RELIGIOUS DIVISION AND OTHERNESS AS PORTRAYED IN *SHAME* AND *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

SHEIKH ZOBAER

North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

After the partition of India in 1947, religion has become a major catalyst for division and othering in most of South Asia. Bangladeshi author and activist Taslima Nasrin was exiled from her country, primarily for revealing the mistreatment of the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh in her novel *Shame*. Indian author Arundhati Roy has also faced severe backlash due to her portrayal of the mistreatment of the Muslims in India in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Religion has become an extremely fraught issue in South Asia, making almost any criticism of religious fundamentalism a highly perilous endeavor. Yet, both Nasrin and Roy had the courage to do that. This paper explores how the aforementioned novels expose the process of othering of the religious minorities in India and Bangladesh by highlighting the retributive nature of communal violence which feeds on mistrust, hatred, and religious tribalism – a cursed legacy that can be traced back to the violent partition of the Indian subcontinent based on the two-nation theory.

Keywords: *Religion, Fundamentalism, South Asia, Taslima Nasrin, Arundhati Roy.*

INTRODUCTION

Taslima Nasrin and Arundhati Roy are amongst the most controversial writers in South Asia. However, it would be an abysmal mischaracterization of them as

authors if they were labeled solely as controversial writers. In fact, the very reason why their works give rise to controversy is also the reason that makes them unique, bold, and courageous in the face of immense social, political, and religious adversity. They are amongst the handful of writers who have shown the rare courage to speak against religious fundamentalism, misogyny, gender discrimination, and discrimination against the religious minorities in their respective countries, that often take a systemic form. Their scything criticism of such social injustice infuriated the majority, which resulted in their being subjected to severe backlash from almost every dominant group whose obscene display of power has been revealed and excoriated by these two brave writers in their literary works. A concern for the wellbeing of the minority communities has been one of the dominant and recurrent themes in their works, vividly illustrating how the process of othering manifests itself in the form of religious sectarianism that often leads to violence of an unprecedented nature.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that captures the theme of otherness in multifarious dimensions. Apart from depicting the marginalization of the Muslims in India, and particularly in Kashmir, the novel also highlights the predicaments of the lower-caste Hindus and documents the dehumanizing expulsion of the transgender community in urban India. The novel is truly an impactful work of fiction in terms of capturing the theme of otherness from many unique perspectives; however, it is the sense of otherness stemming from religious differences and conflicts that stands out the most in this novel. The novel is also replete with allusions to, and criticism of, contemporary Indian politics which not only sparked heated controversy but also garnered unadulterated admiration, depending on which end of the political spectrum the readers find themselves in.

Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi physician, poet, novelist, and human rights activist. She has, by far, been the most outspoken against gender discrimination and religious fundamentalism voice among Bangladeshi writers. Because of the unapologetic and uncompromising nature of her criticism, she had to endure the utmost personal and social loss. After *Shame* was published in 1993, Islamic fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh were driven to such fury that her life was in danger. They accused her of blasphemy – an accusation that almost every fundamentalist Bangladeshi Muslim supported – which also silenced the progressive secular Muslims in fear, who otherwise would have supported Nasrin. She found herself alone and completely helpless in the middle of a swarm of angry fanatics ready to take her life at the slightest opportunity. In order to appease the mob, the Bangladeshi government had to ban *Shame*, and Nasrin had to flee the country to save her life. She has been living in exile ever since, as returning to Bangladesh is still not a safe bet. Needless to say, just a

fraction of what Nasrin had to endure for free speech might be enough to silence even the bravest, but Nasrin held her head high. This is precisely why *Shame* is not just an ordinary novel; if there is any literary work produced by a Bangladeshi author that is a testament to the adage “The pen is mightier than the sword,” *Shame* is the one.

Both *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *Shame* capture the theme of otherness stemming from communal chasm due to religious conflicts, and they do so by primarily illustrating two key aspects of otherness. Firstly, both novels depict the historical legacy of Hindu-Muslim conflicts. They show that the sense of otherness stemming from religious conflicts in India and Bangladesh does not exist in a vacuum; rather, the sporadic but unremitting incidents of communal conflicts bear the legacy of Hindu-Muslim disunity that played a pivotal role in the partition of India in 1947. Secondly, both novels capture the retributive nature of communal violence that widens the chasm of the pre-existing communal animosity, reinforcing and re-imposing the sense of otherness that silently plagues India and Bangladesh, and manifests itself most grotesquely during episodes of communal strife.

