity lost.**

**Keywords – Migration, Partition, Dislocation, Blood, Religion.**

-----X-----

Bhisham Sahni (1915 – 2003) was born in Rawalpindi which is in present day Pakistan. He was an eminent Hindi novelist, playwright, translator and teacher. He was polyglot and therefore knew many languages. In 1950, he was a lecturer professor of English at Delhi College. He translated twenty-five books from Russian into Hindi and wrote more than a hundred short stories.

The title of novel has been taken from Sanskrit word 'Tamas.' There are three 'gunas' or qualities in the Hindu mythology: Rajas (action), Tamas (darkness), and Satva (goodness or enlightenment). There is the concept to do the action to transform him or her from darkness to enlightenment. But Sahni used the title as irony of Indian people's mental state. All the people are in darkness and there is no light or ray of hope. Nobody knew where are going or where they should go. Why are they killing one another and why are they looting poor?

*Tamas*, an episodic novel about a historical event, is an important record of the partition of India and Pakistan. During this socio-political upheaval, men remain at the centre of activity and women are pushed into limited small spaces. They remain on the periphery. Ironically, many of these women who are marginalized and whose identity is the least are bearers of positive values, symbols of strength, courage and inspiration. They act selflessly for human reasons. Their caring and nurturing attitude contributes to the development of a harmonious society. His compassion and care, sympathy and service, love and concern for humanity restores faith in love for mankind. They maintain a corrective balance to the destructive tendency of men who are involved in nefarious and villainous activities. On the national metaphor, Jaidev rightly states:

"Wherever or however we might have turned into a nation, the nation today is a realized fact, albeit admittedly a badly realized fact acutely in need of

redefinition and negotiation right at the conceptual level.” (Jaidev 38)

The novel also underlines the traumatic deaths during the riots and the role of the British. After the twin conspiracy murders of pig and cow in Sayyedpur, dissatisfaction erupted in the two communities and it was obliged to investigate, when representatives of the Congress, Muslim League and Sikhs went to meet the District Commissioner Richard, in religious matters, expressed his helplessness in intervening. An Airplane was also not flown, which could serve as a warning to check the rising tide of bigotry. Commissioner Richard declared that he could do nothing as power was in the hands of Nehru and Patel. This careless attitude of the British administration helped to incite the riots and instigated them in huge proportions. A follower of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Stanley Wolpert, writes in favour of partition in his book, *Jinnah Of Pakistan*:

“Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the World. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all three”. (Wolpert, 2005)

One person who always stood against both was Mahatma Gandhi. And it is very interesting to note how Sahni has represented him in his work. It is none other than Jarnail who stands as the miniature of Winston Churchill's “Half-Naked Fakir.” Jarnail was the exact opposite of Gandhi in appearance; he always wore a proper military uniform with medals. But he stood for those ideals and principles as the Mahatma did. Mahatma Gandhi has said that, “*Pakistan can only be formed over his dead body*” (Tamas35). He always echoed the same idea that Pakistan would form on his dead body and be imprisoned regularly. But then Mahatma Gandhi was also sidelined by both the Congress and the country at that time and his views were considered outdated and impractical. But during the specific time that *Tamas* encountered, he was treated like Jarnail, who talks too much, knows very little and understands almost nothing. And like Jarnail, Mahatma Gandhi was sure to find his end at the hands of a religious fundamentalist. Even some people say that even Gandhi did not make enough statement to give relief to the pitiful population of India when he said, “Partition is bad. But whatever is past is past. We have only to look to the future”. (Hajari, 2015)

The novel deals with four major political parties—Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and Communists; and four religious organizations—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian respectively. Political religious equations overlap. Bakshiji and Jarnail Singh are their workers in Congress party. While Ranveer, Vanaprasthi Ji and Master Devbrat belong to the Hindu fundamentalist group; Ehsan Ali, Ramzan and Hayat Baksh are not only staunch Muslims but also are part of the Muslim League. The number of communists was at least as laborious as that of Devdutt. And the Sikh community was guided by leaders such as Kisan Singh, Teja Singh and Granthi:

Christian is British rulers because Richard is the Deputy Commissioner of the region who is the representative of the colonial ruler. The parties do not have only women workers. The rich and powerful Shahnawaz, Raghunath and Laxmi Narain are shadows of Neo-Colonial agents and remain undivided despite their religious commitments, as economic interests bind them and so they help each other there. While Shahnawaz does not harm Laxmi Narain, he pushes Milky to his servant, down the stairs, from the communal harm that has arisen after seeing a tuft of hair on his head, an identifying mark of being a Hindu. It is the poor and helpless who eventually succumb to such insanity. Ranveer and his friends kill a peddler, a scent-seller who was a Mleech.

The novel opens with a character called Nathu, a tanner, who is involved in the work of skinning animals. He passes a peaceful life with his wife Karmo, who is pregnant at the outset. But this peace burns to ashes at the very beginning of the novel itself. Murad Ali, a man of influence and also connected to Municipal Committee offers Nathu five rupees to kill a pig for some veterinary purpose. Nathu refuses for a while but later succumbs to the handsome return of five rupees. Nathu, with much difficulty, finally kills a pig in a small filthy hut and dumps it in the pushcart as instructed by Murad Ali.

Now these people put the dead pig on the stairs of the mosque, due to which riots started taking place all over the city. Muslims also kill a cow and take it to the temple to avenge it. Due to which the riot is further aggravated, there is a loss from village to city. Now a Shanti Mandal Committee from the city comes to the village and appeals to maintain peace. But peace is not made and people begin to elopement. The corpses are scattered on the streets, due to which the blood is shattered and aggravated.

