



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Fragmented Masculinity in Bhisham Sahani's *Tamas*: Power, Fear, and Identity in a Time of Conflict

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Introduction :

The Partition of India in 1947 was not merely a political division; it was a cataclysmic event that tore through the social fabric of the subcontinent, leaving deep psychological and emotional scars on its people. Bhisham Sahani's novel *Tamas* (1974) stands as one of the most poignant literary reflections of this period, capturing the chaos, fear, and violence that engulfed the nation. While much of the critical discourse around *Tamas* has focused on its depiction of communal violence, Sahani's nuanced portrayal of masculinity amid this turmoil deserves closer examination. *Tamas* presents masculinity not as a monolithic construct, but as a fragmented and multifaceted identity, shaped and reshaped by the socio-political upheavals of the time.

At the heart of Sahani's narrative is a profound exploration of how masculinity is both performed and deconstructed in the face of historical crises. The novel depicts a range of male characters, each grappling with their sense of self and identity as they navigate the horrors of communal conflict. These characters, from the lowly Nathu, whose accidental act becomes the catalyst for widespread violence, to the authoritative but conflicted Inspector Harnam Singh, embody the fractured nature of masculinity in a society on the brink of collapse. Through their experiences, Sahani reveals how the Partition shattered not only geographical boundaries but also the traditional understandings of what it means to be a man in Indian society.

Historical Context and the Crisis of Masculinity

The historical backdrop of the Partition is crucial to understanding the crisis of masculinity in *Tamas*. The division of British India into the independent dominions of India and Pakistan was marked by unprecedented communal violence, mass migrations, and a breakdown of law and order. This period of chaos disrupted the social and familial structures that had traditionally defined masculine roles, leaving men in a state of confusion and disorientation. In a society where men were expected to be protectors, providers, and upholders of communal honor, the violence of the Partition rendered these roles impossible to fulfil. The novel's depiction of masculinity reflects this crisis, showing how male characters are torn between their desire to assert traditional masculine traits and their inability to do so in a world that has been turned upside down.

In *Tamas*, Sahani portrays masculinity as a construct that is inherently unstable and susceptible to external pressures. The novel suggests that the traditional markers of masculinity—strength, authority, and control—are illusions that are quickly dismantled in the face of real danger. The male characters in *Tamas* are often shown struggling to maintain their sense of self in a world that no longer adheres to the rules they once knew. This struggle is most evident in the character of Inspector Harnam Singh, who represents the state's authority but is increasingly powerless to stop the violence around him. Harnam Singh's internal conflict between his duty as a law enforcement officer and his fear for his own life exemplifies the fragmentation of masculinity in the novel. His inability to protect the community and his own family highlights the vulnerability and fragility of masculine identity in times of crisis.

The Intersection of Power, Fear, and Identity

Sahani's exploration of masculinity in *Tamas* is closely tied to themes of power, fear, and identity. The male characters in the novel are caught in a web of social expectations and personal insecurities, where their masculinity is constantly challenged and redefined. Power, both as an abstract concept and a tangible reality, plays a central role in shaping their identities. However, *Tamas* reveals that power is not a stable or inherent trait but one that is deeply contingent on external circumstances. The novel's depiction of masculinity is thus marked by a profound sense of instability, where power is always under threat and fear is a constant presence.

For instance, the British officers in the novel, who are the most overt symbols of colonial power, are depicted as detached and indifferent to the suffering around them. Their version of masculinity, rooted in imperial authority, is shown to be hollow and devoid of empathy. This contrasts sharply with the Indian male characters, whose masculinity is deeply intertwined with their communal and personal identities. The British officers' cold detachment underscores the way in which power, when stripped of its human elements, becomes a tool of oppression rather than protection. This theme is further explored through the character of Nathu, the sweeper, whose accidental killing of a pig—an act that symbolizes the impurity imposed on him

by the caste system—sparks the communal violence. Nathu's marginalized status and the powerlessness he feels reflect the novel's broader critique of how societal structures impose limitations on individual identity and agency.

The Fragmentation of Masculine Identity

The fragmentation of masculinity in *Tamas* is also evident in the way the male characters respond to the communal violence that engulfs their lives. The violence forces them to confront their deepest fears and insecurities, leading to a breakdown of their previously held beliefs about what it means to be a man. This breakdown is not just physical but also psychological, as the characters grapple with guilt, shame, and a sense of helplessness. The novel's portrayal of this psychological fragmentation is a powerful commentary on the destructive impact of communalism and violence on the human psyche.

