CHAPTER – 4

BHISHAM SAHNI’S TAMAS AND ITS TELE-SERIAL VERSION

*Tamas* is the ‘reflective response’ to the partition of India – Pakistan, one of the most tragic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent, by Bhisham Sahni, the master of words. A compact and blood boiling tele serial based on the same novel was brought on Doordarshan by the known director-cinematographer Govind Nihlani.

4.1 Bhisham Sahni

Bhisham Sahni was born in 1915 in an Arya Samajist family of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. After his schooling at Rawalpindi, he took a Master Degree in English Literature from Lahore. After partition in 1947, Sahni with his family shifted to Delhi and settled there. He began to teach at a college in Delhi. Thereafter he moved to Moscow and stayed there for seven years to work as a translator at the Foreign Languages Publishing House. In 1963, he returned to India and resumed teaching at Delhi.

Sahni’s first collection of short stories *Bhagyarekha* (*Line Of Fate*) was published in 1953. He earned much name and fame by this first creative Endeavour itself. Thereafter came the continuous series of writings that won him awards, honours and appreciation.


Sahni has probed into all the fields of literature. He has also written six plays, most of which are based on mythology, history and society of India. Regarding Sahni’s thoughts, Krishna Patel writes that he strongly believed that “a character may remain vague in story, but it cannot in a play/drama. It is necessary that each and every character of any play has its own specific personality.” (Translated) (2009: 24) Bhishan Sahni’s plays include *Hanush* (1977), *Kabira Khada Bazarme* (1981), *Madhavi* (1984), *Muavje* (1993), *Rang de Basanti Chola* (1996) and *Aalamgeer* (1999). Sahni has gifted the children of India two collections of short stories for children, namely *Gulel Ka Khel* (1989) and *Vaapasi* (1989).

Bhisham Sahni has been a remarkable translator too. He has translated nearly 20 Russian books into Hindi and Stories by known Punjabi writers into English. He has written a biography on the life of his brother Lt.Balraj Sahni, a renowned film actor. It is titled *Balraaj My Brother* (1981). It is the collection of memories, happy and sad, related to his brother Balraaj. Apart to all these *Apni Baat* (1990) is the collection of essays he wrote between 1947 and 1987.

His novels mostly deal with a conflict dwelling inside the human being himself. The novel *Jarokhen* discusses that the cultures based on fear and pain are never humane. Equally are humane the tortures done on the name of religion. It brings down the life of any individual. The writer has tried here to show the events happening in a family through a child’s eyes. It also tells of how the child learns from his experiences. Sahni once said that, “What after all is the use of this long wide observation done during the childhood? It probably helps to understand one’s ownself.” (Translation) (Patel 2009: 27)

*Kadiyan* his second novel deals with the cultures and conflicts of the middle class society. He tells in this novel how adultery and extra marital relations spoil the life of not one person, but the whole family. The writer here also tries to suggest that the marriage is a delicate bond. Once snapped, is difficult to return to normal.

*Tamas* is an episodic novel, a ‘reflective response’ to the partition of India and Pakistan, one of the most painful events in the history of the sub-continent. Divided into two parts, the novel tells of evil happenings and good things striving to survive during the Partition period. Sahni has unveiled the frustrated Imperialism, which very few Indian writers have done in their Partition novels. It discusses both, the reason and results of Partition.

Sahni’s *Basanti* is a saga of urbanization, in which the simple, straight forward lower class people, tormented by draught, famine, hunger and thirst move to the cities. Their life settels down to shatter again and again. It is a satire on the hypocrite elite class and their thinking pattern.

*Mayadaas Ki Maadi* is a picture of how Punjab came into the clutches of the British. The word ‘maadi’ means palatial house. This novel revolves around a ‘maadi’ in
Punjab, narrating the shifts in the Indian society and cultures in a picturesque manner. It can be coined as his modern novel, a blend of imagination and reality.

*Kunto* is a novel related to Sahni’s family life. It tells of happenings of post independence period at Lahore, Shrinagar and even Bombay. It reflects actions reactions and sensitivity prevailing in relations in a family. The time period of the novel begins at 25 years before Independence and ends a few days after the Indian Independece.

*Niloo, Nilima, Nilophar*, Sahni’s last novel focuses on the theme of ‘love’. The novel concentrates on the problems and difficulties rose due to intercaste marriages, the ego of the communities, and their victims and finally ‘love’- the element that shocks and moves the established traditions.

Though Sahni had experienced the trauma of Partition himself, *Tamas* had to wait for 25 years after Partition to be expressed. *Tamas* is Sahni’s par excellence reflection of Partition in its most concentrated form. This novel, originally written in Hindi, later translated into English and also transformed into visuals, is the result of an instinct felt by the writer while walking on riot struck streets of Bhiwandi near Mumbai in 1970s. Sahni himself had said:

“As we entered Bhiwandi, I felt as if I had seen the scene in that town somewhere: silence all around, only one or two people on terraces and verandahs, empty streets, as if time had slowed down….As if I had ‘heard’ the sounds of that ‘silence’ before…..When I picked up my pen and put the paper in front, my thoughts wandered to the riots in Rawalpindi. The Congress office appeared before my eyes.
I found myself drowning in the memories of those days…My pen took off. Now one scene emerged before my eyes, then another, there was not even a thought then in my mind to arrange them in any order.” (2003: n.pag.)