OTHERNESS: A CURSED LEGACY

Both *Shame* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* illustrate how the sense of otherness which the Hindus and the Muslims of both Bangladesh and India project onto one another leads to communal violence. In addition, what is excruciatingly unsettling about the fact is that such communal violence is retributive in nature more often than not. If Muslim minorities are attacked in India by Hindu fanatics, in response, Muslim fanatics in Bangladesh will retaliate against the Bangladeshi Hindu minorities. The situation is even murkier in India because retributive violence does not always have to be a cross-border affair due to India’s extremely large population. As a result, there are also some instances of Muslim zealots attacking the Hindus in India, which, in return, led to serious retribution from the Hindu fanatics. However, in Bangladesh, there is hardly any instance of Hindus attacking the Muslims, and it is almost always the Muslim zealots who attack the defenseless Hindu minorities, much to the consternation of the secular Muslims. Nonetheless, this is not to say that such a phenomenon is a norm and that Hindus and Muslims in both Bangladesh and India are living in a perpetual war-like situation. In fact, the vast majority of the people of these two faiths long for peaceful coexistence. However, the fact still remains that a significant number of people of both faiths harbor intolerance against the people of the other faith, and they are almost always ready to violently express their intolerance during the times of communal strife. The communal violence is mostly retributive in nature which both Roy and Nasrin

aptly capture in their respective novels, and even a rudimentary knowledge of the socio-political turmoil the Indian subcontinent went through during its partition would help the readers understand why such communal violence is mostly retributive in nature.

Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent have long been living an intertwined life, and “acceptance of difference” – both religious and communal – “was central to the Indian experience throughout its long civilizational history” (Tharoor 114). Jaswant Singh in his biography of Mohammad Ali Jinnah – the founding father of Pakistan – argues that “Islam itself got transformed by India, intermeshing with it and ultimately being absorbed by it as an integer” (Singh 2009). Tharoor also echoes Singh’s claim as he points out that Islam got transformed in India to such an extent that “even religious practices were rarely exclusionary” (113). However, after the partition of India in 1947, things started to change, as religious animosity among the Hindus and the Muslims started to grow exponentially. Famous Indologist Stanley Wolpert argues that India’s partition ensued a tragic “legacy of hatred, fear, and continued conflict” which could have easily been avoided, had it not been for the “arrogance and ignorance of a handful of British and Indian leaders” (4). Abul Kalam Azad, one of the most influential Muslim leaders of The Congress and the first Minister of Education of India, considers the partition to be a “great tragedy” and claims that despite their doubts, the leaders of both India and Pakistan accepted the partition because “anger and despair had clouded their vision” (226). Indeed, the feud between The Congress and The Muslim League became intense as the departure of the British became inevitable, and both organizations accused each other of bigotry. Jinnah was convinced that The Congress was unwilling to protect the Muslims’ interests (Ali 84), and in response, Nehru labeled the Muslim League as a “reactionary organization” (Ali 82) and maintained that “religious identity was irrelevant to the struggle of [India’s] freedom” (Embree 49). However, while Jinnah was criticized for the extremist view of his two-nation theory (Singh 498), Nehru also showed a lack of political foresight by refusing to take religious differences seriously (Embree 50). As a result, the Hindu-Muslim political tension took a bad turn particularly after the provincial elections of India in 1937 when The Congress asked the Muslim League in the UP province to “dissolve itself in the Congress” (Hodson 67) and “offered a share of government to the Muslim League politicians in UP only if they ceased to function as a separate group” (Talbot & Singh 32). Such “suicidal conditions” according to Hodson was a “blunder of the first order” which made The Congress, in the eyes of a great many Muslims, “a worse bogey than British raj had ever been” (67).

