UNIT 5  AN OVERVIEW

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This concluding unit is meant to give you an overview of the novel and raise several questions relating to the meaning of the novel and its artistry. Besides, it succinctly presents some of the important criticism of the novel. Finally, it also talks about Govind Nihalani’s hugely popular and controversial TV serial based on the novel and briefly refers to the legal battle fought about it.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

After having sojourned together on our journey of having explored, analysed, seen Tamas thread bare in the previous four units, we now come to the finale. We shall talk about the positions and perspectives taken by the writer in his delineation of characters and events, the literary criticism available on Tamas. However we shall leave you to seek for yourself whether the writer is partisan or objective? Is he balanced? And finally, is he non-judgmental?

As thinking adults you should be able to wrestle with these questions yourself and reach your own conclusions.

5.2 A PANORAMIC VIEW

_Tamas_ is the portrait of a West Punjab town in the grip of communal frenzy in pre-partition India. The narrator’s camera moves over the city giving us more or less brief glimpses of scenes and people and the goings-on in the town. Assembled together, the novel presents a composite picture that is
comprehensive, harmonious and vibrant. The eruption of the riots shatters everything.

5.2.1 The Writer's Objectivity

I think that the major strength of the novel is its objectivity and the evenness of its tone. This objectivity results in the writer's general reluctance to intrude into the narrative. There are occasions when he does so but such occasions are not many. Even the few that are there are in a low key.

The writer's objectivity is deliberate. He is against frenzy of any kind. Witness the congregation scene in the gurdwara and later the chase-and-conversion scene involving Iqbal Singh. The whole novel is a strong plea for sanity and rationality in the matter of religious and political issues and asks us not to get swayed by outdated traditions and beliefs. The writer's objectivity is reflected in his style also, in the choice of the words he uses. So in a very real sense he is practising what he sets out to say.

A good example of the writer's objective style could be seen in his presentation of the character of Shah Nawaz. He maintains his temper and his equanimity even while talking about Shah Nawaz's great hatred for Milkhi.

...Shah Nawaz gave a sharp kick to Milkhi on his back. Milkhi stumbled and fell head downward. As he went tumbling down, his head struck against the wall at the turn of the staircase; his forehead split and his spine broke. When Shah Nawaz came down the staircase, Milkhi's head was hanging downward from one of the last steps in the staircase. Shah Nawaz was still in a rage, the spurt of anger had not subsided. Coming down the staircase, he felt like lifting his foot and hitting Milkhi on the face so as to crush the centipede (177).

Notice that Bhisham Sahni avoids using adjectives. The only adjective he uses is 'sharp' in 'sharp kick'. The word 'centipede' carries a strong emotional charge but the concentrated hatred that it conveys is Shah Nawaz's, not his own. The writer is merely reporting. This objectivity combined with the complexity of his character makes him a memorable character and the writer's presentation extremely effective. The scene becomes ironical when Shah Nawaz goes and delivers the jewellery box to his friend's wife and she thinks of him as 'a saint', a 'punyatma' (in the Hindi version). This is Bhisham Sahni at his best.

Even Ramzan who is one of the cruelest characters in the novel shows that he has some humanity left in him.

But how does Sahni present his Hindu fundamentalist characters? It seems — and this is my personal opinion — that when he comes to Vanprasthi and Ranvir's Master Dev Vratt, his usual objectivity seems to desert him and is overtaken by mockery and stinging satire. As a result they are both painted in dark colours. In the case of Shah Nawaz, the narrator discovers his character and the discovery is not complete until the end. But when he comes to Vanprasthi, he knows all that he needs to know about him and he begins with mockery. He does not discover, he merely uncovers. The question is: Why does he lose his temper? And why does he oversimplify their characters? Is it
that his ideological compulsions drive out his artistic objectivity, which is one of the strong points of the novel?

