UNIT 3  MAKING SENSE OF THE NARRATIVE

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3.0  OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to discuss the novel in terms of its narrative and various aspects of it, its function and its organization. It also discusses the main theme of the novel and the use of language. After reading the unit you will be able to discuss its narratology, theme, language and style.

3.1  INTRODUCTION

After giving you the detailed storyline of the novel in the previous unit, in this unit we take you to another important aspect of the novel — its narratology, to make you aware of the various ways available with the writer to narrate the story and be visible or not visible as the case may be. Another significant aspect of the novel — its preponderant theme will be the topic of our next discussion followed by a critique on language and style.

3.2  UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVE

I think it would be helpful to begin this discussion of narrative in this novel with the necessary distinction between the writer and the narrator. Bhisham Sahni is the writer of Tamas but who is the narrator? Who is telling the story?
The narrator may be a major character or a minor character, or he may not be a character at all but a mere observer. He may be someone who stands outside the novel or may be a character within it. There is another way of looking at the question. Is someone telling his/her own story, in which case it would be a first person narrative or is the narrator one who stands outside the story but who knows the minds of all the characters. In this case we would call him an omniscient narrator. It all depends upon what the writer intends to do in the novel and how best he thinks he can marshal the resources of the novel to fulfill his objective. There are many possibilities.

In his discussion of the narrative Jonathan Culler has raised several general questions that could help us understand the narrative in this novel and how it affects us and of course other narratives as well. These questions are:

1. Who speaks? Or whose voice do we hear in the novel?
2. Who speaks to whom? In other words, who is the audience the narrative is addressed to?
3. Who speaks when? The timing of narration is important: how long after the occurrence of the events does the narration begin?
4. Who speaks what language?
5. Who speaks with what authority?
6. Who sees? Or who is the focalizer?
7. And finally what function does the narrative perform?

We shall briefly discuss each of these questions as they apply to the novel in hand.

3.2.1 Who Speaks?

In Tamas the story comes from an all-knowing, third person narrator, someone who knows everyone and everything and who can go where he likes. The narrator is not a character in the novel and refers to all the characters in it in the third person either by name or as ‘he’ or ‘she’. As we said before such a narrator is called an omniscient narrator. We call such a narrator omniscient because he has the godlike ability to go everywhere and enter the mind of any character, and possesses power and control that come from unlimited knowledge. Here is a sample from the first chapter:

Nathu could not refuse either. How could he? He dealt with Murad Ali every day? 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. Besides, Murad Ali was a man of contacts. There was hardly a person, connected with the Municipal Committee, with whom he did not have dealings. *Italicics added*

Notice that in this brief excerpt we are in the mind of Nathu who has the unwelcome task of killing a pig, on his hands. Notice also that Nathu and Murad Ali are referred to by their names, or by ‘he’ or ‘him’. In the following chapter we move on to the Congress prabhā pheri, and then to Richard and Liza the same morning taking a ride together and thereafter to other scenes and people.
The choice of an omniscient third person narrator is appropriate, indeed crucial, for a novel that seeks to present an objective picture of a town in the grip of communal frenzy. It enables the all-seeing narrator to take his camera over the entire city and beyond and move from place to place, from scene to scene and from people to people. S/he can go inside a character’s head and also go above and beyond the events in the narrative. The last paragraph of Chapter 20 is essentially a view of the human scene of 1946-47 from the vantage point of the present.

But of course, the narrator has to be selective. As Paul Cobley suggests in his useful book Narrative, ‘in the act of representation he is forced to select areas of knowledge for narration and to deselect others. S/he is able to allow some characters’ voices to be heard and not others.’ This is true of Tamas too.

In the first thirteen chapters, for instance, we have selective glimpses of or hear about the entire district town (in West Punjab) — its geography: the spacious municipal grounds, the Grain Market, the Shivala Bazaar, the Imam Din Mohalla, the Naya Mohalla, and other lanes, Kailon ki Masjid and Jama Masjid and Mai Satto dhamashala and the cantonment where the Deputy Commissioner lives; its history of harmonious living with different communities mostly living in mixed mohallas; prominent Muslims like Hayat Baksh and Shah Nawaz, and Hindus like Bakshiji, Lala Lakshmi Narain, Raghu Nath, Vanprasthiji and Master Dev Vrat and his disciples, Ranvir and Inder, and the indefatigable Comrade Dev Datt, the mysterious Murad Ali and finally poor Nathu who unwittingly becomes the cause of all the mayhem let loose; its sounds: the sound of the tower-clock of the Sheikh’s garden, the azan, the temple bells, the dreaded alarm bell of the Shivala temple, prabhat pheri songs, the Congress and the Muslim League slogans; its holy men: the fakirs and the Pir of Golra; and its superstitions and beliefs. The remaining eight chapters come in with more details.

