

Compassion v/s Communalism: Reading Bhisham Sahni's Tamas and Neelu, Neelima, Neelofer

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*Where the world has not been broken up by narrow domestic walls
Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake.*

-Tagore

Creation, Country, Community, Culture, Customs are composed of Compassion. Compassion is a synonym for affection, kindness, humane, merciful, considerate, sympathetic, tolerant and motherly. It is an antonym of hatred, violence, destruction, despotism, ruthlessness, exploitation, annihilation, barbarism, cruelty, murderous, riotous and wild. The very words reflect their positivity and negativity. The polarities voice the power equations and expose an uneven power structure which divides a society, a nation; Communalism belongs to the latter species of words as it breeds hostility, intolerance, scorn and resentment. The divide is not just love/hate; positive/negative; bonding/separation but also woman/man and personal/public.

Frederic Jameson's claim that "all third world texts are necessarily to be read as ... national allegories"¹ and "private experience is represented as allegorical of the public and national destiny"² might have created a considerable discussion and criticism, but historically generated realities cannot be exorcised. To elaborate my point I'll take up Bhisham Sahni's Tamas (1974) and Neelu, Neelima, Neelofer (2000) as representative texts from the Indian Literature which depict the national allegory of secularism from the time span of Tamas is partition, then Neelu, Neelima, Neelofer is set fifty years after partition; if one is an overtly political text, the other is essentially a narrative of personal relationships; if Tamas is male centred, Neelu, Neelima, Neelofer is a woman centred novel; but the two factors that compel us to read them as a sequel to each other is the Hindu- Muslim divide and women who become signifiers of national culture. The novels present a powerful allegory of underlying colonial ideology in post colonial India and gender remains at the core of all discourse. Though there are no defined compartments in the paper, yet one aspect of the paper dwells on the political aspect of religion and the second aspect reads the lives of women, their sharing and bonding and their compassion. Religion being used as a divisive tool, religion being misinterpreted, and the power of religion being used negatively is juxtaposed with essence of religion i.e. love and compassion; kindness and humanity reputed through the women who transcend all barriers to preach the gospel of tolerance, and became the torch bearers.

On 15th August 1947 a nation was divided on religious lines; overnight borders were drawn and people were separated.

... our Independence too was peculiar: it came together with the Partition of our country, the biggest and possibly the most miserably migration in human history, the worst blood bath in the memory of the subcontinent: the gigantic fratricide conducted by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalists. Our 'nationalism' at this juncture was a nationalism of mourning, a form of valediction, for what we witnessed was not just the British policy of divide and rule, which surely was there, but our own willingness to break up our civilizational unity, to kill our neighbours, to forgo that civic ethos, that moral bond with each other, without which human community is impossible.³

The very word 'partition' brings to our mind the gruesome pictures of a nation and it narrates a harrowing tale of deteriorating relationships, communal discord, dislocation, sense of loss on all fronts - home, personal, professional and emotional. A tragedy like partition cannot be relegated to the sphere of statistics alone. The effects of carnage, the corollaries of division inclusive of riots, looting, arson, bloodshed and rape are uncountable. Let us not forget that partition was not a natural calamity but a deliberate one. Freeing ourselves from colonial rule but imprisoning ourselves within the barriers of nations and enslaving ourselves to communal hatred is the irony of situation. Partition shocked the conscience of civilized people, destroyed human attitudes and transformed people into wild beasts who perpetrated extremely barbaric cruelties against their fellow beings. *Partition was not division of nations but of communities, values, memories and dreams. It is a phase in history when Hindus won,*

Muslims won, colonial rulers won, freedom fighters won, political stalwarts won, But humanity lost. The aftermath of the holocaust can be witnessed even today - be it Bombay or Gujarat or day-to-day lives of common people belonging to two different religious factions, different sects. The darkest line etched by British imperialists is still fresh and new. On national allegory Jaidev rightly says: "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."⁴ The divide is deep and wide.

Episodic novel Tamas⁵ is an important document about a great historical event. Evidently in times of socio-political upheavals men remain at the centre of activity and women are pushed to the limited small space. They remain on the peripheries. Ironically these very women who are marginalized and whose identity is minimized are the carriers of positive values, they are embodiments of strength, courage and inspiration; they work selflessly for human cause; their caring and nurturing attitude contribute to the growth of a harmonious society. Their acts of compassion and care, sympathy and service, love and concern for humanity, reinstate one's faith in the love for mankind. They maintain a corrective balance to the destructive tendencies of men who are involved in nefarious and villainous activities.