The gap has helped the writer to represent the happenings of Partition days in a reflective manner. As Govind Nihlani, the known film-maker calls it, Sahni deals with the theme of Partition as a ‘reflective response’, with much detachment and remarkable objectivity. Nihlani says,

“A traumatic historical event usually finds the artistic/literary response twice. Once during the event or immediately following it and again after a lapse of time, when the event has found its corner in the collective memory of the generation that witnessed…when the event is reflected upon with emotional detachment and objectivity, a clearer pattern of the various forces that shaped it is likely to emerge…” (2008:02)

_Tamas_ is an account of Partition, days of the darkest period of the Indian sub-continent, as witnessed by the writer himself. It tells of how communalism works havoc and provokes monstrous violence, how the politicians manipulate the innocence of common man, how various communal organizations make use of religion and the name of ‘their God’ only to fuel fire and raise their own status in a group of their kind believers. The novel talks of the shrewd British Administrators who avoided taking any initiative in bringing the riot situations under control, instead let the communal fire reach every corner. All these things together engulfed the
peaceful life of God fearing common man. After two and a half decade of the tragic event, Sahni gave heart touching novel.

4.2 The novel *Tamas*

The novel opens with a character called Nathu, a tanner, who is involved in the work of skinning animals. He passes a peaceful life with his wife Karmo, who is pregnant at the outset. But this peace burns to ashes at the very beginning of the novel itself. Murad Ali, a man of influence and also connected to Municipal Committee offers Nathu five rupees to kill a pig for some veterinary purpose. Nathu refuses for a while but later succumbs to the handsome return of five rupees. Nathu, with much difficulty, finally kills a pig in a small filthy hut and dumps it in the pushcart as instructed by Murad Ali.

Early next morning, the Congress committee meets for the regular ‘Prabhat Pheri’. The committee consists of members of different age and community. Bakshiji, Kashmirilal, Mehtaji and Jarnail – Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. After the ‘Prabhat Pheri’ they go to clean drains in the Muslim locality. On their way back, like others, they too are stunned and shocked to see a dead pig on the steps of the mosque. Nathu too sees it.

Fear struck people close down their shops and gather at the mosque. Bakshiji leads two of the Congress committee members to clean the place, so as to avoid unwanted disturbance. But this is followed by the incident of killing of a cow. The writer gives quite appropriate words to elderly Bakshiji. He says, ‘soon vultures will fly over the city’ (55). The two incidents, as expected, start turning a heat bomb ready to blast any moment. Bakshiji’s words are to come true very soon. Just like the arrival of the ‘ghost train’ of Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, these two incidents
become a messenger of the forthcoming calamities. The slaughter of two animals pours fuel to the fire of rumours about Partition amongst people of the town. The situation worsens into violence and destruction. The two major communities of the town – Hindu and Muslim turn into two different sides of the blazing border. Both Nathu and Murad Ali see all this with an intention to know and foresee the next step respectively.

Richard, the Deputy Commissioner, a shrewd British Administrator representing the British Imperialism remains unaffected by the tension raised in the town. He looks quite untouched amidst the chaos and violence outside his dwelling. According to him it was the failure of Indian leaders. A meeting is held at his place which included the Congress committee and the leaders of different communities. Richard believes that Nehru and other leaders have proved their inability to cope up with the worsening situation. Just as he wanted, those in the meeting are outraged towards one other and start blaming one another. He is pleased but does not express it. His attitude reflects the annoyance and frustration on the part of the British. He could have deployed Army to prevent trouble. Instead he suggests the Congress Committee and the religious leaders to form a Peace Committee. His ignorance and indifference lead the three major communities to prepare for self-defense and survival which starts taking the form of civil war.

The town becomes a battlefield where everyone tries to save one’s own self. However, violence and killings become raupurant. Religious leaders add fuel to the fright and panic rising in the people. The grain market is set to fire. Nathu flees homewards. He could feel the flame from far away. The cries of ‘Allah-O-Akbar’ and ‘Har-Har-Mahadev’ along with tolling of bell and barking of dogs make him sit restless. There starts communal war, talking toll of many lives. The feeling of guilt
crops Nathu’s mind. Richard’s wife Liza sits confused. Unlike Richard she could feel
the pain of innocent victims. She requests Richard to tell them “that they belong to the
same racial stock and therefore should not fight one another.”(53) Liza finds the
atmosphere insecure and uncertain too. With a bleak face she expresses her fear:

“I hope there is no danger to you, Richard.”(54)

But Richard remains aloof. He is actually waiting for the right moment. Those like
Devdutt try for communal harmony. They try their level best to prevent the riots and
agitation. He did not relax for a moment while the riots were on. He tried to bring the
Congress and the Muslim League to converse and clarify the problems and bring
some solution. He reflects Sahni’s soft corner for the communists.