Moreover, Sahani's depiction of women in *Tamas* serves as a counterpoint to the male characters' struggles with masculinity. Women in the novel are often seen as the bearers of communal honor, and their bodies become sites of violence in the name of protecting this honor. This gendered violence further complicates the notion of masculinity in the novel, as male characters are forced to confront their inability to protect the women in their lives. The intersection of masculinity with issues of power, identity, and communalism in *Tamas* thus reveals the deep fractures within the construct of masculinity itself.

Sahani in his novel has shown the harsh realities of partition and kept all the male characters authentic to the time, the novel also demonstrates the turmoil of partition and the struggle for power of being one above the other and in which innocent people get killed, Raped, kidnapped and houses are burnt etc. The entire novel talks about the politics and showcase of power through four major parties, The congress Party, The Hindu Mahasabha, The Muslim League, the communist Party of India and The British Rulers who still; hold their power in Governing the country.

Bhisham Sahani in his novel shows the tense atmosphere of the Situation even before Partition and the lives of people. This dissertation tries to focus on all the male characters and expose how they have politicized their struggle for power with the help of communal Riot. To start with Nathu who belongs to Chamar community, who has been asked to slaughter a Pig by a Muslim league member named Murad Ali, when Nathu questioned what was the reason, he informed him it was for veterinary Purpose asked by Dr Saloria. Murad Ali was a person belonged to Muslim community, who had advanced with five Rupees for the work and Nathu struggles entire night to kill the pig, he decides to give up at a moment because it was very hard for him to kill the Pig. The Pig was very furious and the entire act was in complete darkness. Nathu's killing of Pig in the darkness represents the ignorance of education and to the community he belonged to, and his finally killing of Pig with the great struggle shows his extreme power over an animal of him being Superior. The Connotation of Word "Tamas" Is Darkness, which shows the entire cruelty that Men shows on women, children, animals Etc. The novel also shows the dishonesty and aggressive behaviour of Man.

We see how a man also becomes the victim of masculinity over his Situation of class, caste, community, Poverty etc. Nathu says "I've never killed the Pig, boss. I've heard it's pretty hard to do it. I can't do it" in spite (Sahani 5) of his repeated refusal to Murad Ali, he never listens to him, he says "You're the man for this Job" and hands Five Rupees and walks away. Nathu becomes a victim of his class, he belonged to a lower class and he has no say over Murad, hence Murad tries to show his power over Nathu. Nathu also becomes very helpless because It was Murad who gives information whenever any cow, buffalo, horse died in the city and this was a good information to Nathu, he couldn't refuse to kill the pig. The Novel also centres on the harsh realities of life, in which everything mattered a lot, Like there caste, class, sect, etc.

In the second chapter of the Novel, we see only three people standing at the Shiekh Garden, they has formed the congress committee which has Hindu, Muslim and Sikh who worked for the unity and was against the concept of Partition, every morning they all met for morning singing, we had Bakshi Ji, who was the head of congress committee with him there was Aziz, Mehta Ji, Desraj, Shankar, Master Ramdas, Kashmiri lal, They had formed a team but they were not united. They had different expectation and everyone wanted to dominate over each other, there was another person people called him General, he was always with his Trousers, his six inches shoes, he was a man of his word, very straight forward in whatever he spoke. A man who went to the jail very often for different reasons.

Through their behaviour we could see that they just had formed a team, but never worked like a team they were more concerned about exercising their power over the other, they just wanted to make fun of each other depending on how they looked and behaved. As soon as General arrived we could see how Kashmiri lal mocked at General and told "why did you flee from procession yesterday?" (Sahani 17) to which General got annoyed and says "I don't want to get into the fight with the Likes of you this early in the Morning." (Sahani 17)

We see Shankar was an outspoken man, He always had conflict with everyone and Shankar and Mehta Ji were never in good terms because of their bad past experience, we see when Bakshi Ji blew out the flame of his lamp, Shankar says why he needs to blew out the flame, so Bakshi Ji gets annoyed and says this is not a congress property this belongs to his home, to which Shankar Says, "A bird can't flap its wings without your approval." (Sahani 18) They always had a verbal argument and never respected each other's opinion they just worked for them and not for the community and country.