However, despite the partition, neither India nor Pakistan became fully Hindu and Muslim nations, respectively, because a transformation of such magnitude was not pragmatic. As a result, the Hindus became a minority in Pakistan, and the Muslims in India. Jawaharlal Nehru discusses this obvious predicament in his magnum opus *The Discovery of India*, where he points out that “any division of India on a religious basis as between Hindus and Moslems” cannot practically separate them because “they are spread out all over the country,” and “even if the areas in which each group is in a majority are separated, huge minorities belonging to the other group remain in each area. Thus instead of solving the minority problem, we create several in place of one” (528). Despite its glaring, insurmountable complications, India’s partition became a reality in 1947, and the subsequent aftermath of the partition is sure to mark one of the darkest episodes in the history of the entire Indian subcontinent. During the partition of India, unprecedented communal violence of colossal magnitude plagued the Indian subcontinent, killing millions of people and displacing millions more. According to historian Yasmin Khan’s estimate, “hundreds of thousands” lost their lives in brutal communal riots, and about twelve million people had to endure the trauma of forced migration (9). The numerical figures of death, displacement, and destruction documented by Shashi Tharoor point towards an even bleaker scenario, as he estimates the number of people who were forced to migrate at a staggering 17 million, and the death count is estimated to be well over a million (145).

The creation of India and Pakistan was expected to solve the problem of communal conflict for good; however, the reality turned out to be tragically opposite as the partition of India further compounded the problem, which now became a cross-border affair (Khan 9). Pakistan was created to protect the rights of the Muslims based on the two-nation theory which posits that Muslims and Hindus have irreconcilable differences, and as a consequence, the Muslims are fundamentally different from the rest of the population. Therefore, by ensuring the recognition and protection of their rights, only a separate state for the Muslims could protect them from any communal oppression they might face as a minority group.

However, the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 exposed how abysmally deranged and abhorrently vapid the casuistry of the two-nation theory was on grounds of faith. Before her independence, Bangladesh used to be known as East Pakistan, while the country Pakistan as we know it today was West Pakistan. Despite having a country where Muslims were the overwhelming majority and where all Muslims were supposed to be treated equally with their rights finally recognized and protected to the fullest, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was effectively treated as a colony by the West Pakistani regime (Mamun 15) and soon the Bengalis realized that “their own ethnic traditions unwelcome” (Bass

45). As a result, the sense of Muslim brotherhood crumbled to smithereens, and East Pakistani Muslims became the “others” in their own country. Moreover, “about 12 million Hindus” (Chaudhuri 8) living in East Pakistan as a religious minority were treated like “undependable, undesirable aliens” (Mascarenhas 8). In the cruelest twist of fate, the people of Bangladesh found themselves having to fight for their liberation for the second time in 24 years, as Bangladesh declared its independence on 26 March 1971 and gained its independence on December 16 of the same year. However, Bangladesh’s independence came at a staggeringly steep price of the lives of about “three million” people in just a little over nine months (“Genocide, 1971”). The West Pakistani army “was the organizer of the holocaust” and “genocide” (Chaudhuri 8), using strategic rape to “deter the Bengalis from continuing their freedom struggle” (Saikia 57). The massacre of civilians in Bangladesh is widely accepted as a genocide by most of the genocide scholars (D’Costa 144).

OTHERNESS AND RETALIATION: THE RETRIBUTIVE NATURE OF VIOLENCE

After such a cruel birth, the newly-independent Bangladesh realized the obvious flaws of the two-nation theory embraced secularism as its foundational principle. As a result, religious tolerance is expected to prevail in Bangladesh at all times. However, the sad reality is, communalism based on people’s religious identity still looms large in independent Bangladesh, and this is precisely what Taslima Nasrin bemoans in *Shame*. First published in 1993, *Shame*’s plot revolves around a cynically high number of retributive anti-Hindu riots that broke out in Bangladesh in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the historic Babri Mosque in India in 1992. The novel depicts the gruesome retaliation against the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh as a response to the demolition of the Babri mosque in India, and documents how an alarming number of Hindu families were tortured and evicted from their homes, which eventually forced them to escape from Bangladesh and seek refuge in India, leaving behind almost everything they had in Bangladesh. The novel embodies the struggle between the forces of acceptance and bigotry, secularism and fundamentalism, unity and division, and we-feeling and otherness. The novel sheds light on the fact that despite secularism being at the core of Bangladeshi nationalism, and despite having fought for independence in order to do away with discrimination, the cursed legacy of Hindu-Muslim conflict from the time of India’s partition still haunts Bangladesh as religious sectarianism and bigotry. In her memoir, *Split: A life*, Nasrin recalls that *Shame* had been banned under the accusation of disrupting communal harmony. She rejects such an unfounded accusation and