In the second part of the novel, aged Sikh Harnam Singh and his wife Banto
represent the innocent victims of the frenzy of communalism. The two own a tea-
shop. Muslims attack their shop, take away things in it and set fire to their house. The
two could escape the uncontrollable mob. But unknowingly they seek shelter in none
other but the same Muslim’s house who had robbed their shop. This is one more
instance of communal fraternity besides that of Shahnawaz in the first part. Finally
with the help of Rajjo, the lady of that Muslim family, they reach their daughter’s
village. The riots turn not just violent but very gory and ugly too. The fanatics cross
all the limits of brutality. Harnam Singh’s son suffers too much of pain mentally and
physically when the Muslim mob converts him from Iqbal Singh to Iqbal Ali. A girl
of twelve trying to flee from the roof is caught by a mob and is raped till her death.
The canvas of riots gets more and more frightening. As quoted earlier Sahni seems to
be reliving the immediate pre-partition period that he had witnessed, the traumatic
agonia, which might have perturbed him for many years and disturbed his emotional equilibrium.

As the story advances we find that at their daughter’s place, Harnam Singh and Banto do not experience any better condition, except that all Sikhs have gathered at the village Gurudwara to create strength. But late in the evening, with the fear of molestation, Sikh women along with Harnam Singh’s God fearing daughter give up their lives by jumping into a well. On the following day, the vultures, kites and crows are seen hovering over the well vouching the deaths.

After incidents of lots of killings, abductions, loots and destruction, finally Richard declares to take some action. May be he was waiting for the tragedy to reach its peak. He orders air-patrolling to suppress further violence in the District.

At the refugee camp, the sufferers repeatedly narrate tales of their woe to the record clerk. However, he is indifferent to them and actually is not interested in listening to their stories. He simply wants to finish off the task assigned.

As per Richard’s suggestion, the congress committee and various religious leaders form a peace committee. They all plan to go together in a bus around the city appealing for peace. In this ‘bus’ of the ‘peace committee’ Sahni ironically shows Murad Ali, the root of the disaster, sitting next to the driver’s sit appealing loudly for ‘peace’. Had Nathu been there, he could have recognized “the dark faced Murad Ali with pointed moustaches…” (235).

*Tamas* is an episodic novel. As Sahni commented in an interview:

‘A novel based on recollections does not have any fixed predetermined narrative. Memories pushes the pens...the
novels written under the weight of memories are weak from the point of view of structure. They may be filled with events, and may even have audible heartbeats of life, but the structure of the novel won’t be perfect from the point of view of things like sequential development of the narrative’ (2002: n.pag)

According to Sahni, he had met no one like Nathu or Murad Ali ever before. But he had heard refugees’ stories at the refugee camp. Tamas has no particular character that is in focus or any hero. And still every character dominates a chapter or a situation and leaves unnoticed. Characters like Murad Ali, Nathu, Bakshiji, Jarnail, Shahnawaz Khan, Lala LaxmiNarain, Devdutt, Ramnath, Aziz, Ranveer, Richard and Liza together lead the first half of the novel. Half of the second part is led ahead by the old Harnam Singh, his wife Banto. They are supported by all those whom they meet, especially Rajo and Ehsaan Ali, the Muslim family that gives them temporary protection and Sikhs at the Gurudwara at their daughter’s village. Many characters of the first part return in the end in the peace committee except Nathu. Throughout the novel most of the characters just occupy a few paragraphs or pages, play their assigned role and exit, leaving behind their unforgettable impression. What remain till the last word are the deaths and tears.

Amidst doubt, violence, killings and much more, Sahni does not miss to throw brighter light on co-existence and interdependence of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The intimacy and trust shown between a few characters of both the communities is like a silver line amidst the dark clouds of hatred and fanatism. Raghunath and Shah Nawaz, Khudabaksh the tailor and his Hindu customers, the members of Congress committee and the League meet each other with much intimacy in the first
half of the novel. In the second part, it was Karim Khan who advises Harnam Singh and Banto to leave the town immediately for their safety. On the way to their daughter’s town, the old couple gets shelter by none other but Ehsaan Ali, a Muslim’s family. Sahni describes the intimacy with much sensitivity

“Twice Ramzan raised his axe but could not bring himself to the point of striking Harnam Singh with it. 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” (269)

The relation between Raghunath and Shah Nawaz is the remarkable instance of communal harmony. Raghunath’s wife does not even cover her face in Shah Nawaz’s presence. Shahnawaz helps them in the time of crisis. But this same Shah Nawaz spits out his anger towards Hindu on helpless Milkhi, Raghunath’s servant.