Every writer has his or her predilections, his own point of view, and his own beliefs. Bhisham Sahni has his and he is entitled to them. But if his being a communist interferes in the process of his artistry, it is a matter for concern. His presentation of Congressmen is rather unflattering. They are presented as a squabbling lot, needling and mocking at one another. Bakhshiji and Jamail are the two most sincere Congressmen in the town but notice how Bhisham Sahni introduces Bakhshiji:

A man with a hurricane lamp had turned the corner of the Bara Bazar and was coming towards the Congress office. The light of the lamp fell only on the man’s legs so it seemed as though only a pair of pajamas was walking along (12). (italics added)

The question is: why this jocularity? What has Bakhshiji done or will do to deserve this mockery? He is the first person who suggests that the dead pig should be removed from the mosque and proceeds to do so with the help of Jamail. He is the prime mover of the delegation to the Deputy Commissioner. While the rioting is on, he goes to the house of Hayat Baksh at great personal risk and the two sign a joint appeal for peace. His prophecy of death and destruction — “Kites will fly” — ultimately proves true. Yet at the end Bhisham Sahni writes him off: ‘Ever since the riots had broken out, Bakshi’s mind had been in a sort of mist. He keeps saying to himself again and again that the British had again had the last word, had again had the better of them while his own hold on the situation has been feeble all along’ (308-09). (italics added) This unceremonious dismissal of Bakhshiji doesn’t carry conviction, not to this reader at least.

On the other hand Bhisham Sahni projects Comrade Dev Datt, Sohan Singh and Mir Dad as being indefatigably active in bringing peace to the villages and the town. Sohan Singh loses his life doing so. All this is praiseworthy. But why should it be necessary to deflate and demigrate one set of characters in order to be able to praise another? In a mood of self-congratulation, he even makes Dev Datt describe himself and his friends as ‘professional revolutionaries’. Listen to Dev Datt speaking to Manohar Lal who does not want to sit in the peace bus in which a communist is sitting:

‘Manohar Lal, we don’t mince matters. We are not the tail of the Congress. We are professional revolutionaries. We are working to bring about peaceful conditions in the town and to that end it is necessary to bring together the leaders of all the parties, including your party of which you are the sole follower’ (350-51). (italics added)

This assertion remains uncontested in the novel and also unsubstantiated.

5.2.2 Focus on the Poor and the Underprivileged

Another important dimension of the novel is its focus on the poor and underprivileged who are exploited and who suffer most in the event of rioting. Nathu’s portraiture is truly a triumph of the creative imagination. This character remains etched in our memories long after the book has been put aside.
5.2.3 Dispersal of Interest

The writer's project of depicting a whole town in the grip of communal frenzy has had its disadvantages. We never get to know any of the characters in any great depth. There is a certain dispersion of interest in the novel. The only character that we get close to is Nathu. Richard and Liza come next with Shah Nawaz, Jamail and Bakshiji coming a distant third.

5.2.4 Polyphonic Voices

We hear several voices in the novel. Whose is the dominant voice in the novel? I think the chief concern of the novel is the maintenance of communal amity and the avoidance of religious and political frenzies and the necessity of viewing issues sanely and rationally. (One wonders if that is why the writer has avoided introducing the stereotype of love across the religious barrier.) If the novel has a mouthpiece, it apparently consists of the trio of Comrade Dev Datt, Sohan Singh and Mir Dad. Their entire effort in the novel has been to bring the different communities together and facilitate the establishment of peace. But while doing so, they also repeatedly assert that the riots are all engineered by the British. In saying this they seem to be absolving the communities of any responsibility for the mayhem. If this is Bhisham Sahni's view also, it seems to be an oversimplification of a complex reality.

The British are able to bring the riots under their control when they want to and to that extent they are culpable but the religious antipathies between Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs were patent. And the British exploited them to the full. It was at best a fragile togetherness that existed, so fragile that it crumbled under the slightest pressure. So, when the writer asserts in his key statement (115) that 'the rhythm or symphony was the creation of centuries of communal living, of the inhabitants having come together in harmony', he is romanticizing the situation a bit, saying what is politically correct or desirable, not what is real. What really existed could be called, in the words of another writer on partition, Krishna Sobti, 'a working harmony'. The hiatus between the communities had been growing. The Pir of Gofra is said to be blessed with healing powers. But this is what one of his admirers says about him:

'But the Pir Saheb does not touch kafirs with his hands. He hates infidels. Earlier, it was different. Anyone could go to him. Only, if an infidel came for treatment, he would feel his pulse with a stick—putting one end of the stick on the pulse and the other to his ear, and thus diagnose his disease. But now he does not permit any kafir to come near him.' (Italics added)

And he is 'a pir with very high spiritual attainments.' The reference to earlier times is not to yesterday or the day before but to quite sometime back.