makes her point abundantly clear that *Shame* was written “precisely because there was a lack of communal harmony in the nation, it was written to help inspire concord so that no person ever had to feel persecuted by another because of a difference in their respective faiths” (*Split* 364). She further clarifies her stance by pointing out that she wanted to examine “why the Hindus were being persecuted, how and where it was happening, why they were suffering from so much insecurity that they were considering abandoning their own country for another,” and that she “wanted to understand everything about their pain and misery” (*Split* 365).

Taslima Nasrin’s *Shame* is replete with so many references to actual events of communal violence against the Hindus in Bangladesh during the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Mosque that many readers might consider *Shame* a documentary novel. In fact, it is the very documentation of actual events of atrocity that incensed the Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh, turning them against the author herself. One of the strengths of Nasrin is she seamlessly incorporates the factual information of atrocities into the narrative of the novel, which not only allows for the plot to develop and the characters to grow, but also engages the readers in a way that they can fully comprehend the true depth and magnitude of the atrocities committed against the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, while at the same time enjoying the novel as a brilliant work of fiction. The novel is intense, as the readers can easily relate to what the characters are going through. Shuronjon, one of the main characters in the novel, becomes apprehensive about the safety of the Hindus in Bangladesh immediately after getting the news of the demolition of the Babri mosque, as he thinks aloud, “The matter of the Babri Masjid would cause mayhem in Bangladesh too. Temples would be ground to dust, Hindu homes burnt, shops ravaged” (*Shame* 16). He vehemently condemns the heinous act of destroying the Babri Mosque which is not only a sacred place for the Muslims but also a site of historical significance. He questions, “Did the protectors of Hindu interests know that there were between 20 and 25 million Hindus in Bangladesh? Also, there were Hindus living in almost every country in West Asia. Had the Hindu fundamentalists bothered to think about the awful consequences for these people?” (*Shame* 16) It is abundantly clear that Shuronjon is already apprehensive about the safety of the Hindus in Bangladesh, as he fears retaliation. Ironically, his apprehensions come true in the cruelest form, as the novel ends with his younger sister being raped and his family having to leave Bangladesh for good. This is exactly the tragedy that befell thousands of Hindu families in Bangladesh as they became the helpless victims of horrific retaliation at the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists who maintained that letting their wrath unleash upon the blameless Bangladeshi Hindus was a justified means of avenging the demolition of the Babri Mosque in India.

It is important to acknowledge that the ghastly demolition of the historic Babri Mosque would warrant grievance not only among the Muslims but also among every single individual who, irrespective of religious affiliation and values upholds communal harmony and despises religious tribalism. But by attacking the Hindus, the Bangladeshi Muslim fanatics made it patently obvious that they are as heinous – if not more – as the Hindu fanatics in India who demolished the Babri Mosque. The rioting mob of Muslim fanatics swore, “Hindu bastard, offspring of the damned, kill the fucker! You guys want to get away with destroying our mosque. We’ll chase you out of this country” (*Shame* 98). Clearly, the othering of the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh on religious ground is evident here. Sudhamoy’s helplessness poignantly captures the brutality of the retaliation against the Hindus as he finally gives up all hope and wants to “find out exactly how many Hindus in Bangladesh would have to die so that they could conclusively say that they had atoned for the wrong-doings of all the militant Hindus of India” (*Shame* 243).

