

The Ecology of Nationalism and the Representation of Lower Castes in the Novel Tamas

Ashutosh Manohar Popate*
Assistant Professor in English
Rashtrasant Tukdoji College, Chimur

ABSTRACT

The colonization of India had awful consequences on the lives of people as the nation was severely affected by problems like poverty, illiteracy, unhygienic and callous living producing, in addition to the already prevailing sociological and economic problems, environmental and conservational crisis, the root cause of which was to be found in the incessant exploitation of natural resources by the ruling European colonial powers in India. Resultantly, the Gandhian struggle for independence could not restrict itself merely to the primary objective of acquiring a politically independent statehood for India, but it had to keep on its agenda also problems of ecology, hygiene and conservation. The novel Tamas describes analogous labors made by the congress working committee volunteers in the Muslim area despite antagonism by the Muslim League workers. This ecology of nationalism, however, could not sustain long as the ecological purity of a mosque and a temple, in retaliatory action, was polluted by the perpetrators. The novel regularly, throughout the narrative, establishes a connection between the ideas of pureness and dirtiness and the consequential communal clashes in the city by showing how harmony and mutual veneration for each other's community, the so-called ecology of nationalism and political unity, was thwarted by an error of Nathu, a member of the lower caste community. In a broad sense, the character of Nathu is presented representatively in a way to demonstrate how the act of a socially impure community was accountable for the fall of the ecology of Indian nationalism rather than the political desires and mistakes of leadership.

Keywords: *The Partition of India, the Ecology of Nationalism, Historical Narratives, and Subaltern Communities*

INTRODUCTION

The partition of India had not merely demarked the political and national boundaries but also the lives of culturally homogenous communities whose identities came under crisis resulting in cultural alienation and also in antagonism among the communities living together for ages. The tragedy of partition is a fertile ground for writers to venture into that period in their ceaseless search for historical causes that result in the collapse of the Indian nation. These writers depict the exodus of communities leaving behind their cultural and historical roots. It is seen that most of the partitions novels present the partition of India from the perspective of

* Author: Ashutosh Manohar Popate

Email: popate.ashu87@gmail.com

Received 08 Nov. 2022; Accepted 21 Nov. 2022. Available online: 25 Nov. 2022.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



elite communities by alienating socially subaltern communities, especially the lower castes. The totalitarian master narratives of partition by the elite writers abnormally confine their narratives to the pre-partition and post-partition lives of the upper caste Hindus, the Sikhs, and the Muslims, strategic negotiators in the idea of Indian nationalism, with fleeting references to the lives of subaltern communities like the lower castes. So such narratives have proven to be one-sided and prejudiced. Resultantly, the partition novels by the elite writers are highly unrepresentative; they are accused of either suppressing or misrepresenting the subaltern voices. To be frank, the mainstream partition narratives notoriously either decanonise or misrepresent the lower castes. They represent social, cultural, regional, and linguistic alienation, triggered by the partition of India, as fundamentally interconnected with the lives of elite communities only, reducing the roles of subaltern communities as merely dumb bystanders. Speaking in the context of such unjust privileging of the master narratives of partition and decanonisation of the subaltern narratives, Ravinder Kaur aptly says, “Though Partition historiography has grown considerably in volume and scope in the past decade, it is yet to draw upon the personal experiences and oral histories of Untouchable migrants” (285).

The mainstream partition novels and their grand-scale narratives of the fall of the Indian nation can hardly have any space for the subaltern and disadvantageous communities in the pre-partition period and the period immediately after the partition, and if any such representation is offered to them, it is usually from the deleterious perspective. Since, it is an acknowledged fact that the lower castes have had the pangs of partition perhaps more than the upper caste Hindus, it is not wrong, in this case, to trust the popular belief that such narratives are unfair and discriminatory, and intend to decanonise and falsify the identity of socially subaltern groups and their historical roles. “The distinctive body of Untouchable experiences is ignored and superseded by the oft-narrated dominant narrative of the middle-classes in Punjabi migrant society” (Kaur, 287).