Nathu is filled with self-loathing and thinks that it is the same pig that he killed; he repents after this and goes to his home. The author has said in the end that Nathu also died in the riots. Next we see small ghost incidents like Ranveer is the young leader of Arya Samaj and Devdutt is his master who teaches him how to protect ourselves when Muslims attack Hindus in case of riots. There are many characters, workers of Congress Committee and others in this novel like Bakshi Ji, Shahnawaz, Lala Luxmi Narayan who is Ranveer's father, Jarnail Singh who believes in Gandhian ideology.

In the second section we see that Harnam Singh and his wife Banto and they have son Iqbal Singh and a daughter who live in a village Dhok Ilahi Baksh. This village has a Muslim population where a Sikh family also lives. Harnam Singh who runs a shop who gets a message that you should leave this village, he says that it will not be appropriate for you to stay here. Hearing this, both the husband and wife leave their shop and home and also knock on the door of a house to ask for help on the way. But it happens to be the home of Muslim family. A woman comes from

inside the house named Razo who is the wife of Ehsan Ali. At first that woman refuses to give shelter to Harnam Singh and Razo and says that if my son Ramzan comes, he will kill me along with you, so you both leave from here. But after listening to their request, Razo gives shelter to both of them. When Ehsan Ali comes home, he is very angry at first seeing the two but forgives them for being an old friendship. Ehsan Ali says "It is because of our past friendship, otherwise my blood boils when I think of what the Kafir have done in the city" (Tamas182). After that, Ehsan Ali's son Ramzan arrives, who is determined to kill both the husband and wife. But somewhere humanity comes in his mind and he leaves both of them.

The Deputy Commissioner of that district is Richard, who believes that if these people unite, they will rebel against us. If these people fight among themselves like this, then we will not be in front or against, so Richard holds back from taking any action. If he wanted, he could have pacified both the communities but he does not do so. Richard believes that if the people of these two communities become one, then they will blame us.

The next formidable incident takes place in Seyyadpur village where all the Sikhs gather and band together. At the same time, the front of the Muslims is on the fort of Ghulam Ali. After two days, the Sikh front weakens. Meanwhile, a touching incident takes place. On the other hand a Sikh woman named Jashbir Singh who leads the entire Sikh women commits suicide by jumping into a well. These are the events of these five days. After the fifth day of these riots, curfew is imposed in the city. After which the riot subsides. But by then the view of the city itself has changed. Properties are looted or burnt, hundreds are killed, and hundreds go missing, thus destroying human civilization in an instant. The riots stop at the end of the novel a Brahmin woman reports her daughter's disappearance after a Muslim boy has kidnapped her daughter. His name is Alla Rakha and her daughter's name is Prakasho. She tells that the Muslim boy had already his eyes on Prakasho but seeing the opportunity of riots, he picks up Prakasho and imprisoned her in his house and forces her to surrender. Defeated, Prakasho surrenders. There are also many incidents where many Hindu women who have come to the point of conversion are forced to surrender themselves and married.

On the other hand Harnam Singh's son is changed from Iqbal Singh to Iqbal Ahmad by Muslim fundamentalists. After that he is fed cow meat, dressed in similar clothes, then circumcised, after which he is married to a Muslim widow. Many such incidents happen. Further we see that people are talking about peace after the riots stop. In which a committee is established and one to two people of all religions are taken in that committee. And an atmosphere of people will be created.

The next scene is of Richard and his wife Liza. She asks Richard, "What kind of man are you Richard? Even in such places you have an eye only for birds. You only hear the larks singing" (Tamas 213). Liza says that you are happy, aren't? Yes, you were about to write a book? And heard that you are about to be transferred. Richard says that after such an atmosphere and riots, transfers happen, mine will also happen. What do you mean to say sarcastically, what do you mean? The plot of the novel which fought among themselves, it has been the policy of the British Government that the public had to suffer the consequences of divide and rule. This has been portrayed by the author with subtlety.

To conclude we can say that Tamas has the daunting flavour of partition which provides with humanistic reading of the novel. The thematic overturned and linguistic themes, Symbols and Metaphors of partition in Indian Literature: A Critical Analysis of Tamas by Bhisham Sahni expressions makes it a complete emotional but realistic study of the time of partition. The Hindu-Muslim communal harmony or disharmony is projected vividly by the depiction of various characters. All these features make it one of the best commentaries on the partition.

Some of the sequences described in 'Tamas' (meaning darkness) are horrifying, such as the one where scores of Sikh women, along with their little children, jump into a well in a bid to save themselves from rioters and where an old man is mercilessly killed by a young boy of fifteen, brainwashed into communal violence and bloodshed. These episodes make one think about the times we are living in. It made me ashamed that we can fight to hell for a matter of no consequences which had in fact been intentionally stirred up for political mileage.

The book captures beautifully the many aspects of human life. On one hand, a long battle for freedom was about to conclude after decades of efforts and on the other hand, peopling so easily get drawn into a struggle with themselves over their identity. Is it so hard to keep peace with each other? Is it not possible for two communities to respect the other's beliefs and not intrude in their faith?

#### WORKS CITED

1. Jaidev (2003). "Not by Law Alone: Douloti as a National Allegory" *The Politics of Literary Theory and Representation*, edited by Pankaj K. Singh, Manohar, New Delhi, 2003.
2. Sahni, Bhisham (2001). *Tamas*, Penguin, New Delhi.
3. Wolpert, Stanley (2005). *Jinnah of Pakistan*, Oxford University Press.

4. Hajari, Nisid (2015). *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, Houghton Mifflin.

---

**Corresponding Author**

**Arun Kumar\***

Research Scholar, Department of English, K.K. Jain  
(PG) College, Khatauli Muzaffarnagar