Another important 'voice' that we hear in the novel is that of Nathu and through him of the poor and the deprived section of society. Throughout the novel we don't hear him speak a word, except to Murad Ali who does not recognize him, and to his wife. And the 'voice' that we hear is the voice of his evolving consciousness and this voice is silenced at the end.

Yet another voice that we hear in the novel is the voice of true religious piety represented by Harnam Singh. It has nothing to do with religious texts and
scriptures but of kindness and love in actual conduct and faith in human
goodness. The writer, as we said earlier, is against religious frenzy but this is
different. Along with Harnam Singh is the small voice of humanity heard
through the tall and stately figure of Roja who gives shelter to Harnam Singh
and his wife saying: ‘Shall I push out a person who has come seeking shelter?
Everyone has to go into God’s presence one day’ (258).

Besides the above voices, we hear yet another voice, not as loud and clear and
rational as that of Comrade Dev Datt and friends but the voice of a character
who may be poor and ill-dressed and eccentric but whose commitment to the
nationalistic ideal is complete. The history of the freedom struggle is full of
figures like Jamail who gave their all for their country but remained on the
margins, and died unsung and unmourned.

5.2.5 Question of Optimism or Pessimism

The novel as a whole doesn’t sound very optimistic. An idealist like Jamail is
dead. Bakshiji, alone among the Congress activists after Jamail, is committed
to nationalism heart and soul but he is presented as being full of despair. His
sentence prophesying death and destruction in the city — ‘Kites will fly’
becomes his signature. Moreover those like Dev Datt, Sohan Singh and
Mir Dad who are honestly and actively engaged in promoting peace are only
partially effective.

The last scene in the novel shows us the elite of the town belonging to
different political parties talking among themselves. Knowing them as we do,
does the novel raise any hope that the peace will be lasting? Not if there are
people like Murad Ali in the forefront. The peace achieved there seems a
patchwork peace, very fragile and likely to break under the slightest pressure.
The bus for peace seems more like a charade. This pessimism is vocalized at
the end of Chapter 20 in the form of comments from the omniscient author
who is doing duty for the author:

‘Every person coming to the Relief Office had, as it were, brought with him,
his bag of experience. But no one had the ability to assess these experiences
or to draw inferences from them. They stared into vacancy and listened, with
their ears pricked to whatever anyone said…. No one knew in which direction
to turn, or what lay in store for him or her, or the kind of future it would be. It
appeared as though a remorseless whirl of events would occur into the vortex
of which they would all be sucked, none having either the capacity or the
option to stay out, that no one would be able to take into his own hands the
reins of his life. They moved like puppets…’

Whether or not the writer’s pessimism is the result of hindsight—the novel
was written twenty-five years after the partition — it reflects the reality that
must have stared everyone in the face in those dark times.

The choice of the metaphor of a whirlpool to refer to political forces let loose,
that will suck everyone into it and puppets for individuals is entirely
appropriate for partition was effected the following year.

But since the novel has two faces and one of them looks forward to the future,
it is hopeful — that is, if we come out of the ‘tamas’ of outdated traditions and
prejudices and behave calmly and realistically.
5.2.6 The Title Tamas

*Tamas* means darkness, the darkness induced by communalism, by our refusal to see things in the right perspective. It means our blindness to view things sanely and rationally. The word also takes us back to the ancient Sanskrit adage ‘Tamasoma jyotirgamaya’ [Let darkness be dispelled by light!], in the light of which the darkness referred to is the darkness of ignorance, the ignorance caused by our not knowing enough. Along with this is the unspoken hope that out of this darkness will emerge knowledge and enlightenment.

