



Counterparts-Counter Hearts: A Study of Women Characters in Bhisham Sahni's "TAMAS".

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Abstract: India attained freedom on August 15, 1947. The nation was divided into two nations, India and Pakistan. It was a moment of celebration coupled with bloodshed. If the two nations basked in the glory of freedom, the borders that divided the two nations were soaked in blood and fury. History has hitherto never witnessed the twin response of Joy and sorrow all at the same time. In fact, partition has been one of the darkest phases, India has ever witnessed and the topic has not lost any of the volatility down the lane. The present paper proposes to study the women characters and their response to riots during partition in Bhisham Sahni's Tamas, in stark contrast to the men and their response to riots.

Key words: partition, riots, compassion, bloodshed.

Introduction: India attained freedom on August 15, 1947. The nation was divided into two nations India and Pakistan. It was a moment of celebration that was paradoxically coupled with bloodshed. If the two nations basked in the glory of freedom, the borders that divided the two nations soaked in blood and fury. History has hitherto never witnessed the twin response of Joy and sorrow. In fact, partition has been one of the darkest phases, India has ever witnessed and the topic has not lost any of the volatility down the lane.

Numerous scholars from different perspectives have studied partition literature. Writers like, Chaman Nahal, Khushwanth Singh and Manohar Malgonkar have depicted the male response to partition, largely ignoring women's response. The writers have for

the most part failed to elicit women's response to partition and riots, women who undoubtedly have been the major victims.

The present paper proposes to study the women characters and their response to riots during partition in Bhisham Sahni's Tamas, in stark contrast to the men and their response to riots.

Narration

The novel opens with a character called Nathu, a tanner, struggling to kill a pig in a small hut for veterinary purpose. The pig carcass is later thrown in front of a mosque, leading to Hindu-Muslim riots changing the whole scenario. As a result, dividing lines had been drawn among the people and the rest seemed to be irreversible history.



Bhisham Sahni, captures this very history of violence and terror. The novel uncovers the communal conflicts generated by fundamentalist and extremists of both the communities. Bhisham Sahni also shows how they infused fear and hatred among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikh for their own ends, on the pyres of the innocent people.

In fact, Bhisham Sahni is one of those few writers, who bring out sharp difference of reaction among men and women, as they encounter riots. In other words, he explores the response of counterparts (men/ women) at the time of riots.

As the story advances, it discloses the infuriated tensions and the rent social fabric of united India, which led to the partition of the country and the reactions of both men and women amidst riots. In such horrific moments in time, the men seemed to kill one another indiscriminately in the name of religion, while the women responded to the situation more pragmatically without fear. Women, be it Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or the English all of them showed compassion towards the other person, irrespective of their religion. They considered humanity above religion. Often the saying goes that two women cannot stay under the same roof without any trouble. However, Bhisham Sahni in Tamas sheds light on the matured response and compassion showed by women towards the other women, during the troubled times. The men on the

contrary display their double standards. They show their real self in grave situations.

The first glimpse of compassion is portrayed in the character of Liza. Liza on hearing about the riots in the village shows concern and tells her husband Richard: "You can resolve their differences." (Tamas, 55) Richard a deputy commissioner, the game planner, who indirectly infused the differences for their advantage, shrugs his shoulders and refuses to help resolve the differences. Liza pleads to him saying: "you can stop them from fighting, Richard after all they are from the same racial stock." (TAMAS, 50-51) In this context, the novelist shows that Liza though being a foreigner comprehends the fact that the natives belonged to the same race. She observes that, even though the people followed different religions, dressed differently, had different names, still they belonged to the same race. She fails to find something that distinguishes a Hindu from a Muslim, as their features remain the same. Yet it amused her that people who lived together failed to identify with their own race. Besides, the novelist sheds light on how women irrespective of place and region were more sensible and compassionate in their thoughts and actions. Liza understands the issues that differentiate people, but does not exploit them for selfish causes like Richard does.

Another insight conveyed by the novelist in the character of Liza is that of humanity. When Richards asks her to



watch birds near the stream that goes by the well where, Sikh women have jumped to death, Liza feels for the victims of riots and questions Richard: "What sort of a person are you, Richard that in such places too you can see new kind of birds and listen to the warbling of the Lark?" (TAMAS, 314). Richard perplexes her with his theory of detachment. She finds it difficult to understand his theory of emotional detachment. Liza finds it hard to be indifferent towards the happenings around her. She further questions him: "not even when hundred and three villages burnt down. (TAMAS, 314) Richard's callous reply : "Not even then." (TAMAS, 314), further baffles her. Thus, Bhasham Sahani presents a brilliant picture of counterparts and counter hearts.