At times the narrator gives such intimate glimpses as the conversation of two children defecating outside their house and the obscene game that Shah Nawaz finds the children playing unconcernedly on the day after the outbreak of rioting. All this is meant to help re-create the district town in which the events narrated occurred. The narrator’s roving camera shows a wide range of pictures and scenes and individuals and he depicts the major ‘actors’ who were to play their part in the partition drama. The narrative is thus meant to narrate into existence a pre-partition West Punjab district town in undivided India caught in the whirlpool of communal strife in 1946.

The narrator’s selection is also clear not only in what s/he includes but what s/he leaves out. For instance, though we hear the Muslim League slogans shouted and their idée fixe about the Congress being an organization of Hindus only, reiterated time and again, we are not allowed to have a close-up of Muslim League thinking or discussing an issue just as we have of the Congressmen or the Hindu organization. One reason for this could be that the separatist agenda of the Muslim League is well known.

Complete objectivity of the narrative is of course an impossible ideal, for the medium of language itself is not neutral and the writer’s own perception is bound to colour the narrative. Even so, objectivity is crucial in a novel that deals with the highly sensitive and emotive, even volatile issue of partition. The work as a whole must carry conviction with the readers or at least with most of them. Since it also deals with historical facts, it must also be authentic. Or else, the writer’s efforts have been in vain.
The omniscient narrator may be intrusive and make his presence felt in the novel as, for instance, in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, or he may confine himself largely or wholly to objective re-presentation. If you have read *Tamas*, you will have realized that the novel leans towards objective re-presentation and lets the readers draw his or her own conclusions from the evidence that the narrator, presents. There are of course occasions when the narrator speaks in his own person, which we shall note later.

### 3.2.2 Who Speaks to Whom?

Every fictional narrator has an audience in mind. Who is the target audience of this novel? In other words, who is the narratee? Indians, of course. Naturally, everyone else is free to read it but its most likely audience would be knowledgeable Indians — all those who share a concern with the results of partition and are impacted by it. The reaction of the audience may be very different in Pakistan. Even here the reaction to the TV serial made on the novel, if not the novel itself, was somewhat divided. But its direct appeal is to Indians for it tries to give an impartial picture of the communal situation in the town and indirectly tries to warn them of the dangers of communal thinking in secular India. Embedded in the novel is the writer’s belief in secularism as the bedrock on which the edifice of the country stands and he expects Indians to share that belief.

### 3.2.3 Who Speaks When?

The narrator may narrate the events soon after they have happened, or, as is more common, talk about them after the final event is over. When the latter is the case, the narrator actually looks back at the entire train of events.

In *Tamas*, the narrator is talking of events long after they have occurred. The events in the novel are supposed to have happened in the chosen city in 1946 whereas Bhisham Sahni’s novel was completed in 1974, nearly thirty years later. Nehru’s Interim Government was in place and partition was a certainty.

Obviously the narrator is looking back at past events but he is doing so in the light of the communal situation today. He has said that the riots in Bhiwandi revived the memories of partition events and he started writing the novel. The question is: Does the distance between the time of the events and the time of narration enable the narrator to look at the entire complex of events in a more objective manner and to gain a mature perspective on them? It does. As evidence, one example should suffice. Read para 1 of chapter 18 where the omniscient narrator is talking of the psyche of the Sikhs besieged in the Syedpur gurdwara (The ‘warriors’ had their feet in the twentieth century while their minds were in medieval times.) (282). *Here the narrator is looking at the scene of 1946 from the perspective of the present. Look for other examples yourself.*