“How and why this happened cannot be easily explained—whether it was the chuttia on Milkhi’s head, or the grieving crowd of people he had seen in the mosque…or what he had been hearing during the last few days and—Shah Nawaz gave a sharp kick to Milkhi on his back.” (177)

He kicks Milkhi to death. A saint in the eyes of Raghunath and Janki, Shah Nawaz plays a villain to innocent Milkhi. This contrast in Shah Nawaz’s character highlights the elite class mentality against Rajo’s help to Harnam Singh and Banto.
Sahni gives a sharp picture of the results of communal politics leading to Partition. The religious leaders used the tragedy to make their seat stronger and safer. They tried to divert the people towards killing as a weapon for self defense, whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. The Hindu priest chanted.

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

The Sikhs were made to believe that,

“The Khalsa shall rule,

None shall remain in subjugation!” (237)

And for Muslims, Peer Saheb said:

“To kill a Kafir brings merit” (168)

Thus the leaders of various religions added fuel to the doubt and fear already flaming in the minds of God fearing people in a wrong way, on a wrong track. They related history to the innocent listeners, causing distrust and despair in their minds by talking of only enimity and not brotherhood. The leaders adopt an interpretation of the darker side of the past raising the feelings of fear and insecurity among the people. It is such misguidance that plays one of the major roles in riots full of violence and killings.

“…..Sahni successfully reveals how the communal leaders, in the gaise of religion, pressed religious symbols into service and made battles over them.”(Rao, 2004: 75)
It is due to such perversion that the young boys like Ranveer and Inder kill an innocent perfume seller; Harnam Singh’s shop gets looted and ablazed; his son Iqbal Singh is circumcised and is forcefully converted to Islam; his daughter, along with other Sikh women, throw herself into a well to save herself from molestation; small girls are raped by many till their last breathe. People are butchered on the pretence of self defense and on the name of the religion. Still as per Rajendra Yadav’s opinion:

“The anger present in a man is not seen in Bhisham Sahni. That’s the reason why his reactions and counter actions are not that violent compared to those visible in the creations of Yashpal, Manto or other Punjabi Partition writers.”

(Translation) (Patil, 2003: 15)

Sahni evidences the subtlety of British imperialism with only one character Richard. The frustration of British Administrators is easily visible in Richard. The Congress committee wants peace and they meet Richard at the out start of the tension itself. But he does not help them. Neither does he agree to any action as he says that he now had no rights. This too is a reflection of that what Sahni had seen at Rawalpindi. In his recollections Sahni talks of a British official, truly a Richard.

“The deputy commissioner kept taking down notes with his pencil on a paper lying on his table - was he taking notes, or just moving the pencil? He is shaking his head and saying, "I can not arrange for a military patrol in the city. The military doesn't follow my orders..." (2002: n.pag)

Richard, on the contrary, blames the Indian leaders to have failed to control the worsening situation. He reflects the withdrawal attitude of the British. He suggests
the Congress committee and religious leaders to from a Peace Committee and appeal to the citizens to maintain law and order, ignoring their suggestion about using army and air force to bring situation under control. This shows his disconcert for the victims, dead people and their family. He is intentionally fanning the situation already on fire. Later on he deputes the army, but very late. Liza, a bit different from Richard tries to argue. But Richard’s argument is:

“……what can I do if there is tension between the Hindu and the Muslim?” (53)

“……if the subjects fight among themselves, the ruler is safe” (54)

According to V. Pala Prasad Rao,

“Every effort was made to set as many groups and interests against one another to find and widen as many social gaps as possible.” (64)

*Tamas* can be called a collection of communal politics prevailing at urban level striving successfully to get over the peace and harmony prevailing in rural areas and in common man. It can be also explained as the depiction of darkness of communal fury and intolerance prevailing in the fear struck people.

As a novel *Tamas* is episodic in structure, as a work of literature *Tamas* reveals the detached but passionate vision of its author. As a work of history, reflective by nature, it involves three religious communities who either killed or were killed at one another’s hand during Partition especially in North-East and Western regions of India. Did it bring a negative wave in the reader’s group? No question was
raised when it came out, twenty five years after the tragedy had occurred. Instead it was considered a masterpiece and was duly honoured. But when in 1988, a Tele series based on *Tamas* and two other short stories by Sahni was brought on small screen, there flew a heat wave all over the country with several question marks. This Tele series was also titled *Tamas*.

4.3 Govind Nihlani

The screenplay *Tamas* had to undergo an interrogation in the Bombay High Court before it finally got the green signal. As quoted by Nihlani, Justice Bakhtawar Lentin and Justice Sujata Manohar of the Bombay High Court said for the Mini Series *Tamas*:

*Tamas* is an anatomy of that tragical period. It depicts how communal violence was generated by fundamentalists and extremists in both communities and how innocent persons were duped into serving the ulterior purpose of fundamentalists and communalists of both sides…. *Tamas* is an equal measure against fundamentalists and extremists of both communalists, and not in favour of hatred towards any one particular community…. The message is loud and clear, directed as it is against the sickness of communalism”. (2001: 3)

