



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

The Pain of Partition in Bhisma Sahni's *Tamas*

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VIDHYAYANA



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Abstract:

It is needless to say that the painful events of partition of such a vast magnitude is bound to affect the human sentiments and moral values to such an extent that all creative arts forms and artists involved with those arts forms came under its influence profoundly. That pain of partition is very well narrated in Bhisma Sahni's *Tamas*. He experimented with his characters; it is remarkable to note that he is fully aware and acquainted with the customs, rituals and mannerisms of Muslim society. Sahani in his world famous and monumental novel *Tamas* presented his characters in realistic and true colors. *Tamas* is a harsh reminder of the immense tragedy of pre-partition communal riots in India. This novel demonstrated the realistic picture of the turmoil of partition in the wake of communal violence which aims to achieve political ends most of the time, catastrophe on large scale is expected.

Key Words: Partition, Human Sentiments



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The Pain of Partition in Bhishma Sahni's *Tamas*:

Bhisham Sahni, born in the year 1915 and died in the year 2003, was one of the outstanding writers who could represent themselves in context of their time and place. The culture and locale of everyday life can be seen reflected in his novels with the emotions and passions of the people of the time. Bhishma Sahni was absorbed in his milieu so much that there can be seen no difference in his personal and literary self. And yet one can see that he displays enough acumen to perceive things with an aerial view from where he could gauge things clearly and describe the aspect of a human life. It is therefore can be said that he is one of the rarest author of Indian literature who was able to compose with zoom in and zoom out of the human emotion and experiences in a balanced manner. The dreadful event of partition of Indian and Pakistan were among the major themes on which Bhishma Sahni wrote extensively.

The unique thing about Bhisham Sahni has been that he composed the pieces of literatures be it his novels or short stories and then he left it for the audience to take over the charge. He would not aver anything pertaining to his creative writing ever in public or private not ever endorsed any guess work by any stockholders. He was of the opinion that the tale he has unfolded would communicate on its own to the readers and hence, there is no need for the author or the critic to come into picture. It was a fine trait of his personality with which he lived throughout his life. However, Bhishma Sahni had to pay the prize of his introvert personality in many ways. Bhisham Sahni, who could lead the fraternity of Hindi literature of his time, could never have the lime that he deserved and stayed away from the Centre Stage of the Hindi literary spectrum. He could never be the beacon of light for the following literary generation because of his too introvert and silent persona. It is needless to say that due to his voice the writing of his time attained muscle, tone and tenor. It is heartrending, therefore, to note that when Bhisham Sahni died in 2003, his exit from the world was as peaceful as was his life on the earth was. Unlike the lives of the authors of some repute, there was no hype and glamour of any sort in his entire life neither was there any pomp at the time of his death. His sad demise, though, was a loss of some family member to the lovers of Bhisham Sahni.

Apart from her high-end educated parents and elite social surrounding, Attia Hosain had many influences that fascinated her and shaped her mindset. The nationalist movements of the age and role of those movements played a pivotal role in her literary life. The greatest sources of influences in Attia's literary career and political activities were leftist stream of ideology and line of thinking of National Congress. Further, Sarojini Naidu was also one of the most influential figure in her life. It was due the



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ISSN 2454-8596

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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

influence of Sarojini Naidu that Attia took part in the All India Women's Conference. It has to be noted that a part from aforesaid influences, Attia was deeply involved in the activities of main stream leftists and Marxists of the time. She had also attended the famous conference organized at Lucknow of the Progressive Writers. Some of her acquaintances include but not limited to Mahmuduzzafar, Rashida Jan, Sajjad Zaheer, renowned author Mulk Raj Anand. Being the center of literary, cultural and political activities, Lucknow as a location carved her nationalist thinking to broadest extent.

Sunlight on a Broken Column by Attia Housain is one of the most representative novels of 20th century depicting the dreadful event of partition of India and Pakistan. The novel can be identified with the views of an insider in general and that of daily experiences of women belonging to elite class of the time. Apart from the individual experiences of her own, the dreadful events of partition were also interwoven in the novel. A close reading novel will reveal that it depicts the plight of Muslim women irrespective of class that these women may belong. The narrative of the novel revolves around the family house called *Ashiana* (ironically translated as the nest). The house represented the microcosm of the then society that consisted of the characters that represented very section of Indian society of the time. Jasbir Jain observes that the house turned out to be a living entity:

“It has a living relationship with the past not merely through the culture it cultivates but also through the house at Hasanpur at the outskirts of the city, which symbolizes continuity and permanence.” (Jain 1)

Being an autobiographical novel, many aspects of the narration involves the stream of conscious movements for the author. The conversation between Attia Hosain and Laila whom many critics consider to be her alter-ego. There can be seen many representation of many historical and cultural references of the contemporary India in these conversations. Further, the dreadful partition of Indian and Pakistan later on followed by the Partition of Bangladesh were the events of such a vast magnitude that they affected the human sentiments and moral values to such an extent that all creative arts forms and artists involved with those arts forms came under its influence profoundly. It is interesting to note that not only creative writers in literature but artist from fine arts area such as painters, film makers and TV producers also could not resist themselves to explored these two dreadful event in their forms of art in their own capacity. The present novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Housain is one such creative out cry of an artist for documenting the dreadful events of partition and upheavals, mass migration and massacre that was followed.