Every one Gathered from the congress committee and started the March. People who belonged to the congress committee, we could see that they were in the committee because they belonged from well to do family and a few were educated, General was always made fun of because he spoke everything that he felt was correct without considering the situation. There was a group of congress committee no doubt, however there was another group within the group which was based on intellectual capacity, way of living, education and contacts they had developed with people had power, General was not that great in his appearance and also the way he looked was completely savage and the way he spoke was not a refine language. He was aggressive and no one paid attention to him. He was not considered and his words were not taken seriously in any of the important meetings that they conducted. we see how a man not only through his physical power show's his masculinity but also through his intellectual power are looked down upon.

Nathu after killing of Pig had a sigh of relief. Murad had instructed him to stay after loading the Pig into the carcass onto the sweepers cart, Nathu crossed one street to another and in those days more and more rallies and procession has started in the city, where each group started shouting their slogans. One group who belonged to congress committee said "Bande Mataram" and immediately and different slogan from another street said "Pakistan zindabad" from the Muslim community. Each community wanted to dominate over the other and they were ready to do anything for power.

Both the groups started to quarrel with each other, one party spoke against the other. one of the men in the group responded by saying "Congress belongs to everyone" Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, one of the men who belonged from Muslim league mentioned, Congress is a Hindu Party and Muslim

league for Muslims. A person from congress committee responded “look at us there are Hindu, Sikhs, Muslims here we also have Azim Ji and Hakim Ji. A person from Muslim committee got angry and says “Aziz and Hakim are the dogs of Hindus” (Sahani 36)

Looking at the conversation of both the committee, it was not about the same religion that they belonged, it was about the power that each community had with them, though Aziz and Hakim were Muslims they were not given respect from the Muslim committee. They wanted dominance over the large majority, people from Muslim committee was in favour of partition because only with the partition they can show their dominance over the large majority and in a way we could see the people from Muslim committee were in larger number and had greater unity in them then the congress committee and hence could show their Dominance over congress committee.

It was always General who spoke against everyone from the congress committee. He Screamed “Pakistan over my dead body” (Sahani 37). this people from his own committee started laughing. Some people also called him Lunatic, though he always made sense while talking everyone made fun and ignored what he said and some asked him to calm down and not get anxious or angry, Though General always spoke correct just that he never knew how to speak in what he said, everyone took undue advantage and asked him to be quite every time he spoke.

Tamas is the novel not just based on politics but also on how each male character displays their attitude in the way they talked or behaved. All the male characters obsessed with political and masculine ideologies. It wouldn't be correct if we just spoke about the politics that is presented in the foreground of the novel but it's very important to look at the psychology behind each male character behaving in the certain fashion.

People of congress committee and the people of Muslim committee got in contact with each other on the street, The head of Muslim Committee Hayath Baksh , says very arrogantly that they will not allow them to enter their streets, as those streets belonged to them. Hayath Baksh tries to show his dominance over Bakshi Ji. Muslim community from ages have always been dominant over the other community, one main reason is lack of education as they are deprived of education, they are not aware of what is right and wrong. The dominance that they show becomes very normal and hegemonic because people from other community have accepted it. When the conversation takes place between the community, Nathu from very far listens to all this and he also see Murad Ali listening to the conversation that's happening between Bakshi Ji and Hayath Baksh. Nathu belonged to the lower-class community we never see Nathu having conversation with any of the community members as sees them often as he is always considered to be inferior. They agree to whatever Hayath Baksh says and takes another street; we see all the men from Muslim community shouts their slogan “Pakistan Zindabad”

The important Episode of the novel is about the slaughter of the animal Pig, which sparked the communal Riot. The pig was thrown at the steps of the mosque, with the instructions of Murad Ali, who for his selfish cause that could go to any extent. Though he belonged to Muslim league, he was an opportunist. He wanted to create communal tensions between the Hindu's and the Muslims, at times he also told slogans of Hindu and the Muslim unification. The Head of the congress Committee that is Bakshi Ji and General moves forward to take the Slaughtered Pig and put the Pig aside, they feel that the more it is on the steps of the mosque, the communal tension will increase. Every act of Bakshi Ji does the docile and submissive nature that he carries with him in the name of social service and he is an old man, so he is not hot blooded, so he surrenders to everything.

In *Tamas*, Bhisham Sahani offers a profound exploration of masculinity in a time of crisis. The novel depicts masculinity as a fragmented and unstable identity, shaped by historical forces and social expectations but ultimately vulnerable to the chaos and violence of the Partition. Through the experiences of its male characters, *Tamas* reveals the deep insecurities and fears that lie beneath the surface of traditional masculine roles. The novel's portrayal of masculinity is a powerful reminder of the fragility of human identity in the face of historical upheaval and the enduring impact of communal violence on the individual psyche.

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