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## Darkness at Noon: Exploring Pain, Fear, and Loss in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

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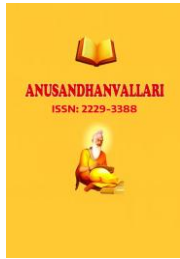
**Abstract:** *Tamas* written by Bhisham Sahni is one of the greatest literary works on the Partition of India, as it reflects the catastrophic consequences of communal violence, in all their horror. The novel is written in the setting of a small town on the edge of horrible riots and employs personal stories and historical naturalism to reflect the overwhelming darkness that engulfed the Indian society in 1947. In this paper, I explore how Sahni brings out both violence, and the following pain, fear, and loss as these being not only a reaction to these acts of violence but rather the defining events that lead to the formation of individual and collective identity during times of sociopolitical collapse. The element of suffering can be seen on the part of characters that belong to the edges such as Nathu where his forced self-action serves as ignition to community massacre. Daniel more than suffers physically but emotionally, as well as being homeless and guilty. On the contrary, fear is what causes the violence and also a psyche that is in control of the lives of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs as well. The uncertain perception of the other due to the rumours and the manipulation of the political and religious leaders in such a way develops the atmosphere where the rationality ruins. The most persistent aspect of *Tamas* can be called loss of home, loss of humanity, and of moral compass. It explains the way the Partition divided communities, ended interfaith coexistence and created trauma. Applying the theory of trauma and contextualizing it in a historical context, this research paper will look at *Tamas* beyond being a historical text and beyond being a document of history but a document extremely human with the emotional truth of Partition. In applying realism, fragmentation and perspectives, Sahni brings out the aspect of universality of suffering and flimsiness of civil society. By bringing darkness at noon, violence in the middle of the day, *Tamas* cautions about the possibility of repeating such fateful events and warns of a reconsideration of the way of preserving history, memory, and dignity of humanity in books.

**Keywords:** Bhisham Sahni, *Tamas*, Partition literature, trauma, communal violence, human suffering, fear, loss, identity.

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### Introduction

India Partition in 1947 was not like subdivision of a piece of geography, it was a disaster, that gashing through the emotional, psychological, as well as moral aspect of millions of lives. Characterized by mass displacement, inter-communal violence, loss of identity and belonging, partition literature has aimed at testifying to this unmatched human disaster. One of the strongest literary reactions to this trauma is the novel *Tamas* (1974) by Bhisham Sahni who is not afraid to describe the dark side of things that submerged both people and society in this period of turbulence. The term *Tamas* (darkness) signifying moral and existential darkness that supports the novel is symbolic in the sense of widened boundary between the victim and the bully and in the sense of shared destiny of human misery.



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Tamas by Sahni does not centre on any political leader or historical events rather, it centres on the life of common people; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians who become the targets of crossfire of communal hatred. The novel also starts with an unlikely inconspicuous story of a pig being killed outside of a mosque but quickly spirals into widespread riots as the effects of fear and misinformation can amplify violence. The story breaks down the social-political processes that uphold community conflict and scrutinizes institutionalization of fear, normalization of pain and irreparability of loss. Through so doing, Sahni does not merely produce a historical record but rather a great human document that lends some interrogation to the psychological price of political choices.

In this paper, I will discuss three themes predominant in Tamas-pain, fear and loss-as the most important aspects to consider the world of emotions of Partition. It relies on such approaches as trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, and socio-historical rhetoric to consider how the realism of the beautiful style developed by Sahni, the imploded form of the narration, and the character-building style of the narration help the novel achieve its long-lasting effect. The paper propositions that Tamas is more representative of the violence of yesteryear rather than a prefiguration of what would come in times more contemporary; and that the author intends to tell people of the danger that human empathy is not as solid as initially presumed, human societies are tempered with very few boundaries to bar the easy and free fall of human civilizations to the deep dark abyss.

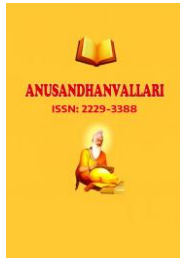
When telling the tale of a town verging into pandemonium, Sahni tells not merely the story of the Partition, but also the demonstration of the dissection of human misery beneath the burden of the scuttled ideologies and bashed mischief of trust. The novel thereby becomes the medium through which we can inspect the atrocities of 1947 as well as the cycle of the sectarian violence in the subcontinent and beyond. Dwelling into the experiences undergone by his characters, Sahni depersonalises the issues of suffering, fear, and loss in his novel so that Tamas can be viewed as a timeless conversation on the topic of hatred and separation.