### 3.2.4 Who Speaks What Language?

We hear several voices in the novel. We do so because the narrator not only tells but also shows and while showing makes us hear different voices. For instance, we see (and hear) Nathu cogitating within himself and finally disclosing his secret to his wife. We hear Congressmen squabbling while
going on a round of prabhat pheri. Similarly we hear fundamentalists, both Hindus and Muslims, talk their language — to Hindu fundamentalists, Muslims are meelchas, and to Muslims, Hindus are kafirs. We see a fundamentalist Hindu youth organization at work and are a witness to how a 15-year recruit is enticed into stabbing an innocent, poor old Muslim to death. Adversity often brings out the best in us and we see young Sikh women with or without children in their arms jump to their death rather than face capture at the hands of Muslim marauders. We also have Comrade Dev Datt who calls himself a professional revolutionary trying to bring peace between the embattled communities. Finally we have the British rulers’ point of view voiced strongly through Richard and his deliberate policy of playing off Muslims against Hindus in religious matters. The novel is polyphonic.

The novel ultimately upholds the ideal of communal amity and valorizes the active part that the communists played in promoting communal harmony in those fateful days. Theirs is one of the main voices that we hear in the novel. Whether or not this is historically true is another matter.

3.2.5 Who Speaks with What Authority?

‘To tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant,’ says Jonathan Culler. In other words, we want our narrator to be reliable. This is true of all novels. In a partition novel the responsibility of the narrator is much greater because it has to have a ring of authenticity. While the writer is free to invent, he must also ensure that the historical events narrated are true and that the invented events are credible. Or else, the entire project of writing a partition novel will misfire and fail.

3.2.6 Who Sees?

Ordinarily we talk of the ‘point of view’ from which the story is told. The person who sees may be the same as the person who speaks but not necessarily. They may be different. The person who sees is the person whose vision is presented.

Jonathan Culler puts the question in another way: Who is the focalizor? Through whose consciousness are the events brought into focus? The focalizor may be external, ‘an anonymous agent’ who exists outside the story. Such a focalizor could be called the narrator-focalizor. Or he may be a character, which participates in the action as an actor, in which case he would be an internal focalizor. Let us take an example: the story ‘Kabuliwalla’ by Tagore. If you remember the story, you will recognize that the narrator in the story is Mini’s father but he is not the focalizor. The focalizor is Rahman, the kabuliwalla who brings dry fruit for Mini.

What can we say about Tamas? Here we have external focalization, a task that is accomplished by an omniscient narrator-focalizor. But focalization has both a subject and an object: someone who focalizes, the focalizor, and someone or something that is focalized. How is the focalized person or thing perceived? From outside, or from inside? For instance, in Tamas, Nathu is perceived from inside, as perhaps no one else is focalized in the novel. We remain in his consciousness for long in the novel. He is the unwilling doer of an act, which sets off the whole series of events. Later we remain with him as he moves about restlessly in the lanes and bazaars of the city battling against
the feeling of guilt for a crime that he did not commit. And we know him as don't know anyone else.

But, while Nathu is perceived from inside, he himself perceives or focalizes Murad Ali from the outside. In other words, we view Murad Ali through him but the latter remains an enigma to him as he remains to us. Later when Nathu is no longer needed, he is discarded. We are told (in Chapter 21) that he is dead. Or who knows?, he may have been eliminated. Nathu emerges as the symbol of a commoner who is exploited by powerful groups to serve their own ends.

What about the other characters in the novel? Do they also serve as focalizers? Who are the other focalizers? Make a list.

**Hint:** Richard is another important character who we see more fully than many other characters. We learn much about his attitude to Indians and to Liza.

### 3.2.7 Function of the Narrative

Stories, we are told, are man's chief way to make sense of things.

Narratives give us pleasure. But the pleasure of narratives is also linked to the desire for knowledge: 'we want to discover secrets, to know the end, to find the truth.' (Culler: 92) Narratives enable us 'to see things from other vantage points, and to understand others' motives that are opaque to us.' (93)

What about *Tamas*? *Tamas* makes interesting reading or to put it in the current jargon, it is an interesting read.

But it also tries to make sense of the complex reality of partition, of what happened during partition and immediately before and after it, and why; and it also suggests how we could avert a communal holocaust today. It exposes the designs of British rulers to exploit religious differences among the communities and shows what unbridled passion and frenzy could lead us to and the subhuman levels we could all descend to. But the novel is also a warning, a warning against narrow, sectarian thinking and religious bigotry that claims an exclusive place for itself. It also emphasizes the need for rational, balanced thinking without being swayed by outdated traditions and prejudices.

*Tamas* also gives us insights into complex human motivation and behaviour, which are far removed from our stereotyped thinking.