Bhisham Sahni has always portrayed women with great sensitivity and empathy. An analysis of the subservient, marginal roles of women in society; their attitudes towards political events; their interaction with men and their suffering reveals them to be protagonists of and believers in humanitarian values.

Before we precede let us have a brief overview of the novels. Bhisham Sahni himself stated that the trauma of partition was too deep and shocking and it took him twenty-three years to register the pain, agony and disturbance, in words. The setting of the novel Tamas is a small village and its surrounding area in the North West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan) and the specific time is five day's prior to partition. Communal riots break when outside the mosque a slaughtered pig is discovered and this is followed by the killing of a cow. This particular event gives an impetus to the communal frenzy of common people who divulge in various felonious activities thereafter, unmindful of the trap laid by the White colonial rulers supported by their Brown stooges who work hand-in-glove in administering the lives of common people and in creating disharmony and destruction.

The novel deals with four major political parties- Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and the Communists; and four religious organizations- Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, respectively. The politico-religious equations overlap. The Congress party has, Bakshi ji, Mehta, Shanker lal, Kashmeri lal, Ram Das and the General as its workers; whereas Ranvir, Vanprasthi ji and Master Devbrat belong to the Hindu fundamentalist group; Ehsan Ali, Ramzan and Hayat Baksh are not only staunch Muslims but are a part of the Muslim League as well; the Communists few in number had committed workers like Devdutt; and the Sikh community was guided by leaders like Kishan Singh, Teja Singh and the Granthi. Christians are the British rulers as Richard is the Deputy Commissioner of the area who is a representative of the colonial rule. None of the parties have women workers. The rich and powerful Shahnawaz, Raghunath and Lakshmi Narain are the shadows of the neocolonial agents and they remain undivided irrespective of their religious commitments, as economic interests bind them and therefore they help each other. While Shahnawaz does not harm Lakshmi Narain, he nevertheless pushes Milkhi his servant, down the stairs, out of sheer communal hatred generated after viewing a tuft of hair on his head, an identity marker of his being a Hindu. It is the poor and helpless who are ultimately the victims of such insanity. Ranvir and his friends kill a peddler, a scent-seller who was a mleech; Murad Ali deploys Nathu, a chamar whose profession is to kill animals and skin hides, to kill a pig which is used later to fan the fire of communal hatred.

In times of communal strife women are more vulnerable to suffering and exploitation. Worst of its kind is rape and abduction. A poignant incident is where a Hindu woman is gang raped by ten Muslim men. She dies in the course of events but they continue to rape her (288); another man narrates a story of catching hold of a low caste bagri woman, raping her and then killing her (288). There are numerous instances of loot and rape and men do not hesitate to gloat over their crimes. Allah Rakha had kidnapped Parkasho, performed some sort of nikah rites and married her (330-335).

Men's insensitivity is portrayed through Richard as well. He pays no heed to his

wife Liza who becomes an emotional wreck due to loneliness and depression; he pretends to be unaware of the tense situation of the town when a deputation of Hindus and Muslims meets him to appraise the administration of the deteriorating condition (92-97); and his detachment is visible in a conversation between Liza and him:

"I have to go Sayedpur tomorrow, to get a disinfectant sprayed into a well. ..why don't you come along too? ..From there we can proceed to Taxila. ...The rural area. ...is lovely. ..on my rounds I saw lark. ..a lovely stream. ..the fruit orchard."

And Liza questions Richard: "What sort of a person are you, Richard that in such places (sic where women had drowned themselves) too you can see new kinds of birds. ...When a hundred and three villages are burnt down." (313-314)

Liza tries to understand the difference between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs on the basis of their names-- Roshan Lal as Hindu and Roshan Din as Muslim, Iqbal Chand as Hindu, Iqbal Ahmed as Muslim and Iqbal Singh as Sikh (43). Apparently she's unable to distinguish them except when Richard pinpoints their identity markers like the beard, turban, offering of namaz, eating beef or pork; j hatka or halal (51). Richard spells out clearly the colonizers policy when he explains to Liza: 'In the name of religion they fight one another, in the name of freedom they fight against us' to which Liza replies: 'Don't try to be too clever, Richard I also know a thing or two. In the name of freedom they fight against you, but in the name of religion you make them fight one another' (50). Liza is able to sympathize with the Indians. Her compassion can be well read in the above textual passages.

