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BHISHAM SAHANI'S *TAMAS* AS A PARTITION NOVEL

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Indian Partition literature is very rich and varied. Such works as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgonkar's *Bend in the Ganges* and Bapsi Sidwa's *The Ice-Candy Man* speak of the richness of Partition holocaust. Partition literature is rich even in other Indian languages like Hindi and Punjabi.

Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003) is a fine Hindi writer, playwright, and actor. *Tamas* is his powerful and passionate account of the Partition of India. Sahni was awarded the Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998 and also Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2002. The Hindi film actor Balraj Sahni is his brother.

Bhisham Sahni was born in Rawalpindi in 1915. He had an MA in English in Lahore, and a PhD from Punjab University in 1958. Sahni took part in India's struggle for independence. In 1947 he helped the refugees when Partition began. He was part of Indian National Congress all the while. Later he joined Communist Party.

Bhisham Sahni joined the theatre as his brother did. He worked as actor and director.

Bhisham Sahni left Bombay for Punjab, and later to New Delhi. He had already served as a lecturer in various colleges in Ambala, Amritsar, and New Delhi.

Bhisham Sahni from 1956 to 1963 worked as a translator at the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow, and translated some important works into Hindi, including Lev Tolstoy's short stories and his novel *Resurrection*. On his return to India, Bhisham Sahni resumed teaching at Delhi College, and also edited the reputed literary magazine *Nai Kahaniyan* from 1965 to 1967. He retired from service in 1980. Sahni was fluent in Punjabi, English, Urdu, Sanskrit and Hindi.

Bhisham Sahni was associated with several literary and cultural organizations. He was General Secretary of the All India Progressive Writers Association (1975-85) and Acting General Secretary of the Afro-Asian Writer's Association and was also associated with the editing of their journal *Lotus*. He was the founder and chairman of 'SAHMAT', an organisation promoting cross-cultural understanding, founded in memory of the murdered theatre artist and activist Safdar Hashmi.

Bhisham Sahni's epic work *Tamas* (Darkness, Ignorance 1974) is a novel based on the riots of 1947. *Tamas* portrays the horrors of senseless communal politics of violence and hatred; and the tragic aftermath death, destruction, forced migration and the partition of the country. It has been translated to English, French, German, Japanese and many Indian languages including Tamil, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kashmiri, and Manipuri. *Tamas* won the 1975 Sahitya Akademi Award for literature and was later made into a television film in 1987 by Govind Nihalani. Two of his masterpiece stories, 'Pali' and 'Amritsar Aa Gaya Hai,' are based on the Partition.

Sahni's prolific career as a writer also included six other Hindi novels: *Jharokhe* (1967), *Kadian* (1971), *Basanti* (1979), *Mayyadas Ki Madi* (1987), *Kunto* (1993) and *Neeloo, Nilima, Nilofar* (2000), over a hundred short stories spread over ten collections of short stories, (including *Bhagya Rekha* (1953), *Pahla Patha* (1956), *Bhatakti Raakh* (1966), *Patrian* (1973), *Wang Chu* (1978), *Shobha Yatra* (1981), *Nishachar* (1983), *Pali* (1989), and *Daayan* (1996) ; five plays including 'Hanush,' 'Kabira Khada Bajar main,' 'Madhavi,' 'Muavze,' 'Alamgeer,' a collection of children's short stories *Gulal ka keel*. But his novel named *Mayyadas Ki Mari* (Mayyadas's Castle) was one of his finest literary creations, the backdrop of this narrative is historical and depicts the age when the Khalsa Raj was vanquished in Punjab and the British

were taking over. This novel is a saga of changing social order and decadent set of values. Sahni wrote the screenplay for Kumar Shahani's film *Kasba* (1991), which is based on Anton Chekhov's story, "In the Gully".

Bhisham Sahni wrote his autobiography *Aaj ke Ateet* (Today's Past, Penguin 2016) and the biography of his brother Balraj Sahni, *Balraj My Brother* (English).

Bhisham Sahni was one of the most prolific writers of Hindi literature. Krishan Baldev Vaid says, "His voice, both as a writer and a man, was serene and pure and resonant with humane reassurances." (Bhatnagar 18)

Noted writer, Nirmal Verma felt, "If we see a long gallery of unmatched characters in his stories and novels, where each person is present with his class and family; pleasures and pains of his town and district; the whole world of perversions and contradictions; it is because the reservoir of Bhisham Sahni's experience was vast and abundant." (Verma. Q. Bhatnagar 18)

Bhisham Sahni's name is etched so deeply into the twentieth century of Hindi literature that it cannot be erased. With Independence and till the 11th July 2003, this name has been synonymous with Hindi story and play-writing. Bhisham Sahni had gained such an unmatched popularity that all kinds of readers awaited his new creations and each and every word of his was read.

Bhisham Sahni won several Awards including Shiromani Writers Award 1979, Uttar Pradesh Government Award for *Tamas* 1975, Colour of Nation Award at International Theatre Festival Russia for Play *Madhavi* by Rashi Bunny 2004, Madhya Pradesh Kala Sahitya Parishad Award for his play *Hanush* 1975, the Lotus Award from the Afro-Asian Writers' Association 1981 and the Soviet Land Nehru Award 1983, and finally the Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998. This is a great achievement, indeed.

India Post released a commemorative postage stamp to honour Sahni on 31 May 2017.

Tamas, the Textual Analysis:

Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* centers upon the reasons of Indian Partition in 1947.

Sahni argues that Indian Partition took place because of the Hindu-Muslim fundamentalists and the British policy of 'divide and rule'.

The novel *Tamas* faithfully records how different forces have flared up the tensed relationship between Hindus and Muslims already existing during the time of Indian partition in 1947. The novel delineates some facts of history.