Narratives can also provide social criticism. In *Tamas* this is applicable to the plight of Nathu, Milkhi and Nanku, and other characters, who are at the lowest rung of society. They are always at the receiving end in any public tragedy.

### 3.3 HOW IS THE NARRATIVE ORGANIZED?

**(STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL)**

The core of the novel is the communal frenzy in the town, what led to it and what it led to and how it was contained. Since the writer's roving camera goes
over the entire town and beyond, the structure inevitably appears loose. But of course it is well planned.

The original Hindi narrative is divided into two parts. (The English translation by the author does away with this division.) Part One comprises thirteen chapters and begins and ends with Nathu and shows the disastrous results of his innocent act of killing a pig. This part occupies some 213 pages of a novel of 352 pages.

In these thirteen chapters we are introduced to all the major forces in the town: the Congress, the Muslim League, the British administrator, Hindu fundamentalists and the communists. We pass through the lanes of the town and also its Bara Bazar, both before and after the rioting. Much of this comes to us through the consciousness of Nathu. Part one of the novel ends, with Nathu confessing his sin to his wife.

Part Two consisting of 8 chapters could be divided into two sections. The first section comprising 5 chapters (Chapters 14 to 18) takes us to the surrounding villages where the violence has spread, and focuses mainly on the Sikhs living there, particularly on one family — of Harnam Singh and his wife Banto, their son Iqbal Singh, and daughter Jasbir.

The last three chapters from 19 to 21 take us back to the town and show the efforts of the administration and the people to restore peace and also give us an idea of relief work being done for the victims of violence.

### 3.4 OMNIPRESENT NARRATOR

An important point to be made about the narrative is that the narrator is not only omniscient but also omnipresent. He knows what happens in several places at the same time. Notice that several chapters start in the morning itself. Here is what happens in the first nine chapters, the action in all of them starting on Sunday.

- **Chapter 1** Saturday evening till dawn on Sunday morning — Nathu kills a pig.
- **Chapter 2** Sunday morning 4 o’clock outside the Congress office.
- **Chapter 3** Sunday morning — Nathu wanders about around the lanes of the city; encounters the Congress prahat pheri.
- **Chapter 4** Sunday morning — Richard and Liza are out taking a morning ride.
- **Chapter 5** Sunday late morning — prahat pheri continued. Bakshi and Jarnail remove the dead pig from the mosque.
- **Chapter 6** Sunday around noon or a little later. Vanprasthiji holds a meeting at the satsang.
- **Chapter 7** Sunday afternoon — Citizens’ delegation to the Deputy Commissioner
- **Chapter 8** Sunday afternoon to evening — the Shivala Market and Bara Bazar etc. in the evening; Nathu reaches home at night after daylong wandering.
- **Chapter 9** Sunday night — Lala Lakshmi Narain’s house; Grain Market on fire.
You can see that some of these scenes run concurrently or partly overlap in their timing. For instance, the Congress activists in Chapter 2 probably start gathering outside the Congress office before Nathu leaves his hut after killing the pig in the opening chapter. Chapters 3 and 4 probably start almost at about the same time. Again Chapters 4 and 5 overlap in their action. Chapters 6 and 7 also overlap in their action. This is clear from a reference in Chapter 6 that a delegation has already gone to meet the Deputy Commissioner. This meeting is described in Chapter 7. The last part of Chapter 8 deals with events on the night of the first day. When Nathu goes home at night, he notices flames rising from the Grain Market. In Chapter 9 Lala Lakshmi Narain also notices the flames of the Grain Market, which indicates overlapping.

Similarly, in the second part there are three strands of action, that is, in five chapters from 14 to 18 — Harnam Singh and Banto seeking shelter in Dhok Muridpur, Sikhs of Syedpur gather together in the gurdwara and fight a pitched battle with the Turks, and Iqbal Singh is hounded out by a Muslim mob and is converted to Islam. Apparently all the three episodes run concurrently, or at least overlap and happen on the third and fourth days of rioting. Certainly the Harnam Singh episode in Chapter 16 takes place at Ehsan Ali’s house in the absence of Ramzan who, we are told, has gone for Tabligh, for conversion. This conversion takes place in Chapter 17. Also the Sikhs’ preparation and fight with the Muslim marauders is one action but the writer has divided it into two — Chapter 15 dealing with the preparation and Chapter 18 with the fight and the Sikh women’s heroism and the cessation of rioting. The last three chapters cover two days after the rioting has stopped.