Shame also casts light on the bleak reality that the retributive riots against the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh did not appear ex-nihilo. Rather, those riots were a cynical continuation of the cursed history of Hindu-Muslim communal conflicts that plagued the Indian subcontinent before its partition, and continued to do so almost half a century later (considering the riots happened in 1992). Shudhamoy believes that it is the “divide and rule” policy adopted by the British colonial administration that sowed the seed of communal division among the Hindus and the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent as he maintains that “The British had realized that unless they were able to destroy the unity and amity amongst Hindus and Muslims they would not be able to establish and persist with colonial rule and oppression in India. Their statecraft birthed the policy of divide and rule” (*Shame* 224). Such a bold assertion must not be dismissed as just a whimsical thought of a fictional character, as many historians, as well as political critics, draw their conclusions along the same line. Many critics maintain that the political animosity between the Hindus and the Muslims in India stemmed largely from the British colonial rulers’ “divide and rule” strategy, and “because of their strategic position, the British could easily play one community against the other” (Prasad 257). Tharoor claims that the British colonial rulers augmented Hindu-Muslim religious differences as a “useful means of divide and rule,” and they did so as a “deliberate strategy” to fracture communal harmony in order to prevent a united uprising against the colonial regime (111). Jeff Hay claims that “Great Britain had used a policy of divide and rule in its Indian possessions,” and “knowingly or not, Indian independence leaders picked up on the practice of divide and rule” (86-87). Thus, *Shame* sheds light on one of the major causes of the emanation of the Hindu-Muslim conflict

in the subcontinent and gives a clear message that religious tribalism must be expunged in order to ensure peaceful cohabitation.

Sadly, Bangladeshi Islamic fundamentalists interpreted *Shame* as a blasphemy against Islam, and Nasrin was in danger of losing her life. In her memoir, *Split: A life*, she recalls, “Protests against me were becoming increasingly frequent across the country... Maulana Habibur Rahman [a popular Islamic cleric] had declared a price of 50,000 Taka for my head. Whoever was going to hand over my head to the maulana was going to receive the sum as a reward” (*Split* 455). She continues:

I had faced people shouting and running in pursuit after recognizing me while travelling by rickshaws. ‘See, there she goes, Taslima Nasrin!’ ‘Catch that bitch! Catch that bitch!’ ‘Get her!’ ‘Drag her down from the rickshaw! Beat the shit out of her!’ ‘See, there goes an atheist!’ ‘The slut!’ I was certain they would not have hesitated to drag me down from the rickshaw and rip me apart if they had managed to catch hold of me. (*Split* 457)

Eventually, Nasrin had to leave Bangladesh in 1994, and she has been living in exile ever since. *Shame* exposed the tragic weathering of the foundation of secularism in Bangladesh – the foundation on which the very country is built – and revealed how Islamic fundamentalism lurking beneath the thin, fragile veneer of tolerance. The fundamentalists accused Nasrin of lying about the problem of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, but by evicting her from Bangladesh, they proved the very point Nasrin has made. *Shame* portrays how religious fanaticism poisons the prerequisite conditions of peaceful coexistence, and almost totally annihilates communal harmony during times of unrest. *Shame* reveals how retaliation against the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque bears the curse of otherness that emerged from Hindu-Muslim animosity from the time of India’s partition – the curse of which the author of the novel herself became a victim of in her own life.

Religious division, otherness, and the retributive nature of communal violence have also been captured at great lengths in Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as the novel is awash with such references. The so-called “Poet-Prime Minister” and “several of his senior ministers were members of an old organization that believed India was essentially a Hindu nation and that, just as Pakistan had declared itself an Islamic Republic, India should declare itself a Hindu one” (Roy 26). It barely needs mentioning that such a sectarian, dogmatic conviction is diametrically opposite of the secular principle on which India is founded, and is predicated on the abysmally deranged and reactionary assumption that declaring India a “Hindu nation” is the

only suitable response to Pakistan's transformation into an Islamic Republic. The not-so-subtle undertone of such an unhinged conviction is the desire to avenge India's geographic amputation and to put the Indian Muslims in their place – the place of abject otherness – as in the Hindu fanatics' worldview, the Indian Muslims are nothing more than “auxiliary Pakistanis” (Roy 28). The novel also gives reference to Bangladesh's liberation war as the narrator refers to the genocide committed by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh as the “holocaust in East Pakistan” (Roy 14). During Bangladesh's liberation war, Hindus were indiscriminately massacred in Bangladesh by the Pakistani army, which forced numerous Hindus to leave East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and settle in India. The narrator observes that despite coming from a different country, the newly-arrived Hindus settled in quickly, whereas a significant number of Muslims who had been living in India for centuries, either found it difficult to integrate, or were not fully accepted by many orthodox Hindus. According to the narrator, the fact that Delhi's Muslims lived in a “vibrant ghetto” was viewed by many fundamentalist Hindus “as a proof that Muslims did not wish to ‘integrate’ and were busy breeding and organizing themselves, and would soon become a threat to Hindu India. Those who subscribed to this view were gaining influence at an alarming pace” (Roy 14). The reference to the notion of “Hindu India” is particularly pernicious here, as it signifies the perverse doctrine that India is supposed to be a Hindu nation. Such a maliciously misguided ideology is as damaging – if not more – as the two-nation theory which curved out a separate state for the Muslims solely predicated on the abysmally deranged and patently sectarian conviction that Hindus and Muslims cannot coexist peacefully.