Tamas, presupposes at the very beginning the existence of the two separate identities in pre-partitioned India - one of Hindus and another of Muslims.

Racially, Hindus and Muslims in India are of the same stock. The difference between Hindus and Muslims is only a matter of religion. If we accept the hypothesis that Hindus first come to the Indus from Central Asia and Muslims from the same region in a much later period, we will find that they are of same anthropological origin. Indian Muslims are mostly converted to Islam. Muslim rulers of Central Asia invaded India, established their rule here, and then converted the Hindus to Islam by force. Moreover, in the course of centuries, they all become Indians. By Indian culture, we mean contributions of both Hindus and Muslims. Indian culture is a composite one. It is a synthesis of various cultures and traditions.

A careful examination of the conversation between Richard, the District Deputy Commissioner, and his wife, Liza, in *Tamas* shows that both Hindus and Muslims are of the same racial stock. Liza who comes from England fails to distinguish between a Hindu and a Muslim. She asks her husband this. It is not possible for Liza to identify a person either as a Hindu or as a Muslim. Their looks are identical; their features are same. The only reason of similarity is that they are of the same race. Another piece of conversation between Richard and his wife establishes that both Hindus and Muslims are of the same racial stock. It is said,

'The inhabitants of this area too have been living here since times immemorial. Have you noticed their features? A broad forehead, brownish tint in the colour of their eyes. They all

belong to the same racial stock.'

'How can they be of the same racial stock, Richard, when invaders from all over, as you say, have been here?'... (Tamas 19)

The first wave of migrants who came from Central Asia three or four thousand year ago and the bands of invaders who came two thousand years or so later, both belonged to the same racial stock. The former were known as Aryans and the latter Muslims. But both had the same roots.'

The people here too must know all this. 'These people know only what we tell them.....' Most people have no knowledge of their history. They only live it." (Tamas 207)

The Muslim leader Jinnah calls for a separate Muslim state called Pakistan in the 1940, while the Hindu leader Vir Savarkar cries, 'India for the Hindus'.

The novel at the beginning introduces pig-slaughter episode. Nathu lives from hand to mouth. He flays animals and cleans hides. This is his profession. Murad Ali, a local Muslim politician meets Nathu and asks him to kill a pig. He tells Nathu that the veterinary surgeon is in need of a slaughtered pig for his experiment. Furthermore, he tempts him saying that he will pay him five rupees for the job. It is a big money for Nathu. At first, Nathu hesitates to do this because he never kills any pig. Moreover, he knows that pig slaughter is a sensitive issue in that Muslim-dominated locality. Murad Ali is also an influential person in the area. He is well connected with the municipal committee. Almost every day a cow or a horse or a buffalo dies somewhere within the jurisdiction of the municipal area. Murad Ali gets Nathu for skinning those animals. Murad Ali gets the money from the municipality. Nathu gets only the hide. This is the deal between Murad Ali and Nathu. It is very difficult for Nathu to ignore Murad Ali's demand. If he does, he will simply invite Murad Ali's rage and thus will get no animal skinning job from him. Even Murad Ali will evict him from the place where he with his family lived for years together

Nathu accomplishes this job of his distaste. According to Murad Ali's instructions, Nathu leaves the carcass of the pig at the pushcart before the daybreak.

Nathu anticipates something ominous. Nevertheless, he is so frightened that he does not spell that out even to himself. He has only some faint ideas about what is going to take place in the next morning. When the day breaks, it is seen that carcass of the pig lies at the entrance of the mosque. 'Something blackish, like a bundle seems to be lying there.' To a Mussalman, pig is the most unholy creature. This event totally changes the communal relationship between Hindus and Muslims in the town. The corollary of this event is the astringent animosity between the two communities. A reference to the following conversation between a group of Congress Party and a group of the Muslim League, is relevant to the present context.

Both groups stood facing each other. They talked like friends, and they also exchanged diatribes. 'See for yourself,' Bakshiji said. 'In our group there are Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims. There stands Aziz. Here is Hakimji.'

'Aziz and Hakim are the dogs of the Hindus'.... He said it with such vehemence that both the Muslims members of the Congress looked crestfallen.

'Is Maulana Azad a Hindu or a Muslim?'

'Maulana Azad is the biggest dog of the Hindus who goes wagging his tail before you.'

The elderly man continued to listen patiently.

'Freedom of Hindustan will be for the Hindus. It is in sovereign Pakistan alone that Muslims will be really free But when the group of Congressmen moved forward, resuming their *prabhat pheri*, the man with the Turkish cap blocked their way. 'Muslims reside in this street. You can't go there.'

'Why can't go there? You go raising slogans for Pakistan all over the town without let or hindrance, while here we are only singing patriotic songs.' (Tamas 201-02)

The conversation between the leaders of two groups suggests how hostile Muslims are to their Hindu counterparts. Muslims believe their freedom is only in the formation of a separate land for them in

India. Pakistan is their only dream. The Muslim leaders believe that the Congress party is for Hindus and the Muslim League for Muslims.

Another example of how the crisis of Muslim identity or the concept of Muslim nationalism is related with the religion is the episode of Iqbal Singh's conversion into Islam in *Tamas*. The authorial narration of this event is significant:

The Muslims think that the conversion of Hindus or Sikhs to Islam is a triumph of Islam. Murad Ali who victimizes Nathu, and creates Hindu-Muslim discord is a leader. He gains Maximum benefit from all this.

The irony of the communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims is that a conspirator like Murad Ali gives slogan, 'Long Live Hindu-Muslim Unity!' or 'Peace Committee Zindabad!' Partition movement becomes one of the tools of some political leaders for the fulfillment of their personal ambitions of their lives.

Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* is an entry into the examination of Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism.

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