A successful filmic version of any literary work is not just that it enriches the original, but it should also modify the original to render it a better work. When a filmmaker takes up any piece of literature, she/he not only tries to retain the strength of the original but also recognizes it to make it a superior work of art. Govind Nihlani
does the same. His six episode Miniseries on Doordarshan *Tamas* achieves the unusual accomplishment in his filmic version of Bhisham Sahni’s novel of the same title. According to Nihlani:

“As a novel *Tamas* is episodic in structure which from the view of literary craftsmanship may not exactly be considered flawless. Yet, as a piece of literature, it reveals the vision of one detached yet passionate, quietly reflective yet emotionally intense”. (2001:03)


Apart to the honour of Padma Shri (2002) for his outstanding contribution to Indian cinema, Nihlani has snatched National film Award for Best Cinematography for Benegal’s *Junoon* (1979), Golden Peacock for *Aakrosh* and much more.

Nihlani is known for selecting a script not because of the writer but because of an element of drama in it. But he can be coined as an avid reader who is motivated by
the written word. Nihlani has been inspired by the scripts from Vijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Shashi Deshpande, Maha Shwetadevi and many more. In one of his interviews to Belu Maheshwari for The Tribune Oct. 25, 1998, Nihlani said that he did not know Bisham Sahni before. He came across the title *Tamas* while he was looking for stories on the Partition at Delhi, in a break on the sets of Attenborough’s *Gandhi*. He immediately liked the title, read the first paragraph of the book and was hooked. After six years, the pages came on the screen. Nihlani said further,

“I had wanted to make a film on the Partition for a long time since I was also an affected person. I was very young but the Partition had left very emotional and traumatic memories. My first memory of blood, of fear and panic comes from that time”. (1998: n.pag.)

Thus he started to bring the words on screen. *Tamas* first came as a Television series of six episodes and later was edited to a compact film.

**4.4 Television Series *Tamas***

The Tele series *Tamas* appeared on Doordarshan in 1987 after crossing sharp hurdles. The crew was:


Director: Govind Nihlani

Cinematographer: Govind Nihlani, V.K. Murthy

Music: Vanraj Bhatia
Screen Play: Govind Nihlani assisted by Bhisham Sahni and Stephen Altar.

Editing: Shantanu Gupta

Art Director: Nitesh Roy


The word *Tamas* means ‘darkness’ in the Hindu culture. But it has deeper meanings too. It also talks of the lowest of the ‘gunas’ or attributes as per Nirad Chaudhari. As quoted by G.R.Taneja, Nirad Chaudhari says in ‘The Continent of Circe’:

> “The word *Tamas* literally means darkness, but in Hindu thought and feeling it stands for a very comprehensive term for all kinds of squalor – material, biological, intellectual, moral and spiritual”. (n.d., n. pag.)

And that is what Nihlani tries to show in his tele series with visible digressions. *Tamas* on screen differs at certain points from the *Tamas* in pages. Nihlani has omitted and added a few episodes/scenes which are quite visible. He has introduced digressions intentionally.

As like the novel, the television series opens with ‘a lamp flickers in an alcove in a low lit room.’ Suddenly Nathu (Om Puri) leaps into the frame. He has been battling with a pig. He was asked to kill the pig by the Thekedar (Pankaj Kapoor) as the local hospital needed one for the study. The carcass of the pig is later found.
dumped on the steps of a mosque. This stimulates all the communities into action. Congress committee, led by Bakshiji (A.K. Hangal) clean the place, but this contamination is followed by the killing of a cow. The town is covered by the communal frenzy. Nathu, quite terrified, realizes that he has become an instrument in the hands of dirty minded trouble makers.

The town changes into small battle camps of each religion – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. A young Hindu fanatic stabs to death an old Muslim perfume-seller and the body of a Hindu is found on the bridge across the river. The town is set aflame. All-the not-concerned British Administrator, divided congress committee and obstinate religious leaders, fail to come to a common conclusion.

Nathu leaves the town with his pregnant wife Karmo (Deepa Sahi) and his old mother. On the way, the old woman dies with her frozen finger holding Karmo’s hands. Nathu and Karmo interment the dead body at a lonely open place which was never theirs, nor would it ever be.

The two very soon are accompanied by equally helpless pair – old Harnam Singh (Bhisham Sahni) and his wife Banto (Dina Pathak). They have fled before a crazy mob sets fire to their tea-shop. They escape through the jungle where miserable Nathu runs into them seeking help for his troubled pregnant wife. The four finally find refuge in the Gurudwara at the old couple’s daughter’s village Sayeedur. The rioters from the nearby villages come and create a violent trauma. The fighting goes on for two days. All Sikh and Hindu men at the Gurudwara perish and the women folk jump into the village well to save their honour.

Later, the riots cease due to the energy exhausted and British patrolling. In the refugee camp, Karmo identifies Nathu’s dead body. She soon delivers a child. The cry
of the new born is over-lapped by the shouts of ‘Allah-O-Akbar’ and ‘Har-Har-Mahadev’.