Thus, the experiences of the middle-class Punjabi migrant community are privilege over the experiences of subaltern groups like the lower castes and the untouchables. The middle-class Punjabi experiences of partition are seen as the only voices of partition relegating and suppressing the subaltern ones. The novel *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni is no exception to this view though it has a lower-caste protagonist Nathu. The novel looks back at the partition period from the eyes of Nathu, who is used, without his knowledge, to stoke communal violence and carnage in the city. Sahni is faithful to the lives of lower castes, but he seems to be subsiding,

like other partition novelists, the problem of caste resulting in a helpless condition of the lower castes who could be used for political gains by members of the elite communities. It overlooks alienation and rootlessness among the lower castes as the only community with almost nowhere to go after the partition. As if in the ecology of nationalism, they were the elements of pollution and social corruption, as they are always thought about. Belonging to no particular land or not having any particular national identity emerges as a grave concern of representation for the lower castes in the novel. The ecology of nationalism seems to be subsiding them; it sees them as outsiders like the British, who had very little care for what was happening around them and who were not going to be affected by the events. This decanonization from historiography results in a serious identity crisis in the case of the lower castes.

Moreover, the writer's continuous allusion to the role of lower castes in bringing in the darkness of social animosity and bigotry by teaming up with the politically driven miscreants opens the way for a new debate on their alleged roles in the events resulting in the partition of India. Sahni, by subsiding the actual reasons for the partition of India: the gulf created between the Hindus and the Muslims, and the ambitions of the political leaderships of both communities, levies the sin of partition and the fall of the Indian nation on the heads of lower castes seeing them, indirectly, as villains. Under the objective description of the events leading up to the partition of India, the character of Nathu is made to carry on the head of his community that sin of mayhem and massacre that the city undergoes because of his mistake.

Nathu: A Subaltern Protagonist In The Novel

The misrepresentation of subaltern communities or their blunt disappearances are the strategic issues to be found in the partition novels. Most of the partition novels talk about the Punjabi upper caste or middle-class communities as the only communities who underwent the pangs of partition, but leave unexplored the lives of people from the lower caste communities during that period; moreover, they are misrepresented or completely isolated from the mainstream partition narratives. The partition of India, as one of the most tragic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent, is still fresh like a scorching wound in the collective memories of the generation who have gone through that tortuous phase of fear, violence, migration, and alienation. It is seen as not merely the partition of geography but that of minds; in fact, the latter causes more pain than the former. History has taught how religion is dreadfully

manipulated as the easiest weapon and how its ecology can be easily tainted and effectively manipulated for political gain. But its consequences have left ‘shock and numbness’ for ages. Among the worst sufferers are marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The partition narratives in India, however, have isolated such groups from the historiography; often they are misrepresented in the partition novels as criminals and enemies of the values of nationalism. The Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Tamas* recounts that period of partition through the character of Nathu, a low-caste tanner, who is used by politically ambitious Murad Ali to create communal tension in the city. Despite its faithful representation of the lives of lower castes, Sahni fails to provide Nathu and his community with any political activism; they are merely presented as puppets and passive observers. The partition drama is thus a saga of causalities-physical and mental -inflicted on the elite communities alone, and their narratives dominate the scene. Riots forced the upper caste Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims to mobilize their community against rioters, unlike the lower castes, who were shown as helpless and living on the mercy of their fate and life.

Nathu is the most submissive character in the novel. He is inactive and helpless. His helplessness is the helplessness of his community which has been silenced by the caste system and does not allow them even to be recognized as citizens. The novel does not show any constructive part played by the lower castes in the national freedom movement; despite severe resentment, the Congress volunteers rally in the Muslim-dominated areas; they even clean these localities, but no such work is shown to be undertaken in the locality of tanners. The Congress volunteers have no agenda of bringing the lower castes and untouchables into the mainstream though they struggle to get the radical Muslims into that. In the novel, the lower castes, including the tanners, have no nation to go to; they have the least trouble going anywhere. The freedom of India is shown to be immaterial to them. The way these communities are shown as indifferent and unaffected in the novel is certainly a perversion of the reality of the fact that after the partition of India, the lower castes and untouchables also migrated from Pakistan to India. Thus, the novel is untrue to the reality of the partition of India.