### **Pain as a shared disorder**

Bhisham Sahni conveys pain not as some single or individual phenomena but a mass state of experience in Tamas, which befalls whole communities living and struggling in the insanity of the Partition. This suffering is beyond the bodily injuries; it is emotional, mental, as well as spiritual suffering. The novel is a demonstration of how an ordinary man/woman, irrespective of caste, class, religion borders are involved in a situation that is soaked with blood, betrayals, and desperation. Sahni creates the world where suffering has become the common, atmospheric phenomenon, which quietly reverberates in a house, on a street, in the places of worship that were supposed to uphold peace and harmony.

Nathu, the lower-caste and poor Hindu, is manipulated into seemingly suffering and hence becomes an icon representing it. Nathu, a naive, poor man, is forced by a local politician to kill a pig posing as a burden of regular routine work, by killing this pig, he unknowingly triggers a series of communal violence. The fact that his emotional breakdown is shown immediately, along with a sense of guilt, helplessness and fear shows the existential pain of the people on the fringe, those who are mere pawns in the game they do not comprehend. It is not only Nathu who suffers, he represents the suffering of thousands and thousands of people who are used by systems of power and ideology.

The plight of displaced families and especially Muslim and Sikh households who had to leave their homes lifts the veil on how much pain people have endured. Sahni is not interested in shock value gory details, but he creates the sense of pain using tiny pictures: fleeing with her baby in her arms; burning everything, so it would not be desecrated; and a child who is shocked by the confusion and pain of adults around him but remains silent. These incidences emphasize the ubiquitous violence that seizes to be a thing of the past but is entrenched in memory and identity.



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Even the people who are not touched by the physical violence feel great emotional and moral torture. Such characters as Lala and his wife, who stay inside and witness violence that is inflicted on people outside, are tortured by the inner trauma of fear, paralysis, and ethical vacuum. The sign of the fact that they cannot even say or do anything against the carnage would be the collective numbness sweeping through societies in stressful conditions.

With the help of these interconnected stories Sahni drives her point home that the agony of Partition is not exclusive to a particular religion, a particular social strata of the society or gender. It is an illness that people share and which, at the same time, unites and separates them. The shared state of suffering in Tamas turns out to be both a history of trauma as well as a moral judgment of the systems, the colonial, political, and sectarian, which encourage suffering. With her work, Sahni encourages the readers to acknowledge that this suffering is not the attribute of the past but a reminder of the long-term implications of hatred and divisive mindsets.

### **The Catalyst and Effect of Fear**

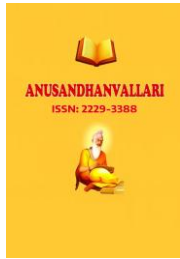
Fear does serve as the engine of the communal violence and even as byproduct of the same in Tamas forming a vicious circle into which the person and the whole community become imprisoned in the state of constant fear. Bisham Sahni chooses his words attentively, thus making the safety in the fear a political apparatus, psychological state, and a social fact. The novel is all about fear that spreads through the air and distorts the perceptions, shuts down rationality, and motivates people to do things, or accept things, they would otherwise never tolerate.

The fear is first sown by way of rumor and religious manipulation. The murder of a pig in the area neighboring a mosque, which is a seemingly insignificant matter, turns out to be a match that provides a stimulus to the hidden hatred. Religious desecration is logically exploited by the holders of power, political figures and pastors, in order to achieve their personal goals since the intimidation of religious desecration is quickly abridged. Again, in this manner, Sahni reveals the process of creating and leveraging fear as the means of control. Actions of the characters are not driven by their underlying hatred but by fear prepared and diligently fed with misinformation and mistrust of the long historical lifetime.

Fear is internalized as the novel continues. His wife Lala and the British District Officer Richard are some of the characters who undergo psychological paralysis out of the moral obligation and the protection of their own lives. Lala and his wife lock themselves up in their house fearing the madness beyond the streets and at the same time despising the price that would be paid by them by doing nothing. The colonial officer Richard illustrates the indifference and estrangement of the British managers who menace more than the human cost of massacres the political reaction. Fear, therefore, results to compromise of ethics, becoming passive, and staying silent.

Fear is a more imminent and physical feeling of the minority communities (primarily Muslim and Sikhs). Women are worried about getting kidnapped, men are anxious about being lynched, and children receive all these without making a noise. Whole communities turn into ghost towns overnight not because of fear of violence but the fear of what may occur. Sahni effectively reveals that during a period when there is communal tension, fear usually comes before violence initiation- it undermines trust thus providing the necessary environment that violence can be executed.