Nihlani treats the novel as a starting point and thereafter investigates an episodic novel with much depth. The first visible digression is the treatment provided to the two minor characters – Nathu and Karmo. Nihlani uses these two characters to transform the two-part raw structure of the novel into one whole. Sahni’s Nathu regrets his act in front of Karmo and is then lost in the crowd amidst violence, killings and tension. But Nihlani’s Nathu and his pregnant wife Karmo becomes the camera eye to how evil thoughts and action corrupt the civilization – religion, culture and social bonds. Sahni’s Nathu attracts attention, but only for a few chapters. Very soon before the 14\textsuperscript{th} Chapter, Nathu and Karmo are lost and even forgotten amidst the description of riots. Nathu, in the end, is said to have died. But no one knows how.

But Nihlani’s Nathu and Karmo, successfully played by Om Puri and Deepa Sahi, become the knots connecting separate strings of events. Nathu leads the viewers place to place, event to event and time to time. The viewers/audience seems to go ahead with Nathu from that filthy hut where the Tele series begin with the butchering of that pig. Then to the mosque, burning grain market, innocent victims being killed by ignorant hands, doubts, fears, communal agitation, war-camp like religious places, and finally the refugee camp where Nathu is found dead and Karmo gives birth to their child. Two minor characters of the novel are made the leading ones taking the viewers ahead till they are accompanied by aged couple Harnam Singh and his wife Banto, enacted by Bhisham Sahni, the writer himself, and Dina Pathak. They share the responsibility to take the viewers ahead in the later episodes. This can be considered a major digression from the text. But this connects the events. Nihlani
transforms the two part raw material in properly structured plot by transforming the minor characters into major roles.

In any adaptation, removing or changing the name of any character may not be considered an important change. But in Nihlani’s *Tamas* such a change becomes quite noteworthy. The novel begins with Nathu trying to kill a pig. He is instructed to do so by ‘Murad Ali’ for a handsome return of five rupees. Once the job gets done, ‘Kallu, a Muslim’ was to take it in his pushcart. The name ‘Murad Ali’ suggests the community. In the last chapter, Murad Ali sits in the peace bus set out on peace mission very next to the driver raising slogan for peace. ‘Nathu was dead, or he could have recognized him at once’ (350). The same happens on screen, but with one change – the name of the character. Unlike Sahni, Nihlani does not gloss over the identity of any community. He avoids giving any name to this character, the root of the problem. He is simply called ‘Thekedar’ (Broker). Pankaj Kapoor, the known actor – director from NSD is Nihlani’s ‘Thekedar’ dressed as given in the novel. He is seen around everywhere in a knee length Khaki coat, white salwar, turban on his head and a cane stick in his hand. Nihlani’s trouble-maker or the villain is not ‘Murad Ali’ but the ‘Thekedar’. Neither his name nor his body language or his costume suggest or hint to any of the rival communities – Hindu, Muslim or Sikh.

There was already a strong request in the Bombay High Court to discontinue the series. If a name had been given to the ‘Thekedar’, the root of the crisis, it would have created a greater trouble to the telecast. The tele series *Tamas* remains an analysis of that tragic period. It is not in favour of hatred towards any one particular community. This is where Nihlani as a film-maker uses his right to read a work of art in the light of his subjective response, critical conclusion and artistic abilities.
The tele series *Tamas* begins with Nathu, a killing and deadly silence in the darkness of the night. The same is narrated in Sahni’s novel, the original text. The novel ends leaving the readers with the peace bus. Sahni’s readers are made to concentrate on the hypocrisy of the communal and political leaders, the crafty schemes of people like Murad Ali and the British’s indifference towards the tragedy. But Nihlani’s *Tamas* ends with a different message, different lesson, and different scene. It ends with Nathu’s wife Karmo, a birth and cries of the new-born infant blended with shouts of Allah-O-Akbar! And Har-Har-Mahadev! The end is neither ‘all’s well’ nor ‘nothing well’. But it contrasts the beginning. It is open ended. With such an end, Nihlani points to the ray of hope in the human life. Contrasting the beginning and the end, Nihlani tries to pass a positive message that even if the past (beginning) was deadly and solitary, even if the present is polluted, cruel, for all intents and purposes evil, still the life-sacred and gentle, shall keep on approaching the earth full of evil. The possibilities of hopes remain open. No evil can stop this ‘hope’. The ‘killing a pig’ in a filthy badly lit hut becomes a metaphor of polluted mentality of the society taking the cruelty and evil to a height. The end becomes a metaphor to the attainable hope, amidst filth, cruelty and malevolence. Karmo’s pregnancy, the pain she suffers on the couple’s journey towards a safer place too can be coined as a metaphor for the pain experienced during the process of the division of nation into two siblings of which one followed ‘Allah-o-Akbar’ and the other screamed ‘Har-Har-Mahadev’!