3.4.1 Comments of the Author/Omniscient Narrator

Generally the narrator’s presentation is objective and he allows the readers to draw his own conclusions but there are occasions when he intrudes upon the attention of the readers with comments on the scene or character or the situation. Here is a list of some of these comments.

1. ‘How calm and peaceful were the beginnings of the day’s business.’ (Chapter 3, 29)
2. ‘It appeared as though the sound was coming from the sky.’ (Chapter 3, 31)
3. ‘Every activity in the business of life appeared to be moving as rhythmically as part of a symphony. When Ibrahim the pedlar selling scents and oils with the bag on his back full of bottles big and small and another bag hanging from his shoulder, went from lane to lane shouting about his wares, it appeared as though his movements too were in keeping with that rhythm... So were the movements of the women with their earthen pitchers going to the water taps, tongas plying on the roads, children going to school. Every activity gave the impression of having combined to create an inner harmony to which the heart of the town throbbed. It was to the same rhythm that people were born, grew up and became old, that generations came and went. This rhythm or symphony was the creation of centuries of communal living, of the inhabitants having come together in harmony. One would think that every activity was like a chord in a musical
instrument and if even one string snapped the instrument would produce only jarring notes.' (Chapter 8, 115)

4. ‘There is a quality of character which some people possess, an inner balance which strikes an equation with any situation, and does not make any demands on life that are beyond their reach. Such people are always cheerful and are like flowers that have blossomed fully.’ (Chapter 8, 138)

5. ‘As the day dawned, the town, as though stung by a cobra, bore a half-dead half-alive appearance. (Chapter 10, 161)

6. ‘Overnight, dividing lines had been drawn among the residential localities. No Muslim now dared to go into a Hindu locality, nor a Hindu into a Muslim locality. Everyone was filled with fear and suspicion.’ (Chapter 10, 162)

7. ‘A woman has a keener insight into things.’ (Chapter 14, 214)

8. ‘Argument can counter argument, but argument is helpless against faith.’ (Chapter 14, 215)

9. ‘It is one thing to kill a kafir, it is quite another to kill someone you know and who has sought shelter in your house. A thin line was still there which was difficult to cross, despite the fact that the atmosphere was charged with religious frenzy and hatred.’ (Chapter 16, 269)

10. ‘Hostility and hatred cannot turn into sympathy and love so suddenly, they can only turn into crude banter.’ (Chapter 17, 278)

11. ‘A person clinging to life can only grovel and cringe. If you tell him to laugh, he will laugh, if you tell him to cry, he will begin to cry.’ (Chapter 17, 278).

12. ‘By the time evening fell, all the marks of Sikhism on Iqbal Singh’s person had been replaced by the marks of the Muslim faith. A mere change of marks had brought about the transformation. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer; to whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open.’ (Chapter 17, 281)

13. The Turks had come, but they had come from one of the neighbouring villages. The Turks too mentally viewed their attack as an assault on the citadel of their age-old enemy, the Sikhs. In the minds of the Sikhs too they were the Turks of the bygone medieval times whom the Khalsa used to confront in battle. This confrontation too was looked upon as a link in the chain of earlier confrontations in history. The ‘warriors’ had their feet in the twentieth century while their minds were in medieval times. (Chapter 18, 282) (italics added)

Activity

1. Now find out other examples of significant comments of the author and state their significance.

2. Which of the above remarks, in your opinion, are closely connected with the theme of the novel?
3.5 THE THEME OF COMMUNALISM AND ITS TREATMENT

The theme of communalism as the major concern of the novel has been referred to. We shall now discuss the novel’s treatment of it in some detail.

The following points could be made.

1. As suggested earlier, the novel’s treatment of communalism is Janus-faced. It reconstructs the picture of a small town in pre-partition West Punjab in the grip of communal frenzy and through this picture, alerts us to the dangers posed by communal forces to the multi-religious, pluralistic culture of our country.

2. The writer’s belief that for centuries the different communities had lived together in communal harmony is expressed thus.