5.2.7 Tamas in Translation

As stated earlier there are two translations of *Tamas* available: one by Bhisham Sahni which has the same title as the Hindi version and an earlier translation by Jai Ratan with the title *The Kites Will Fly*. Bhisham Sahni has been a teacher of English in a college in Delhi and his translation of the Hindi text makes a felicitous reading. I am not sure if he has left an account of the problems he faced while translating his own novel. But on the basis of the translation, the following points could be made.

- The distinction between Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi is naturally lost in the English translation.
- Even so, the writer has retained some of the local terms and with them their associations. These culturally loaded terms used for Hindus by Muslims are karar and baniya. The Hindu term of contempt mlechha and the Muslim term of contempt for Hindus kafir are also retained.
- The writer has also made some minor alterations in the text. For instance, the Punjabi abuse used for Parkasho by Alla Rakha – *soore niye bachiye* (the daughter of a pig) – is changed in the translation to another abuse in Urdu – *haramzadi*. (Chapter 20).
- The writer obviously feels the need for explaining. This is clear from the Hindi text also where the songs and couplets and idioms and abuses in Punjabi are explained in Hindi within brackets.

Surprisingly there is an example of this in the English translation also. Witness the writer’s report on Aziz’s reaction to Bakshiji’s arrival for the prabhat pheri: ‘As he drew near, Aziz greeted him by reciting a satirical couplet …’ (Chapter 2).

Anyone interested in more examples of alterations and/or additions of this kind could do so. The only thing that could be said here is that the changes made are insignificant.

5.3 LITERARY CRITICISM ON TAMAS

The novel has received a lot of attention from critics who have looked at various aspects of it. Some of the points raised are as follows:
According to Prayag Shukla, an early critic of Tamas, the novel brought out the fact that "communal riots were not the culmination of just the political issues, fought with vehemence at the time, but were the outcome of the so-called 'age-old values' and false prestige and pride, cherished in the name of religion by the communities, and 'divide and rule' policy of the British". He quotes a key sentence from the text which says (in translation) that "these men who were fighting each other, had their feet in the modern times, and had their minds stored (sic) in the medieval ages." This critic also makes the point that women characters in the novel were less communal than the men, though he felt that Liza was treated like a puppet, with no scope for what he called 'the complexities of life' (Indian Literature, XVI 3-4, 1973, 220-22).

To my knowledge, by far the most illuminating comments on Tamas have come from the well-known Hindi writer Rajendra Yadav. In his interview ‘Tamas: Rachnatmak Dabaavon ki Khoj’ ['Tamas: Search for Creative Pressures'] given in September 1976 reprinted in Alochana, April-Sept. 2004 issue, Rajendra Yadav concedes that Tamas is a neat, well-organized novel in which situations don't develop but are only introduced, much like detective stories, and that there is a peculiar freshness about it. It has several great scenes that shine like lamps in the novel — the scene where Nathu kills a pig is one of the most unforgettable scenes in Hindi literature, like the nightmarish effect of scenes from Dostovesky or Kafka. Similarly the scene of mass suicide by women in the gurdwara gets imprinted on the consciousness like a painting of Amrita Sher-Gill. Other memorable scenes that he mentions are: the initiation of Ranvir, the old Sikh couple on the run, and Shah Nawaz's retrieving of Raghu Nath's wife's jewellery and his giving a deadly kick to the servant Milkhi while doing so. He points out that Bhisham Sahni is at his best when he is not documenting remembered or heard events but envisioning them with the help of his own creative imagination.

However, he feels that because of the dispersion of form, it is able neither to recreate the contemporary anguish nor produce the full impact of its horror. This would probably have been possible if instead of anthologizing a number of episodes, the author had focused on one individual or one family, something that he did with the whole family of Harnam Singh in a small way. Thus despite the book possessing all the potentiality of greatness and despite Bhisham Sahni’s great writing ability, Tamas has just remained a neatly-crafted, well-organized, and a very good novel, a relevant document but not a book endowed with the warmth of creativity and shared emotions. Rajendra Yadav repeats his views on Tamas in his editorial in Hans of September 2003 written after Bhisham Sahni’s death.