The second character Lalaji's wife seem to be more prudent in her thoughts and preferred to maintain amicable relationship with people irrespective of their religion. She often persuaded Lalaji to: "... socialize with neighbours Hindus or Muslims." (TAMAS, 156) On the contrary, Lalaji cherished the pride of being a Hindu and tried to make a Hindu warrior out of his son. His ego never allowed him to mix with the Muslims.

At the time when the town was burning, Lalaji orders Nanku the servant boy to go to the next locality to handover a letter. However, Lalaji's wife intervenes and beseeches him, and tells him: "Nanku too is the son of some mother. Don't push him into the jaws of death."

(TAMAS, 158) Bhasham Sahni here illustrates how women respect the values of humanity even amidst violence and terror.

As we move into the novel, the novelist projects the reaction of men and women in terrible situation. On many occasions, the novelist shows that women were more mature in their outlook. He wheels out in the character of Raghunath's wife, the unbiased nature possessed by women. Janaki a Hindu never discriminated people based on religion. She respected her husband's friend Shah Nawaz and regarded him as one of their own. She reposed complete trust in him and saw a saint in him. She even handed over the keys for jewellery worth thousands of rupees, at a time when the Hindus no longer trusted the Muslims and vice versa.

Nevertheless, Shah Nawaz displays his double standards. He projects himself to be a man who believed in humanity, but the next moment he kicks Milki, a Hindu to death. Thus, the men fail to draw the thin line of difference between humanity and evil.

It was not just the Hindu women, who exhibited a lot of grace in such inflammatory times, the Muslim women too showed their bravery in saving the lives of Hindu women. When all hell broke out and Harman Singh and his wife Banto battled the odds all alone, Karim Khan a Muslim and a dear friend of Harman Singh dreaded to come to their rescue. As the marauders began to



invade their village, Karim Khan refused to speak to them openly. Instead, he muttered while pretending to cough: "Things have taken a bad turn, Harman Singh your welfare lies in leaving the place." (TAMAS, 216) and passed by leaving them at their own fate.

In such hard pressing time Rajo, a Muslim woman gives shelter to Harman Singh and Banto. In spite of the fact that her husband and son were among the marauders who looted and killed the Hindus, Rajo gives shelter to the old couple. She refuses to allow her mind rule over her heart. She assures them saying:

You knocked at my door with some hope and expectation in your heart. We shall see what happens." (TAMAS,258)

Rajo goes one-step ahead and displays her open mindedness, when Banto hesitates to drink buttermilk in their container. She respects their practices and asks for their container. Rajo indeed represents the sensible woman, who is not carried away unlike her counterparts amidst high tensions and religious animosity.

Rajo goes against the men of her home and protects the couple. She dares to act in a fully charged atmosphere of religious frenzy and hatred and escorts the old couple to a safer place. She empathizes with their situation and guides them saying: "May God be with you. Go along the edge. May fate be kind to you." (TAMAS, 270) and stands like a rock

until they move out of her site to a safer place. Bhisham Sahni through Rajo's character elevates the role of women in his novel. He proves that women were more stable and human in bad situations and held humanity to be supreme above all religions.

Women in the lower strata too showed emotional balance and believed in humanity and love for other people. Nathu's wife, on learning the truth about the pig from Nathu's lips at once rebukes him and questions him: "Why did you commit such a loathsome act?" (TAMAS, 210) She refuses to even use the money he earned by committing a crime. She tells him: "Shall I not throw this money into the fire?" (Tamas, 211).

Although Nathu's wife tries to justify his act as an act of ignorance and comforts him, her guilt kills her. Here Bhisham Sahni makes it perfectly clear, that women counterparts though did not commit the crime, shared and felt guilty for the act of their spouse or children. Thus, Nathu's wife feels guilty for Nathu's act of crime. Her conscience cries out for the innocent victims of riots

Though Nathu was not directly involved in the act, deep inside she held him responsible for the riots and feared in God's eyes. She picked up the broom and started sweeping the floor : "... as though. With the help of the broom she was trying to cast out some phantom or specter from the room." (Tamas, 213)

Conclusion:



Thus, Bisham Sahni in "Tamas" presents a picture of communal divide, which gave way to partition. Bisham Sahni shows that the women who were subjected to humiliation and shame were better counterparts. They did not snap ties with their neighbours nor did they shut themselves from them. They seemed more unperturbed and responded to the situations through their hearts even in the grave situations. On the contrary, the men turned hysterical and unveiled their beastly nature in the same situations. In conclusion, as against their counterparts the men, the women protagonist often show compassion and understanding thus, proving themselves, their counter hearts.

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