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Thus, the reception of these dreadful events can be seen well reported in the present novel along with the descriptive narration and documentation of the dreadful events of partition the author has also documented the saner voices of the communities, those individuals who stood by the humanity and moral values even at the worst conditions and during the movements of crisis that were being unfolded at the wake of partition of India and Pakistan.

Thus, the mass migration started much before the formal announcement of partition. The Hindu and Sikh communities were fleeing to the areas of their majority in the Southern part of India, whereas Muslim communities were fleeing in the opposite direction to take refuge in the areas of their majority in the Western regions of India now known as Pakistan. There were clashes at every juncture of 'contact zones' at railway stations, border areas of one communities majorities and the others minority. The only peaceful places were those remote places as the one depicted in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Housain. The author referred to the instigation of the communities by the religious preachers of both communities.

On the other hand, the narrative of the dreadful events of partition in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, represents a feminine point of view pertaining to the formation of nation as contrast with that of the male dominant society and that of the literary world. Unlike the male centered and male dominant narratives, the Attia's narrative represents the domestic issues to that of the national issues of treatment of women before and after independence. The authors of the male narrative usually take feminine world view for granted and used to speak authoritatively on behalf of the nation as a whole disregarding its diverse inhabitants. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* deals with the expressions of an outlook of Muslim in the process of the formation of the nation. Thus, the novel depicts the dichotomy of the male /female counterparts and their world view pertaining to the nationalism. The novelist opined that the role of the women in general and mother in particular had been assigned to inculcated the nationhood among the future generations and bring up sons and daughters with nationalist spirits. The mothers of the countries were assigned the roles and responsibilities of instilling cultural and nationalistic values among their future generations. Thus, the novel develops the agitation that was surging at the wake of the partition among the dispersed communities. The venom and hatred were in the air; the communities were blood-thirsty to avenge the loss of their communities, belonging and pride. The center of both the countries was either clueless as in India or outright biased for one community, as in Pakistan. The voices of sanity and maturity were missing badly. However, these can be seen the undertone of the meaninglessness of the event among the people that can be seen



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expressed in characters

Attia contradicts the British justification of the colonization of India by the means of her novel and the flow of events she deliberates in her novels. The British had been boasting that due to their reformations they rescued Indian women from the tradition of depravation and debauchery. Unlike the mild feminists she believes in the there is a grave need for radical changes in the system to accommodate the feminine view point in the country. She even proposes a new regime of political and social order to change the fate of women in the independent country. Thus, the novel develops the agitation that was surging at the wake of the partition among the dispersed communities. The venom and hatred were in the air; the communities were blood-thirsty to avenge the loss of their communities, belonging and pride. The center of both the countries were either clueless as in India or outright biased for one communities, as in Pakistan. The voices of sanity and maturity were missing badly. However, these can be seen the undertone of the meaninglessness of the event among the people that can be seen expressed in characters throughout the first half of the novel.

In the second half of the novel, the author shows her agitation by means of lengthy discussions. The novelist deliberates upon the response of Muslim elites to anti-colonial struggle. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Housain represents various versions of the period of agitation that include the anti-colonial resistance. There can be seen marks of the conflict with the British every now and then. The author also exposes the sectarian and communal divide. Laila's search for identity and her progress of individuation is concomitant to the nationalist struggle. Laila's growing awareness of her capabilities to undermine the patriarchal set up, is simultaneous to the awakening of the Indian masses to oust the colonizer. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* also presents ideologies of the time that were colliding with one and another. Tradition of courtesy was first to be lost that was very dear to the people of Lucknow. The courteous way of communications has been overtaken by the form of argument and that to done:

“...not in the graceful tradition of our city where conversation was treated as a fine art, words were loved as mediums of artistic expression and verbal battles were enjoyed as much as any delicate, scintillating, sparkling display of pyrotechnic skill. It was as if someone had sneaked in live ammunition among the fireworks. In the thrust and parry there was a desire to inflict wounds.” (Attia 16)

Be it the ideology of Gandhi and his non-violent cooperation or be it radical Marxist ideology of exploitative economic powers all there deliberated with vivid description and detailing. Further, the views of



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the Muslim League with their radical demands of a separate nation were also discussed at length. On the other hand, the contemporary Congress party was also discussed with its limitation and firmness. It was Congress that firmly declined the demand of separate electorate for the Muslims. Saleem considers Congress to be anti-Muslim and expresses strong view to his father:

“I believe the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it against which the Muslims must organize. The danger is great because it is hidden, like an iceberg. When it was just a question of fighting the British the progressive forces were uppermost; but now that power is to be acquired, now the submerged reactionary elements will surface. Muslims must unite against them.” (Attia 18)

Nevertheless, Uncle Hamid believes that it was Congress that stood by the idea of abolition of exploitative feudal systems. He does not see antagonism in Hindu-Muslim living together: “I always found it was possible for Hindus and Muslims to work together on a political level and live together in personal friendship.” (Attia 22)

The novel dealt with the vividness of opinion represented by various characters such as Saleem’s constant leaning towards the Muslim League, Zahid’s revulsion for the Shia community and at the same time Uncle Hamid’s vision of peaceful co-existence and his disapproval of the Muslim League’s freedom struggle. All these characters and their viewpoints represent the microcosmic world of the contemporary society that Attia lived and struggled.