Nathu: A Member of The Disadvantaged Community

Nathu is shown as a tanner living at the mercy of powerful people like Murad Ali, a municipal contractor. The struggle of this disadvantaged group with life is shown in the very beginning

of the novel when Nathu is trying to overpower a pig for a meager amount of five rupees. “Though drops of blood lay spattered on the floor, the pig did not seem to have received a scratch on its body. It was as if for the last two hours Nathu had been plunging his knife into water or a heap of sand” (Sahni,7).

He thought the best way to kill a pig is to hold its legs or pour boiling water. But there was nobody to assist him. He cursed himself for having taken this job. Nathu’s struggle with the pig acquires a symbolic significance with his community's struggle for survival in the caste-based society, which offers Nathu nothing except poverty and exploitation. It is like, as Nathu says, 'It is now or never for me’ (Sahni, 12). The way the event is presented hints at something evil to take place soon. Nathu is, however, unaware of the nefarious design that Ali has in his mind. The problem with Nathu is that he cannot say no to Ali though he wishes to. Had he said, it would have brought starvation for him and his family. He is like many people in his community. Nathu is to be exploited. In the novel, he opens the doors of the city for the evil darkness to enter. The title of the novel *Tamas* meaning darkness, also finds a symbolic significance in the novel when Nathu, while struggling to overpower the pig, is afraid that his heavy breath may extinguish the flame of the lamp. As expected, it would have left the beast out of his control in the darkness of the room. Nathu’s fear of the beast creating scuffles in the darkness was proven true when the carcass of that dead pig produced communal tension in the village bringing in the darkness of fear, violence, massacre, and suffering, the so-called Tamas. Nathu is held responsible for disturbing the ecology of religious faiths in the city and for the carnage in the city. His poverty and helplessness are visible in his lack of courage to deny the command of Murad Ali. Nathu’s unintentional crime provides a base for all the happenings in the novel. It was like had he denied Murad Ali, and the city would not have been set on fire. Nathu’s helplessness against Murad Ali was the helplessness of his community, who were socially exploited and subjugated and could never say a word against such exploitation. Nathu cannot be held responsible for what had happened in the city, rather, it is the caste hierarchy that should be blamed as it does not allow a member of the untouchable community to deny commands given to him by any member of the socially and politically elite communities. It has historically silenced their voices, making them almost dumb and deaf in the face of discrimination, exploitation, and misuse. Thus it is the helplessness of Nathu that should be blamed. Helplessness and poverty are bestowed upon him by the caste-based society, which has rendered the lower castes dumb and docile.

The Ideas of Purity, Impurity And The Ecology of Nationalism

The novel *Tamas*, literally meaning darkness, attributes a representative significance to the character of Nathu, who is portrayed as the main culprit of violence in the city; his reckless action, for a handful of money is shown to be resulting in the fire of hatred and antagonism among the Hindus and the Muslims. The beginning of the novel presents Nathu struggling to overpower a loathsome pig and an uncertain fear that has been continuously lurking in his mind of the possible darkness that the beast may invite into the room. The beast's carcass later stokes communal riots in the city, proving the fear of Nathu true. Under the seemingly modest account, the author, in his search for the root cause of mayhem, puts the sin of carnage in the partition on the lower castes, presenting it as the community, however indirect it may be, ultimately responsible for communal clashes. He has created such narratives around Nathu to justify his position, and by symbolically mixing the ideas of purity and impurity, the author struggles to establish, by a symbolic connection, a link between the partition and the causes of communal clashes. The ideas of purity and impurity are historically and socially inherited by the lower castes and the untouchables through the caste system. Since Nathu is a lower caste member, he is associated with a social impurity that is inherited from him by his caste. Indian society keeps these communities at bay as they are thought of as spoiling social purity.