'Every activity in the business of life appeared to be moving as rhythmically as part of a symphony. When Ibrahim the pedlar selling scents and oils with the bag on his back full of bottles big and small and another bag hanging from his shoulder, went from lane to lane shouting about his wares, it appeared as though his movements too were in keeping with that rhythm. So were the movements of the women with their earthen pitchers going to the water taps, tongas plying on the roads, children going to school. Every activity gave the impression of having combined to create an inner harmony to which the heart of the town throbbed. It was to the same rhythm that people were born, grew up and became old, that generations came and went. This rhythm or symphony was the creation of centuries of communal living, of the inhabitants having come together in harmony. One would think that every activity was like a chord in a musical instrument and if even one string snapped the instrument would produce only jarring notes...' Chapter 8 (115).

This is obviously a key statement of the omniscient narrator’s, that expresses the conviction of the author. Notice the writer’s use of the metaphor of symphony for harmonious communal living. The eruption of communal violence shattered that symphony and replaced it with cacophony and led to final separation.

3. The writer’s project of giving a comprehensive picture of the riot-torn town has apparently prevented him from exploring the question of the origins of communalism in any depth. But he does hint at a couple of sources. He traces the source of communal antagonism to old prejudices and out-dated traditions and warns us against the danger of cherishing them and making them the basis of our actions. He pleads for greater realism and for sane and rational thinking. Two examples could be cited.

(a) The Sikhs assembled together in the Syedpur gurdwara had come together for reasons of greater safety. But, instead of being realistic and negotiating with sensible elements among
Muslims of the village, they thought of them as Turks of old against whom Guru Gobind Singh had fought two centuries ago. Through congregational singing they worked themselves into a frenzy and were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the panth. Ironically, while they could go centuries back and link themselves with the Khalsa who had fought against the Turks, they were completely oblivious of the presence of the English just twenty-five miles away and their machinations. A good example of the killing in frenzy is furnished by Baldev Singh who alarmed at the imminent attack by Muslims comes to the conclusion that his old mother must have been killed and rushes out to avenge her ‘murder’ and comes back after killing old blacksmith Karim Baksh.

(b) A much bigger target for Bhisham Sahni is narrow sectarian thinking and religious bigotry among certain sections of Hindus. People like Vanprasthi believe that Muslims have been the despoilers of the land. This settled antipathy to Muslims is expressed in a couplet that he recites in an anguished voice at the congregation:

Much blighted has this land been by the sins of the Muslims, even the Divine has refused us this grace and the earth its bounty (73).

To such Hindus Muslims are mlechhas and ‘mlechhas are unclean people, they don’t bathe, don’t even wash their hands after toilet, eat from one another’s plate, they have no regular hour of going to toilet,…’ (82) Along with this is the self-glorifying belief that that the technique of making a bomb or an aeroplane was inscribed in the Vedas. This agenda of hate becomes even more dangerous when young innocent teenagers like Ranvir and Inder are indoctrinated into believing that killing a mlechha is the mark of ‘a warrior’. The mentality of the ‘warriors’ when one of them killed the poor Muslim scent seller was like that of the besieged Sikhs:

‘All the four ‘warriors’ were itching for action. Time had come to enter the battlefield and show one’s feat of valour. Standing on the balcony they felt the same way as the Rajputs of yore did, who, taking cover behind rocks and dunes waited for the mlechha hordes to enter Haldi Ghati before they pounced upon them’ (192).

Bhisham Sahni does not spare Muslim communalism either and the incident of the hounding and humiliation of Iqbal Singh by a gang of mujahids led by Ramzan and his conversion to Islam is frightening in its barbarity.

But curiously while Ramzan has a spark of humanity left in him and cannot bring himself to kill Harman Singh, nothing redeems Vanprasthiji or Master Dev Vratt till the end. Obviously Bhisham Sahni does not think they deserve any quarter.

What are we to conclude from this? Who is to blame? We leave it to you to judge. We only need to remember that Hindu and Muslim communalism live in a symbiotic union. The problem of communalism is far too complex and Bhisham Sahni’s diagnosis leaves several questions unanswered.
4. The writer devotes a lot of attention to the divisive role played by the British rulers. As Richard tells Liza, ‘the rulers have their eyes only on differences that divide their subjects, not on what unites them’ (51). And the suspicion is that the carcass of the pig was thrown outside the entrance of the mosque at his instance. The British raj is over but the suggestion is that we need to be wary of the ruling class or powerful groups even today for they could resort to the same policy of exploiting the religious sentiments of the people to further their own ends.