Rajo, the Muslim woman who shelters the Sikh couple Harnam Singh and Banto is a kind-hearted, God-fearing woman and is sympathetic to the suffering of people irrespective of their religion. She is an example of true humanity. Harnam Singh and Banto are rendered homeless and in utter depraved condition they knock at the door of Rajo who not only provides shelter and food but also hides them and later walked till the grove to see them off safely. She handed back Harnam Singh's gun and Banto's jewellery which had been looted by the husband and son (253-271). When her daughter - in - law Akran, a victim of internalized patriarchy intervenes, Rajo replies: 'I shall answer them myself..... Shall I push out a person who has come seeking shelter? Every one has to go into God's presence one day' (258) Here religion cuts across all barriers to be more humane, more compassionate. Compassion wins over communalism and the message is loud and clear in the text. Man made interpretations of Scriptures have degraded religion and the message of love and peace has got diffused. Our mentality has narrowed down and our horizons have faded. Thus women think beyond religious fanaticism and power-equations. They fully realize the pain they have undergone in the making of their homes, the basic unit of any society, culture or nation.

Nathu's wife was a woman blessed with infinite patience (137), was on good terms with all [20 Chamar families] sharing their joys and sorrows, a God fearing woman, she was content with whatever little she had (138). There is a quality of character which some people possess, an inner balance which strikes an equation with any situation.... (138), and Nathu's wife is able to pacify her husband when he narrates as to how he was cheated by Murad Ali to kill a pig for the piggery and how he killed it in want of earning the five rupees for his wife. She is the provider of solace and comfort to him. Ironically it is women who are receptors and perceivers of the raging fire, the ringing bell and the confused mixture of sounds the disturbed distant noises of the final out break of riots, Nathu's wife and Liza are the first ones to realize that hell has broken loose and the nether world is without a centre any more.

The most disturbing episode of the novel is Jasbir's suicide along with fellow Sikh women and children who drown themselves in a well in order to save their honour from being abused and mutilated (293). These women fearlessly jump into the well for they had no choice. They chanted the Gurbani while heading towards the well but their recitation is not like raising slogans in the name of God, for them the recitation infused strength to meet their death daringly. It is ultimately this very incident which brought an end to the riots in that area. (To recall- the incident is real which took place in Thoha Khalsa.) Women become the messengers of peace. They are the embodiments of sacrifice, courage, strength, determination and compassion.

Erosion of human values that started prior to Partition, has corroded the social system further. After half a century the situation is no better. Instead of bridges we build walls and seem to live happily in our compartmentalized lives.