In other words, the novel shows how Nathu, a low-caste tanner, can taint the ecology of nationalism as equally as he can taint the purity of caste and society, however unintentionally it may be. The novel establishes a connection between social impurity and impurity in religion and the lower castes and indirectly blames Nathu for spoiling the ecology of nationalism and social solidarity. The congress workers labor in the Muslim locality to establish harmony between Hindus and Muslims to unite them against their common enemy- the white colonial master. However, the novel does not show any such work undertaken in the locality of lower castes like that of tanners. Somehow, it is how the ecology of nationalism has to be shaped according to caste supremacy and by decanonizing the lower castes from the idea of nation and sense of belonging.

Nathu is a representative of his community. Murad Ali takes advantage of his poverty and honesty. Nathu thus becomes a puppet in the hands of Murad Ali so that the latter can achieve his political aims. The novel shows how the poverty and ignorance of the subaltern community,

as that of Nathu's, is being misused by people like Murad Ali for political gain. Like a slave, Nathu could not deny the command of Murad Ali as he had to deal with him now and then. "Whenever a horse or a cow or a buffalo died anywhere in the town, Murad Ali would get it for him to skin. It meant giving an eight-anna piece or a rupee to Murad Ali but Nathu would get the hide."(Sahni, 8)

The very idea of failing the job of Ali would send a shiver in Nathu and the idea of Jamadar Kalu reaching with his pushcart anytime was making him more nervous. Thus the novel shows how the disadvantaged groups were manipulated and misused in the pre-partition period, and even today, the picture is scarcely altered. They are scared to oppose whatsoever commands given to them. It is because of that that Murad Ali can exploit Nathu. "Bribed and deceived into killing the pig by Murad Ali, a local contractor, who uses the carcass of the pig to spread communal riots, Nathu is represented as the victim of both the capitalist and political forces"(Khan, 86).

Sense of Guilt in Nathu

After realizing an unknowingly committed crime, Nathu is shattered completely; His mind begins to eat his heart; he tries to pacify his mind by repeatedly telling himself that he does not have any idea of the dead pig being used to produce communal tension in the city. He is terrified at the thought of mayhem that may ruin the town after the incident. All that he knows is that the pig was supposed to be for medical purposes. On the way, he encounters Murad Ali, who refuses to recognize him. His indifferent attitude leaves Nathu awestruck. All he could do was merely console him that Ali would not disclose anything at all. After all, it was he who forced Nathu to butcher that pig. Even any association with such a heinous crime as that of corrupting the purity of a mosque could have put his life in danger at the hands of his fellow men.

However, Nathu is not able to recover from the mental torment. He wants to forget all in the company of his passionate wife. He thinks of his wife waiting for him; he longs for her company. On reaching home, his wife informs him of some miscreants throwing a dead pig in front of the mosque; she tells him of the rising communal tension in the city. He is afraid to see unfamiliar faces roaming around his house. He is scared that he may be arrested or his family may be attacked by the Muslims of the city. He lives in fear; he is afraid of going outside. Nathu is not sure that his fellow tanners will not be able to protect his family; he knows that he

belongs to the community whom even his fellow upper-caste Hindus despise. If came under assault from Muslims, none will come to help him.

Soon, hatred sets the city on fire. Nathu and his wife see a fire somewhere in the city and hears “... indistinct sounds, came the ringing of an alarm bell. For both of them it was an unfamiliar sound” (Sahni, 124).

Nathu is paralyzed; he cannot move at all. His wife requests him to come outside, but he does not. He holds the arm of his wife. Riots have broken out in the city, and Nathu knows it will happen sooner or later. News of the beastly killings in the city falls upon his ears, and he burns in the fire of guilt. The sense of guilt haunts him days and nights.

The Grim Lives of The Lower Castes in The Novel

Despite the fact that Sahni is not able to provide any activism to the lower castes in the novel, he is faithful to their wretched lives outside the city. The novel takes us into the grim livelihood of these communities, marked by callousness and unhygienic existence. They live behind the graveyard; this is the place forced upon them by the Indian caste system. They are thus outsiders, like the British in the novel, and scarcely have any connection with what is happening in the city. The Indian society thinks of them as harmful to social purity in the same way as Nathu is being held responsible for harming the purity of ecology of nationalism and social solidarity. That is also why they have been kept at bay during the freedom movement. Their very existence during the partition has become a matter of jest as they are thought of as nowhere to go after the partition. All they have to do is struggle with poverty and hunger; perhaps, these issues are crucial to their identity even after independence.