Comments

Bhisham Sahni has brought a new awareness by bringing the poor and underprivileged Nathu from the periphery to the centre of his narrative. In a sense Nathu is the conscience of the novel. It is person like him who are exploited and who suffer most. Dev Datt rightly suggests to the Statistics Babu: ‘Add another column to your tabulations indicating the number of poor people killed as against well-to-do people’ (325).

3.6 USE OF LANGUAGE

Bhisham Sahni’s Hindi in Tamas is a fine amalgam of several languages. This shows how people of different religions, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs lived peacefully together. It is indeed a reflection of the composite culture of the area. Besides Hindi, there is a fair sprinkling of Urdu words in the language. Punjabi too has been used on occasions, particularly the dialect of Punjabi prevalent in the area. For instance, the freedom song sung by the Congress volunteers in the morning (Chapter 2) is a Punjabi song. The wake-call sung by the fakir is also in the same language. The verse from the scripture recited by Harmam Singh is naturally in Punjabi. When Shankar gets up to announce the holding of a public meeting (Chapter 9), he recites an Urdu couplet.

3.6.1 Use of Spoken Language

The writer’s use of spoken language in the novel is a principal way to give a local, realistic flavour to it. An important fact is that all the folk and commonplace items used in the novel are in Punjabi and make full sense only to a person who knows the local variety of the language.

Here are some examples:

i. Chapter 2 — Congress activist Aziz needling Bakshiji, Secretary, D.C.C., for coming late for the prabhat pheri with a Punjabi couplet apparently current among the people. (17 Hindi; 13 English)

ii. Same chapta. — As the Congress activists start to move for the constructive programme, they sing a common patriotic, Punjabi song. (26-7H; 26E)
Chapter 3 — has a fakir exhorting people to leave their bed and be up and about through a familiar song that he sings. (28H; 29E)

Chapter 7 — Mehtaji to Bakshiji while coming back from the Deputy Commissioner. When Bakshiji reprimands him for traveling in two boats, Mehta fires back using a local Punjabi idiom. The words in Hindi are: ‘Tumhara kya hai, tum to sadhu, bairagi ho, tumhari na rann, na kann.’ The English translation reads: ‘You are a sadhu, without a wife or family. What will a fellow gain by killing you?’ (81H; 103E)

Chapter 8 — Old Karim Khan relates the Khizir-Musa folktale to listeners assembled in the nanbai’s shop. (120-24)

Chapter 14 — Harmam Singh keeps reciting verses from Guru Granth Saheb. (161 H; 215E) He also talks to his wife Banto using the local Punjabi idiom. (162H; 215E)

Chapter 16 — Ehsan Ali’s wife Rajo who gives shelter to Harmam Singh and Banto responds to Harmam Singh’s gratitude using Punjabi. (189H; 256E)

Same chapter — Rajo’s daughter-in-law Akran expresses her fear of men’s disapproval of the women’s action in sheltering the Sikh couple and Rajo’s replies to it, in the local variety of Punjabi. (191H; 260E)

All these are evidence of the fact that the novel is firmly rooted in the life of the people.

If you are a Hindi speaking person, look for other examples of the use of the local idiom in the novel. Note also that the writer has made plentiful use of Urdu words.

3.6.2 Irony

Irony is a very potent weapon in the armory of the writer of Tamas. There is very little direct criticism in the novel. The writer describes the scene objectively withholding direct comment and leaves it to us to draw inferences. One could find examples of irony in situation and also irony in the use of words.

Examples:

1. Addressing Vanprasthi as Punyatma, a saint.

This word is used three times in the Hindi original(58). In the author’s own English translation the word used is ‘the Vanprasthi’ or ‘Vanprasthi’ once. Also, the closing words of the section dealing with Vanprasthi in the chapter mock at his hypocritical abstention from the so-called mundane affairs. [‘The other members of the core group except the Vanprasthi, would forthwith get into tongues and proceed to the bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner. The Vanprasthi, however, being a spiritual man, could not be expected to concern himself with mundane matters of the worldly householders.’] (Chapter 6, 79) Curiously the word punyatma is omitted in the author’s own English translation.