In addition to this, fear bears permanent effects to the psyche. The novel does not find solution or release but instead leaves on the characters in a situation full of doubt and mystery because of what they have seen or could not stop. This fear is left as an indelible mark in their lives -a scar on their lives- with which they will interact, believe, and feel secure.



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Presenting fear not only as a product, but also as a cause of communal violence, Sahni not only attacks the politics of his era, where people are being divided, but also questions the morality of the individual human being when exposed to extremities. Cautioning that fear, when established, is a self-sustaining process, Tamas adds that, societies metamorphoses into a crucible of hatred, suspicion, and inhumanity. By doing that, Sahni leaves the reader with an unavoidable concern on how fear can tear the social fabric so quickly and how the whole communities can turn into silence and suspicion being mere shadows of what they used to be.

### **Loss and Disintegration of Identity**

It is not only the loss of homes and loved ones Tamas is about, it is loss on a more fundamental level touching at identity and personal identity and common humanity, which raises it to a higher level. The Apartition as portrayed by Bhisham Sahni, not only shows how neither physical lives nor emotional and cultural identities are spared in the turmoil of violence. The characters of Tamas have this element of loss in different levels, i.e., material, psychological, moral, and existential. By doing this, Sahni highlights the horrific and lasting impacts of communal hatred which does not only make people widowed, but also out of sorts with the past versions of themselves.

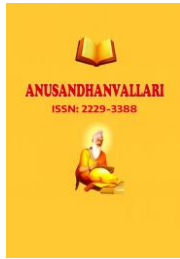
Loss of belonging is one of the most dramatic losses that is represented in Tamas. Societies that always lived together in peace such as the Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs now turn into enemies. Neighbourhoods turn into places of terror, friends are now enemies and neighbors turn out to be threats. The example of Muslim and Sikh families who had no choice but to leave the ancestral-homes demonstrates how the people were displaced due to Partition not only on a geographical level but also on a mental one. Their going away is not just migration but the physical act of breaking a symbolic connection a stumping of ties to roots, customs and a source of emotional attachment.

The book too talks about disintegration of moral illumination and communal credibility. People such as Lala Ram Lal and the officials of the area take the shape of a society that is devoid of moral values. Helplessness, silence of the so-called educated and powerful, or their complicity is symptomatic of the failure of ethical responsibility. People lost faith in the leaders, the relatives, neighbour, even themselves. The fear of betrayal outweighs the homogeneous ties in community, and such suspicion turns to be a major trait of their identities of the post Partition world.

Sahni employs the use of various point of view and piecemeal narrative to express the disintegration of the self. The markers that characters used to identify themselves (by profession, family or community) are erased or un-useful. Nathu is given as an example who is changed to the innocent labourer of guilt and communal manipulation. His sense of worth, as well as being an agent in his life, are taken away. On the same note, the female characters who persist in fear, sexual violence or forced migration are victims of a gendered version of identity loss since they are usually made invisible in the subject position and silenced without voice.

Notably, according to Tamas, this fragmentation cannot be simply cured. Even when the period of violence is over, the trauma of loss does not stop. The characters have the burdens of memory, shame and disillusionment. Those who survive will do so in a crippled state, with their intellectual self-perception shattered by the sight, sound and touch of their experiences. The only thing that occurs is the reconfiguration of identity made on the basis of grief, suspicion, and impermanence of what was lost it is not the restoration of normalcy.

In expressing the nature of loss as physical and physiological, Sahni manages to unveil the transforming force of the Partition, not only the boundaries of a state, but also the inner topography of individuals. Tamas turns into a monument to inescapable scars caused by historical trauma, a reflection on how violence does not only kill, but mutilates identity, belonging, and a promise of a common future.



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### **Technique of a Narrative and Realism**

Tamas is a work by Bhisham Sahni that can be considered a landmark of Partition literature not only due to its theme depth but also because of its exceptional experience with the narrative technique and realism. Using personal experiences and the first hand accounts of the Partition riots, Sahni creates a story filled with the elements of chaos, trauma and psychological breakdown of a society on route to disintegration. His adherence to literary realism allows the novel to serve both as a historical document and a very human story, at the same time. The fracturing narrative style Sahni employs, with its sense of multiplicity in dealing with several different points of view whilst being dry and documentary in its emotional tenor without the element of sensationalism, increases the emotional appeal of the novel.

