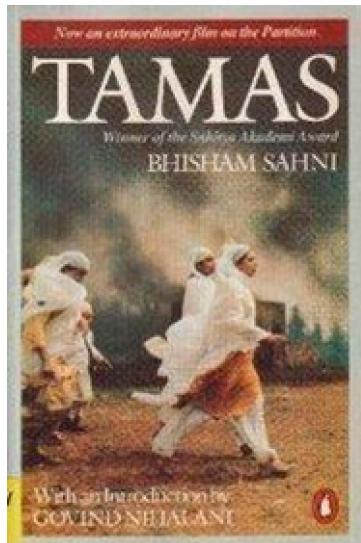


## Book-Review

### Lost Identities: The religious politics of manipulation

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*Tamas*

Bhisham Sahni

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Identities in *Tamas* are never wholly internal. They are externally constructed and the same architecture gets manifested along varying degrees in the novel's characters. This paper poses that while the representation of some identities allude to a slight obscurity of the internal, others represent an entire takeover of the same by the external, the public. The forces with which an identity is made to conform to the public are also different. However, they are portrayed along one broad dimension of 'internalisation' in *Tamas*. The processes that are brought into use for the materialisation of this conformity and the degrees to which they are able to secure it in individuals are essential for the facilitation of nationalist propagandas. Hence, it can be argued that the entire construction of identities in *Tamas* rests on these two premises of processes and degrees of influence. If the construction is successful in its entirety, the public wipes out the 'individual' and plants a nationalist subject in its place. However, if a wholesome takeover is not materialised, one can never say that the public has failed to penetrate the individual. It is

always present, especially when tiny stains of manage to manipulate the individual in certain instances. In any case, the individual can never escape the shackles of nationalism.

The novel confirms the pervasive presence of not one, but multiple nationalisms inspired by strong religious affiliations. Each one of them exists only so long as they differ from the others ‘that the Muslims too have their do’s and dont’s, they do not eat pork while the Hindu’s do not eat beef, that the Sikhs eat Jhatka meat while the Muslims eat halal...’ (51). At the same time, the same nationalisms call out to people with similarities to come around and conform to them. They press the need for similar people who share the same belief system to be strung into a singularity. ‘When we come, clad in khadi, brooms and shovels in our hands to their locality, they regard us as their own’ (62). Nationalisms hence, run along a tricky slope. They owe their existence to difference and to similarity, both at the same time. Even if one starts at the basics of this conformity to nationalisms, one can see that as long as singularity among people who conform is deemed essential, identity of any conforming individual becomes something that is shared with others of their own kind and hence, no longer stands private.

It stands public in two cases here: One, because its construction relies on diktats issued by their respective religions, the public they willingly conform to. Two, insomuch that every identity confirming to one single religious nationalism is broadly the same, for it is shared with many others. However, this construction undertaken by the public is not complete despite the fact that its dictates are being conformed to. It stands complete when the premises of difference and similarity are exaggerated to the greatest possible extent as a result of which, the same nationalism and its cause is echoed and furthered by the subject. An elderly man in conversation with Bakshiji is the perfect subject whose identity furthers reinstates the cause of muslim nationalism. ‘Freedom of Hindustan will be for the Hindus. It is in sovereign Pakistan alone that Muslims will be really free’ (34).

If not in their outwardly representation, identities in *Tamas* lie in their affinity with the external. However, that affinity too does not emerge on its own. There is something that the public appeals to within the individual which leads to an internalisation of the external. Different appeals are the processes through which a takeover of the identity takes place. The subjects of this appeal that the public targets range from a desire for power, money and in most cases, a chance at survival in *Tamas*. ‘As his eyes fell on the ugly, bloated pig, Nathu cursed himself for having taken on so repulsive and hazardous a task’ (5). The repulsion that Nathu is acquainted with is something inherent, something private that stems from within him as soon as he thinks about the job he has at hand. However, that speck of the private is concealed by Nathu himself as he conforms to the public for the latter promises monetary benefit in return. True that this does not lead to Nathu becoming a devout nationalist. Neither does it ensure his loyalty to a single nationalism. However, even as identity construction here stands incomplete, it’s not allowed to remain thoroughly internal either. Through the tactics of manipulation, even an unwilling individual is made to adopt an external identity no matter how incomplete that might be.

This adoption may not always be forceful though. When it takes place more willingly, the internal identity is not only made to conform to the external, as in the case of Nathu. Rather, it completely transformed to become the external. The cruciality of this transformation lies in the becoming and no longer in the conforming. In his attempt at killing the hen in order to get inducted into the category of initiates, ‘Ranvir’s forehead was covered with cold sweat and his face turned deathly pale’ (84). However, the public transforms this hesitation into devout nationalism, that Ranvir later represents, by appealing to his lust for power (made apparent as the novel progresses), and by exacerbating a sense of similarity that the likes of Ranvir are supposed to share with the ‘Arya Youth’. I like to call this process aspirational similarity which is brought heavily into play in Ranvir’s case for turning him into a nationalistic fanatic.

Similarity with the ‘Arya youth’ is exaggerated to a level that the individual keeps aspiring to that, in the hope of reaching it someday. Through these two processes, any sense of an internal identity is no longer hidden. Rather, it is completely wiped out and the identity that the subject now embodies is purely external.

Quite unlike Ranvir, a takeover of an identity by the public might not be that wholesome. However, that is no way to say that the private manages to shut off the public as and when it desires. Nathu and Iqbal Singh (Ahmed) in the respective public manipulation that their character falls into, portray a strong claim that the novel seems to be making. Even when identities do not become the external or completely stand in for the public by staunchly conforming to and further propagating the agenda of nationalism(s), one can still never be truly private. Whether it is a material benefit that the public bestows Nathu with, a chance at survival that an externally imposed Muslim identity lends to Iqbal Singh (Ahmed), or a sense of belonging that it equips thousands of conformists with, by appealing to the desires of the self, the public is shaping us constantly. Even in the slight alterations it causes in the private along the lines of what an individual can and cannot do, one can never escape the confines of multiple nationalisms. They are always there, like pervasive cancer cells within one’s own interiority. Silently disarming internal resistance at first, only to thoroughly enslave later.

## About the Reviewer

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