2. The narrator-focalizer’s use of the word ‘daanvir’ or ‘philanthropic’ for Lala Lakshmi Narain for giving five hundred rupees for purchasing lathis for the Youth Organization (Chapter 6,64H, 79E); the narrator-
focalizor’s treatment of Ranvir and his fellow ‘warriors’ (Chapter 6, 86); in Ranvir’s use of the word ‘arsenal’ for the paltry collection of arms. (same page), the irony turns into mockery.

3. In Chapter 10 Shah Nawaz appears to Raghu Nath’s wife to be ‘a saint’ for having retrieved her jewellery box from their old house, even though we know he has come back after giving an almost fatal kick to their servant Milkh. Curiously the word used for Shah Nawaz in the Hindi original is punyatma, the same as used for Vanprasthiji (178E; 134H).

4. Similarly, the marauders who force Iqbal Singh to get converted to Islam are described as mujahids in the original Hindi version. (Chapter 17, 201H, 273E) The writer wishes to present the dangers of religious frenzy, whether it appears among Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs.

5. The crowning irony is that those who are really guilty are not at all conscious of what they have done but poor Nathu who is guiltless feels guilty all the time.

6. In the final chapter, Chapter 21, the person who was sitting in the Peace Bus in front, next to the driver was Murad Ali, the person who had the pig slaughtered and then had it thrown outside the entrance of the mosque. Similarly the Muslim League activist Shah Nawaz whose blue Buick was seen moving about in the villages offers to pay for petrol. The obvious implication is that the peace achieved through such insincere efforts is hardly likely to last any length of time.

7. The change of religion forced upon Iqbal Singh evokes an ironical comment from the narrator-focalizer: ‘A mere change of marks had brought about the transformation. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer; to whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open’. (Chapter 17, 281) Here is a fine comment on religious identity, which the author considers to be skin-deep.

3.6.3 Some Metaphors Used in Tamas

Bhisham Sahni writes in a plain, simple, unadorned style. But he has used some metaphors at significant moments.

(i) Symphony (Chapter 8, 115)

Bhisham Sahni has used this musical metaphor to indicate the harmonious communal living over the centuries. The paragraph in which this metaphor occurs has been quoted twice but here is the sentence in which it occurs.

‘Every activity in the business of life appeared to be moving as rhythmically as part of a symphony ... This rhythm or symphony was the creation of centuries of communal living, of inhabitants having come together in harmony. One would think that every activity was like a chord in a musical instrument, and if even one string snapped the instrument would produce only jarring notes.’
In terms of the novel one heard the azan as well as the temple bells and of course other sounds. The dissonance is indicated when the alarm bell installed on top of the wall of the Shivala rings insistently (142), as it does on the fateful night of the breaking out of the riots. Liza’s instinctive response to the sound is right: ‘The sound makes one feel as if there was a storm on the sea and some ship was sounding the alarm bell’ (144).

(ii) **Tide** [of the riots] (Chapter 20, 328)

The riots are compared to a tide that has receded leaving a lot of rubbish behind. Like the receding tide of the sea, the tide of the riots had subsided, leaving behind all kinds of litter and junk and garbage. Do you hear an echo of Matthew Arnold’s poem, ‘Dover Beach’ here?

(iii) **Whirlpool and puppets** (Chapter 20)

The writer compares the political forces responsible for partition to a whirlpool that will inevitably suck everybody into it.

‘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 to stay out, that no one would be able to take into his own hands the reins of his life. They moved like puppets …’ (335).

These observations of the omniscient narrator attempt to capture the state of hopelessness and powerlessness that everyone found himself in during those troublous times in 1946. The partition came inevitably. In those days everyone felt like a puppet whose movements were decided by forces much greater than his or her own.

(iv) **Tamas**

The biggest metaphor of all that the writer uses is the metaphor of *tamas* used as the title of the novel. *Tamas* means darkness, the darkness of ignorance and blindness to reality. The title has been explained elsewhere.

**Activity 1**

1. Now pick out other examples of irony in the novel and explain the use of irony in each case.
2. In what sense is the novel’s treatment of the theme of communalism Janus-faced?
3. How objective is the writer’s presentation in *Tamas*?

**3.7 LET US SUM UP**

This unit discusses the narrative in its finer details including the writer’s choice of an omniscient and omnipresent narrator to tell his story and how the writer achieves objectivity in his presentation. The theme of communalism is discussed and also the writer’s use of language including irony and metaphors.
3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the different ways in which the writer has achieved objectivity in his presentation.
2. Discuss the use of metaphors in the novel.