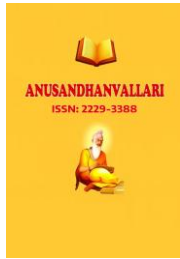
A multiperspectival narrative is yet another of the most successful measures taken by Sahni. Instead of concentrating on one character and one perspective of the problem Tamas presents to us a panoramic picture of the Partition through the lives of different people: The sweeper Nathu; the social worker Lala Ram Lal; the family that leaves the country to avoid the Partition; the colonial official Richard; and so on. This methodology is representative of the complexity of experiences of communal violence and it is made understood there are no mono-faiths, no mono-religious suffering, but rather a collective, cross-religion suffering in its essence. The various shifts of views also establishes a kind of dislocation as duplicates the psychological disjunction of both of the characters and the society they live in.

The style Sahni uses is the realist one and it is rather plain and , the language does not dramatize the acts and represents the events in their full cruelty. Violence is not given as a spectacle, it is shown as a part of everyday, grim life in the times of Partition. As an example, the incidents of riots, murders, and exile are graphically described, but mildly, and this shows a documentary touch to the novel. This realism is further strengthened by the fact that Sahni has introduced the ordinary scenes of home, kitchen, streets, and prayer halls which are in complete contrast to the extraordinary genocide, which is erupting in them. The contrast between the ordinary and disorder furthers the idea of an abrupt failure of normalcy.

The other strong side of the Sahni narrating style is his symbolic and ironical thrust. The novel starts with the slaughter of a pig, which appears to be an insignificant incident, but this leads to the all-out communal upheaval. This is symbolically so absurd how the religious feeling can be misused to provoke the mass violence. On the same note the role of the British District Officer, Richard, who observes the riots through the perspective of administrative distance is also used as an ironic comment on the colonialism distance. His character represents the ignorance of the colonial state and inability to control the outcomes of the social divide they helped to create.

Moreover, Tamas does not conclude or end. In contrast to the traditional stories, where the major resolution is reconciliation or redemption, Sahni leaves his characters in the state of uncertainty, fear, and psychological residue. This cliff-hanger ending makes clear that the trauma is not resolved, and there cannot be any easy way out of this havoc that is spreading everywhere. It also highlights the realism of Sahni- history and tragic history in particular does not speak in pat conclusions.

By mixing a realist plot with a complicated structure and pluralism of voices Bhisham Sahni turns Tamas into something more than a novel. It is a kind of archive of human misery, be such misery is a reflection of the horrors of Partition and an illustration of the power of literature to tell the truth, show restraint, and ascribe to moral courage.



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### Conclusion

The novel *Tamas* written by Bhisham Sahni is not just a story about the Partition of India, it is a shocking story, which exposes human moral weaknesses and instability as well as the tendencies toward community identification and historic trauma. In its discussion of the concept of pain, fear and loss, *Tamas* emphasizes the human toll of violence which exceeds death and destruction. It shows how once created, communal hatred creates scars that not only disintegrate lives, but whole social and cultural constructs. In her attempts at depicting suffering as a common, collective human experience, Sahni breaks down the straightforward juxtaposition of victim and culprit and focuses on the universal peace time effects of hate-based politics.

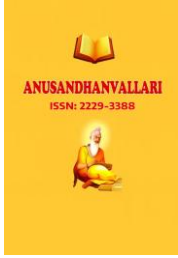
*Tamas* as a pain is a force that created the sense of lingering and all-inclusive pain that torment a person irrespective of religion, stature or status. The role of fear, as depicted in the novel, can promote violence as well as freeze people, and this demonstrates the evil nature of terror that travels through whispering, silence, and lack of action. Most importantly, the destruction that partitions would wreak would be lamented in the novel and this includes the loss of home, friendship, faith, and identity. All these themes and resonances of human cruelty ring true in the memory of readers to this day, suggesting that the problem of violence in the past has never gone away completely but still reverberates in memory and culture, as well as in transmitted trauma.

Realism and the use of narrative multiplicity bring Sahni these themes to those who actually experienced them, who are never heard in major histories. *Tamas* is both a literary and ethical success as he is able to convey the personalities of the common men entangled in unusual circumstances. There are no defeatist resolutions or redemption that one can find in the novel; it requires the reader to have a seat in discomfort, take note of how alluring the darkness that lurks within human societies is, and think about the extent of the communal division.

The world that gave birth to *Tamas*, however, is a world that is still marred by inter-sector tensions and political manipulation of every kind, therefore, *Tamas* rings even more disturbingly through today, and serves as a reminder that we should not yield ourselves to hatred, that we should be able to see the common ground of humanity in each other.

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