Laila paid a visit to her ‘second home’ *Ashiyana* which was converted into a refugee camp. She was dumfounded to see strangers living in the same rooms where she had lived some of the most private movements of her early life. She was further agitated to see those who occupied *Ashiyana*, those strangers were called ‘refugees,’ whereas her cousin Saleem, who being a staunch supporter of the Muslim League and separate land for Muslim - Pakistan was termed as an ‘outsider’. It is to be noted that even today Muslims migrated from India to Pakistan, willingly – by choice, are called ‘Muhajir’ – i.e. ‘outsider’. On seeing Laila in *Ashiyana*, the old loyal servant Ram Singh was choked with tears in his sunken eyes. Ram Singh poured out his heart to his daughter like Laila about the unhappy change of time:

“The house, Bitia, this is not how you should have come to the house. I saw you grow up in it, and I should have seen your children, and the children of Kemal Mian and Saleem Mian grow up in it. Bhagwan should have taken me from this earth before I



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saw this happen.” (Attia 28)

The dreadful partition of Indian and Pakistan later on followed by the Partition of Bangladesh were the events of such a vast magnitude that they affected the human sentiments and moral values to such an extent that all creative arts forms and artists involved with those arts forms came under its influence profoundly. It is interesting to note that not only creative writers in literature but artist from fine arts area such as painters, film makers and TV producers also could not resist themselves to explored these two dreadful event in their forms of art in their own capacity. The present novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Housain is one such creative out cry of an artist for documenting the dreadful events of partition and upheavals, mass migration and massacre that was followed. Thus, the reception of these dreadful events can be seen well reported in the present novel along with the descriptive narration and documentation of the dreadful events of partition the author has also documented the saner voices of the communities, those individuals who stood by the humanity and moral values even at the worst conditions and during the movements of crisis that were being unfolded at the wake of partition of India and Pakistan.

There were instance of humanity and compassion on both the sides of the border. Laila courageously praises the Hindus such as Sita and Ranjit who came to rescue her at the cost of their own lives. She reverts to Zahra’s apprehensive remarks:

Do you know who saved me and my child? Sita, who took us to her house, in spite of putting her own life in danger with ours. And Ranjit, who came from his village, because he had heard of what was happening in the foothills and was afraid for us. He drove us back, pretending we were his family, risking discovery and death. What were you doing then? Getting your picture in the papers, distributing sweets to orphans whose fathers had been murdered and mothers raped. (Attia 46)

Sunlight on a Broken Column by Attia Housain is one of those few Partition novels that are both artistically up to the mark and at the same time depicts the dreadful events of partition with great authenticity and with sympathetic treatment. The novel comes forward with an appeal that forcefully give away venom of hatred and violence and to follow the path of love and compassion. The world can live peacefully only by the virtue of co-existence and tolerance. The path of separatism, hatred and violence will lead us nowhere. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Housain demonstrated the national movement for freedom had no communal considerations initially. However, later on the introduction and indulgence of religion into politics poisoned the psyche of the millions and millions of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. The



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author also brought forward the fact that the religion was introduced and indulged into politics by the communal and leaders of the Muslim League who were outright power-mongers. And ironically enough, this caused the partition even within the Muslims- the nationalist Muslims and the Leaguers, 'a partition within partition'.

The unique thing about Bhisham Sahni has been that he composed the pieces of literatures be it his novels or short stories and then he left it for the audience to take over the charge. He would not aver anything pertaining to his creative writing ever in public or private not ever endorsed any guess work by any stockholders. He was of the opinion that the tale he has unfolded would communicate on its own to the readers and hence, there is no need for the author or the critic to come into picture. It was a fine trait of his personality with which he lived throughout his life. However, Bhishma Sahni had to pay the prize of his introvert personality in many ways. Bhisham Sahni, who could lead the fraternity of Hindi literature of his time, could never have the lime that he deserved and stayed away from the Centre Stage of the Hindi literary spectrum. He could never be the beacon of light for the following literary generation because of his too introvert and silent persona. It is needless to say that due to his voice the writing of his time attained muscle, tone and tenor. It is heartrending, therefore, to note that when Bhisham Sahni died in 2003, his exit from the world was as peaceful as was his life on the earth was. Unlike the lives of the authors of some repute, there was no hype and glamour of any sort in his entire life neither was there any pomp at the time of his death. His sad demise, though, was a loss of some family member to the lovers of Bhisham Sahni.

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