The novel *Tamas* and equally the tele series *Tamas* are filled with evil, cruel and sinful acts. The slaughter of the pig is the most important cruel act written and shown. The scene is given a slot of around 4 minutes full of action in the very beginning. Nathu’s facial expressions, pig’s squeaks and squeals and the dim light in
the alcove create disgust, rightly pointing to the future action in the tele series. With this one rightly generated target, all the existing religious tensions wrapped with hypocrisy, get uncovered. This is the first evil act in the text followed by many. But for the tele series, this slaughter is the only scene that the viewers see as the naked violence. Nihlani, a man of camera and lights uses his mastery of cinematography to show violence and killing thereafter, till the end except for the women of Sayeedpur jumping into the village well. Though narrating Partition, Nihlani avoids a direct sketch of the brutal violence. Nandini Ramnath, points out in ‘Heart of Darkness: Govind Nihlani’s *Tamas* is Timeless’ that:

‘Nihlani eschews a direct depiction of the large scale killings that accompanied the partition. Rather than bodies, we see the killers; instead of blood-letting, we are confronted with the faces of victims’. (2011: n.pag)

This includes murder of the old Muslim perfume seller by the young inexperienced Hindu fanatics. The act is captured with a long shot. Instead of the act of stabbing, the close up of the killer, the killed and their facial expression accompanied with music defines the horror. The same is seen in mass killings. The bewildered eyes of Nathu (Om Puri) make the viewer anticipate the brutality. Nihlani shows the Muslim mob in action outside Gurudwara by the ‘terror-struck faces’ of the helpless people taking shelter inside the Gurudwara. Nihlani makes the best possible use of facial expressions and close ups and thus conveys much more than the words can ever convey.
Apart to this, Nihlani avoids several episodes like Iqbal Singh forcefully converted to Iqbal Ahmed, a Hindu girl being raped on the roof till she is dead and even after that. The director has his own argument to Bellu Maheshwari:

“In cinema and particularly on television, the depiction of violence has to be responsibly done. My conscious artistic decision was to portray the violence in such a way that you feel repugnance”. Tamas shatters the eyes and mind with brutal realism of the Partition though it avoids an overload”. (1998: n.pag.)

The bitter truths in any novel can be read by the class, but may create trouble when watched on screen by the mass. Even after avoiding all the direct violence narrated in the novel, as quoted by Nandini Ramnath, Nihlani says,

“I was very well aware that the series had the possibility of creating debate”. (2011: n.pag.)

And it did. The fanatics demanded a ban on the tele series, precisely because Tamas unsparingly exposes the communal manipulators of all colours. But Bombay High Court allowed Nihlani to go ahead because he had avoided direct scenes of violence and brutality. Instead, Tamas highlighted the humane qualities of the common people belonging to all religions.

Nihlani’s “films begin when the protagonist faces a crisis and a choice has to be made in life. The kind of choice the character makes becomes the film. The dilemma comes across strongly. This gives the films a vitality.” (1998: n.pag.) His protagonist is mostly the victim who remains an ignorant tool of political forces. He is
manipulated to gain power. Om Puri as Nathu plays the role of the weak protagonist strongly.

The castings of the best performers, mostly from NSD add to the authenticity, nearness to the original text. His actors crew include Om Puri, Deepa Sahi, Amrish Puri, A. K. Hangal, Surekha Sikri, Dina Pathak, Veerendra Saxena, K. K. Raina, Illa Arun Sayed Jaffrey and the writer Bhisham Sahni himself. ‘Sahni had sketched his characters so well’, said Nihlani, ‘that half the work was done. Remaining work was fulfilled by the inborn talent of the actors’. (1998: n.pag.) Thekedar’s swarthy face and small ferrety eyes made Pankaj Kapoor, a real cold blooded villain. Nihlani does not stop at just the superficial overview of the character. Each of his character becomes a symbol of pure sensitivity.

As mentioned earlier, Joy Gould Boyum says that “the creator tend to create character through a tension between the type and the individual… between the universal and the particular”. (1989: 37) This reflects in Nihlani’s Tamas. His characters, though taken from par excellence narration of the original text, can be felt created through a tension between the universal and the particular. There can be no other ‘Nathu’ and a ‘Thekedar’ or a ‘Teja Singh’ but Om Puri, Pankaj Kapoor and Amrish Puri. Just as there can be no other aged Akbar but Prithvi Raj Kapoor and Gandhi but Ben Kingsley.

Settings, an important element of both novels and films can never be avoided in the later one. According to news line of April, ’87, old rubber tyres in and around Guregaon were taken by the truck load to Film City and set on fire. The Tamas team had been working on creating the smoke that rose over the city grain market, and wood alone couldn’t do justice to the massacre that accompanied the division of the
Punjab and thus India. (2011: n.pag.) The grain market on flame in the tele series seen from Nathu’s hut, exactly matches the words by Sahni, terrifying enough to give a fright. Both the writer and the director say:

“The fire was spreading – Nearly half the sky had already turned copper red with its glow. Down below, near the horizon, it rose in whirls, flames leapt up, curling like tongues of monstrous snakes towards the sky. The fire was spreading north.” (Sahni, 2001:151).