Over the years the predicament of the two communities, the gap between the

Hindu's and Muslim's has in no way reduced. In fact individuals have internalized the separatist feelings and they are invariably conditioned by the belief and practices of social groups. The very title of the novel Neelu Neelima Neelofer⁶ is suggestive of the two communities. Apparently the novel is about two friends-Neelofer and Neelima who share there traumatic lives which is embedded once again in religious discord and patriarchy. Neelofer, also known as Neelu is married to Sudhir who is employed as an art teacher in a school at Shimla. Neelofer is a bubbling, pulsating girl who after marriage puts on a bindi like any Hindu woman, but she also reads the namaz. Their marriage had been registered in a police station in Delhi where as witness from Sudhir's side was his friend Jagdish and from Neelu's her brothers and father were present who created a great hue and cry. Out of the brothers the elder won Mukhtar was more composed in comparison to Hamid who was constantly abusing his sister. For the father the daughter was already dead, as she was getting married to a Hindu boy. Till the time the girl subjugates to the dictates of men --father, brother, husband or son she is the best and no sooner does she exercise her choice that she is virtually non-existent for them. There is no middle path. Thereafter, Neelu and Sudhir had decided to move to Shimla without informing anyone. Neelu's trauma and distress starts when one day Hamid reaches Shimla and after all the sweet nothings are said to his sister and her husband he is able to take his sister home so that she can meet the ailing mother. By this time Neelu is expecting a child. Hamid, a staunch Muslim can never forget and agree to the fact that his sister was married to a Hindu. Before Neelu reaches home she is taken to a quack and the child is aborted (75). She feels as if a part had been amputated. Neelu belongs to no world. She wants to return back to Sudhir but is unable to escape. At home she is constantly abused by everyone- father, brother and mother. All her dreams of meeting her family, bearing a child, living a beautiful life are shattered and she is no better than a walking ghost. Meanwhile Hamid and the maulvi from the masjid decide to get Neelu re married to a Muslim businessman who already had three children. Once again we witness that women rise above the communal divides, hatred and violence. It's the mother who helps Neelu to escape from the house where she is no better than a prisoner. She's even ready to accept that she helped her daughter to run away. She gives her own burqua, clothes and jewellery and unlocks the back door for her to escape. She later says that she is not repentive of what she did because she was unable to see her own flesh and blood gradually dying for her love Sudhir. She is God fearing (168). The whole family hopes that Sudhir will read the kalma and become a Muslim as they wanted. This is very similar to the forcible conversions at the time of Partition as depicted in Tamas in the case of Iqbal Singh who was converted into becoming Iqbal Ahmed after reciting the kalma three times. "A mere change of marks had brought about the transformations. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer; to whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open" (Tamas: 281). Sudhir, on the other hand, is willing to read the kalma (though he does not do it) out of love for Neelu.

Running parallel is the story of Neelima who during her college days was in love with a Muslim boy, Altaf, but out of sheer respect for her grandmother and father she agrees to marry Subodh who is a self-centred husband. His male chauvinism reflects in his starched appearance and stiff personality .He is not warm and friendly unlike Altaf who was understanding and Neelima's and Altaf's likes and dislikes were similar. They both loved playing tennis, moving out together, etc. But dreams are short lived. Their religion divide separated them also. The grandmother cannot reconcile to the fact that her granddaughter Neelima is friendly to a Muslim boy. She had internalized confinement and restrictive practices to ones own defined religion. She like any other Indian woman of her age cannot allow a Hindu-Muslim marriage because their day to day lives, customs, rituals, myths, food habits, religious festivals, etc all differed and therefore insisted that its not easy for a woman to assimilate in an entirely new system of values. The open Hindu way of living is opposed to the closed Muslim way of living. Neelima's father is more open and is ready to accept but the grandmother convinces him that such marriages are not successful. Her conditioning, her experience and her love for the child stops her and the family from building such bridges. But Neelima's life is no more the same after her marriage to a Hindu boy. Marriage as a basic institution for co-existence of man and woman fails in the case of Neelima. Marriage and home can provide fulfillment if ruled by love, reciprocity and mutual respect. But Neelima becomes a mental and emotional wreck. Her depression leads her to attempt suicide by burning herself. Subodh's constant abuses, beating, humiliation and persecutions are

tormentous and not even once he's ready to share the problem of Neelima and help her to emerge out of them. There is nobody to share the vacuum in her heart except her writing letters to or meeting Neelu occasionally, through which she would unburden herself. Subodh left no chance to intimidate his wife and tell her that she is good for nothing and not a perfectionist as he desired. Violence is the most frequently adopted mode of suppression both inside house and outside the house.

The story of Neelima is juxtaposed with the story of Neelofer; a Hindu girl's sorry tale of suffering and a Muslim girl's painful story of love run parallel. The writer has subtly exposed the Hindu-Muslim divide which after partition is not apparently visible; we all respect and regard the word "secular" in our Constitution; we preach fraternity and brotherhood but deep inside -both in our own selves in particular and in society at large we are building walls. The roots of communalism are deep and its only love and compassion that can uproot this hatred. If Neelu, Neelofer could do it, if Sudhir can why not us?

The novels provide voice and visibility to the communal divide and call for a better tomorrow where compassion is the word. Love and compassion are stronger than communalism and hatred. Greater cultural diversity demands greater tolerance as internal heterogeneities and differences need to be resolved. Let us not build nations within a nation. Let us not succumb to the aftermath of colonialism. Let us not condemn ourselves to repeat history.

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