Rajendra Yadav traces the paucity of Hindi writing on partition to the dilemma that the writer faces. Those who have suffered in partition run the risk of being pushed into communalism in their thinking. The risk is there because the problem of communalism is both alive and delicate. This compels the writer to try to present a picture in which one Hindu killing is balanced against a Muslim killing and human kindness is evenly divided. "Those who caused the vast conflagration have gone away and we have not yet settled our attitude towards them". With remarkable candor, he says that in our hearts we don't accept them as our brothers but are not able to say so openly. We keep convincing ourselves that they are our brothers, not enemies. This compels us to keep repeating stock situations in our writing. He says that deep faith in man alone can help determine the writer's attitude. That is why he considers
the writing of Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s writing on partition to be the best. The whole article is worth reading.

Govind Nihalani considered the book to have been written with an approach that was ‘very reflective and non-judgmental’. The writer, according to him, was ‘extremely compassionate’.

Several articles recognize the central role that Richard plays in the novel in respect of fomenting communal trouble in the novel. The continuing relevance of the novel in the context of the recurring communal riots has also been noted. So also, the pessimistic ending of the novel (Alochana, 44-52).

One charge against Tamas is that the novel has been written from the point of view of Congress nationalism. But this has been contested and evidence adduced to show that the Congress nationalism is shown to be hollow and the contradictions within it are present from the beginning to the end. The same critic also contradicts the view that Richard has been depicted as the sole mastermind behind the rioting (Alochana, 57).

5.4 TAMAS AS A TV SERIAL

Tamas was made into a TV serial by the well-known filmmaker Govind Nihalani in 1986. When he read the book, he decided there and then to turn it into a serial. Bhisham Sahni himself played the part of an old Sikh on the run (Harnam Singh in the novel). Dina Pathak acted as his wife, Banto. The writer said that this role was drawn from a real Sardar whom he had met and whose report he had prepared while serving in a refugee camp in those troubled days. Om Puri played the part of Nathu and Deepa Sahi that of his wife. One of the changes made in the serial is that the person who asks Nathu to kill a pig is named Chaudhri who is a thekedar (contractor) and not Murad Ali. The Masterji who initiates young Ranvir into the Hindu Youth Organization is called ‘Guru’.

It was a six-hour long film that was broken up and shown on six Saturday nights from 10 p.m. onwards beginning from 9th January 1988.

The serial proved highly controversial and was accused of ‘being lop-sided in implicating the Hindus alone in the scenes depicting violence’ (Ravikant: 163). The matter was raised by one Javed Ahmed Siddiqui, a practicing advocate of the Bombay High Court through a writ petition in the Bombay High Court in January 1988. Later the matter went up to the Supreme Court but both the courts refused to intervene in the matter.

The accusation was that ‘there was a real danger of the film … inciting people to violence and to commit other offences arising out of communal disharmony.’ But the Supreme Court said: ‘If some scenes of violence, some nuances of expression or some events in the film can stir up certain feelings in the spectator, an equally deep, strong, lasting and beneficial impression can be conveyed by scenes revealing the machinations of selfish interests, scenes depicting mutual respect and tolerance, scenes showing comradeship, help and
kindness which transcend the barriers of religion.' The film, the judgment said, attempted to 'expose the motives of persons who operate behind the scenes to generate and foment conflicts and to emphasize the desire of persons to live in amity and the need for them to rise above religious barriers and treat one another with kindness, sympathy and affection.'

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this concluding unit we have given you a panoramic view of Tamas summing up various issues raised earlier in our discussion. We have also provided you with literary criticism and comments on Tamas as a TV serial.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. ‘It seems kites and vultures will hover over the town for a long time.’ Do you think this sentence conveys the overall mood of the novel?

2. What part does religion play in Tamas?

3. In what sense could Nathu be called the conscience of the novel?

4. Write short notes on
   i. Shah Nawaz
   ii. Ramzan
   iii. Harman Singh and Banto
   iv. Murad Ali
   v. Bakshiji
   vi. Jarnail
   vii. Comrade Dev Datt

5. ‘The novel is a severe criticism of British imperialism in India.’ Discuss.


7. ‘After Nathu, Bakshiji is the most socially sensitive character in the novel.’ Do you agree? Discuss.

8. Discuss the writer’s treatment of the theme of communalism in Tamas.

5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Sources


Interviews

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On Narrative