Nathu and his wife are shown to be living in the tanners’ settlement. Their life has more hardships and challenges than the upper castes. They belong to the community which is more vulnerable during the partition. As it is evident from that fear of Nathu that his people may not be able to save his family from the wraths of Muslims of the city in case they come to know of Nathu being involved in tainting the purity of the mosque. The upper caste Hindus and the Sikhs can mobilize themselves quickly during the riots, but no such mobilization is possible in case of Nathu’s community; they will be the easiest target for the radical and extremists waiting to take advantage of the situation.

Nathu shares the dark secret with his wife, whom he thinks can understand him better. However, he is scared that his wife may not be able to hold the secret. In the end, he is sure that none will trust that Murad Ali has instigated him for the heinous crime. Even the police will not trust him; they will arrest and take him away. A fleeting memory of his father brings tears to his eyes. He recalls how his father always used to ask him to earn something on his own. The revelation of the secret leaves his wife dumbfounded; she is shocked but soon recovers herself. She consoles him and says that he cannot be held for the crime at all. She tells him that he is trapped in the nefarious plan.

She says, "God is never angry with a person whose heart is clean. Our hearts are clean. Why should we be afraid of anyone?" (Sahni, 184). Nathu's wife is proud enough not to buy the dhotis with that tainted money; rather, she prefers to throw it into the fire. She has self-esteem and does not want anything tainted with the blood of innocent people.

Conclusion

The disappearance of lower castes and socially subaltern groups from the pages of national historiography is a problematic issue that emerges from as much of the biased representation of historical reality as the misrepresentation and falsification of it. It is deliberately done to dilute the sufferings of the subaltern communities, which are misrepresented as invulnerable during the riots and the following exodus in the novel. The novel *Tamas* presents inactiveness and passivity among the lower castes; it shows them as having no special roots like the upper caste Hindus have in India or the Muslims in Pakistan. In the novel, the partition of India is shown to be securing land for every community as per their faith and religious sentiments, but for the lower castes, it is nowhere to go as they are seen as outsiders; even today, they are thought of the same thus unjustly denying any identity or historical role or activism to them except the ones they have in their material life. Nathu represents this identity crisis, and so is his community.

Works Cited:

Bacchetta, Paola. "Reinterrogating partition violence: Voices of women/children/Dalits in India's partition." (2000): 567-585.

- Butalia, Urvashi. *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Penguin UK, 2017.
- Delacy, Richard. "Re-Presenting the Past in the Hindi Novel: The Darkness in Bhīṣma Sāhni's *Tamas*." *Cracow Indological Studies* 23.2 (2021): 41-58.
- Deswal, Prateek. "Communalism and the Politics of the Sacred: A Study of *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni." *Language in India* 15.2 (2015).
- Kaur, Ravinder. "Narrative absence: An 'Untouchable' account of Partition migration." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 42.2 (2008): 281-306.
- Khan, Afrinul Haque. "Text, Representation and Revision: Re-visioning Partition Violence in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*." *Indialogs: Spanish journal of India studies* 3 (2016): 0081-97.
- Mattausch, John. "Gandhi's prescription: Health and hygiene in the unfinished struggle for *Swaraj*." *South Asia Research* 34.2 (2014): 155-169.
- Pal, Virender. "Anatomy of communal violence: a study of Bhisham Sahni's *tamas*." *Academicia: An International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 1.2 (2011): 147-152.
- Pathak, Bindeshwar. "Social Change through Peace and Non-Violence." *LBS Journal of Management & Research* 15.2 (2017): 1-4.
- Sāhanī, Bhīṣma. *Tamas*. Penguin Books India, 2001.
- Sen, Dwaipayan. "Caste politics and partition in South Asian history." *History Compass* 10.7 (2012): 512-522.