Normally such tele films or serials do not have symbolic but actual sets. The dim lit hut where Nathu strives hard to win over the pig is created filthy enough to give the viewer a frown. On the contrary Gurudwara gives a true image of a small town rich religious place. The production designer Nitish Roy created the Gurudwara set so well that anyone who entered it was compelled to remove his shoes. The set of Gurudwara conveys a message of helplessness a life experiences even when it is at a place sacred like God himself.

When Nathu and Karmo flee from their town with Nathu’s old mother, she dies on the way. Nathu and Karmo perform her funeral with a lonely countryside as the scene’s backdrop. This scene with a lonely landscape as its set seems to bring down the human life to a disastrously insignificant proportion. The filthy huts, the grain market, the Gurudwara, the refugee camp suggest increasing evil. Gurudwara and the refugee camp also suggest how the evil works more cruelly in a sacred and safer place. The realistic sets establish a mood and atmosphere and add to the story.

After the making of *Tamas*, Nihlani said to his music composer Vanraj Bhatia that ‘the music does not provide relief to the complete film’. To this, Vanraj Bhatia
answered in one line only: “Is there any relief in the whole movie that you are searching for it in the music?” (Translation Bhatia, 1988: 20) The whole series has tragedy as its consistent feeling. The music too has the tragedy at a ‘grand scale’. The series begins with a loud shout ‘Aayoo Rabbaa…’ followed by the echoing silence, titles and then the filthy hut. The loud shout with silence immediately behind it creates a haunting effect. The music employed by Bhatia lended this grave and haunting effect from the very outset. Bhatia received the National Award for the film Tamas (edited from the tele series). His reliefless music gives Tamas a darker stroke.

The film makers shift and transpose the lighting tones in various shots in accordance with variations in the mood of the motion picture. In Tamas, this feature plays an important role. The lamp in the alcove in the filthy hut becomes the crack letting the evil enter the society which takes the monstrous shape later on. The flames in the grain market are its most treacherous from. It devours man and the food of those who are spared. The blue light of late night showing way to the woman folk towards the village well helps make scene quite graver. The lights help each and every scene to show its best result.

Nihlani has used two short stories by Sahni as a part of his tele series. One adds to the lesson of humanity and the other to the evil happening. One is the short episode wherein a Sikh woman helps a young Muslim neighbor reach the Muslim area safely. She leads him with a sword in her hand. This is probably to balance the goodness of three Muslim characters – Shah Nawaz, Karim Khan and Rajjo. The other is that of a Muslim Sanskrit teacher who worships the Hindu scriptures like his Gods, but is not spared by Hindu fanatics. These two episodes replace a few brutal scenes of the novel on the screen. But they neither help, nor damage the main story.
Though violence is projected much less in the film compared to the novel, both the readers and viewers find something worse, more horrifying than the bloodshed or violence. It is the reversal of morals projected in short scenes but in full lights at the refugee camp. A Hindu couple not ready to accept their daughter’s return fearing that she must have been polluted; a middle aged man trying to bribe the officer at the camp to help him recover not his wife but her ornaments if she was dead. These scenes when came on screen in full lights, they show how shamelessly people practice evil. As if they are used to do it regularly. Such small scenes play an equally significant role compared to those of the violence and blood-shed.

Against the novel *Tamas*, in the tele series *Tamas* evil seems to burst out from one point to everywhere around. It grips everyone at a time. The lives of innocent men, the honour of women, and the hopes of young fall into the merciless clutches of evil. But that’s not all. Nihlani takes his raw material and transforms it into a perfect work of art, a major techno literary document of beyond compare creativity. He expresses the idea of both evil and humanity. He states the picture of evil very clearly, but also shows it being conquered. He exhibits chaos but also subjects it to the order in a very artistic form.

Nihlani’s *Tamas* has been titled by press and critics as a ‘milestone’, ‘a major achievement’, ‘a work with epic dimensions’, ‘a master piece’ and also ‘a latest totem of the Indian guppies’. ‘Purposeless’ and also that it ‘fails to be beyond simplicities’.

But above all this, more than all the comments, it falls under that category of literary cinema in which the film maker enriches the original and modifies it to render it a better work. It would be unfair for any writer or critic to believe that a filmed novel would be or should be an exact copy of the original work. They are different
media catering extremely different types of recipient groups. A film-maker is not just a photocopier but a responsible reader who not just translates the work but recreates it. Nihlani retains the strengths of the original but recognizes it to make it a superior work of art by giving it a structure of an organic whole.

As a novel, says Nihlani.

“Tamas is grim reminder of the immense tragedy that results whenever the religious sentiments of communities are manipulated to achieve political objectives. It is a prophetic warning against the use of religion as a weapon to gain and perpetuate political power”. (2008:04)

And the tele series Tamas, for the director:

“Tamas is more than just a mini-series or a film, it is an act of faith” (2008:04)

With a unified view point, both are unique in conception and design, a lesson to be learnt from the gravest chapter of the history to pursue a better future.

***
References:


<http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/film/features/heart-darkness>.