The novel is replete with socio-political references, as Roy never shies away from making bold political statements and censuring policies that manifest discrimination. The omniscient narrator reveals how the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's “spoiled younger son,” Sanjay Gandhi, led a campaign where “in the name of population control, thousands of men (mostly Muslim) were herded into camps and forcibly sterilized” (Roy 23). This is one of the many incidents of discrimination against the Muslim minorities in India that the novel fearlessly exposes. In an effort to expose sectarianism in politics, the narrator alludes to how “some supporters” of “The Poet-Prime Minister” (alluding to former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee) “openly admired Hitler and compared the Muslims of India to the Jews of Germany” (Roy 26). Such an abhorrent conviction is particularly disturbing because, firstly, it bears a brazen insensitivity towards one of history's greatest atrocities – The Holocaust – and secondly, it shows how an alarming number of Hindu fanatics consider the Muslims to be the “others” in almost every sense of the word, much to the consternation of the vast majority of peaceful, secular Hindus who gleefully

accept the Muslims as their own and want nothing more than to coexist peacefully with their Muslim countrymen. The narrator also refers to the Poet-Prime Minister's aversion to the Muslims as he declares in an open public speech that "the Mussalman, he doesn't like the Other ... His Faith he wants to spread through Terror," and that "what had happened in America [alluding to the September 11 attacks] could easily happen in India" if the government does not pass a "new anti-terrorism law as a safety precaution" (Roy 26).

It is manifestly obvious that the so-called "Poet-Prime Minister" and his ideologues are blatantly calling the Muslims terrorists, and the locus of such an obnoxious overgeneralization is the strong sense of otherness that they project onto the Muslims – the sense of otherness that they harbor deep within their collective subconscious which violently comes to the surface when there is a corrupt, opportunist politician to fan the flame of mistrust and grievance emerging from the subcontinent's long, tragic history of Hindu-Muslim communal tension. Anjum, one of the main characters in the novel, recalls how the newly-passed anti-terrorism law was used indiscriminately against the Muslims, as the law "allowed suspects to be detained without trial for months" and "in no time at all the prisons were full of young Muslim men (Roy 27). The novel is highly critical of such a state-sponsored persecution of potentially a large number of innocent Muslims who had no terrorist connection whatsoever. The novel highlights how such insensitive actions pushed a great many Muslims further to the periphery to the point that many would be convinced of their status as the "others" in the society, which in turn would widen the gulf among the Hindus and the Muslims, helping the cursed legacy of communal tension to continue instead of putting an end to it. In this novel, Arundhati Roy successfully overcomes the challenge of capturing the aforementioned phenomena in almost all their subtleties and nuances.

The novel gives a particularly harrowing account of the Gujarat riots when "sixty Hindu pilgrims were burned alive" in a train attack by Muslim terrorists, which is believed to be a retaliation against the demolition of the Babri Mosque about ten years ago (Roy 28). The omniscient narrator recalls the ghastly retribution against the Muslims that ensued afterward:

The 'reaction', if indeed that is what it was, was neither equal nor opposite. The killing went on for weeks and was not confined to cities alone. The mobs were armed with swords and tridents and wore saffron headbands. They had cadastral lists of Muslim homes, businesses and shops. They had stockpiles of gas cylinders (which seemed to explain the gas shortage of the previous few weeks). When people who had been injured were taken to hospital, mobs attacked the hospitals. The police would not register murder cases. (Roy 28)

The omniscient narrator recalls that Anjum “tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire” (Roy 36).

The novels’ plot gradually shifts towards the political tension in Kashmir and examines the intricate web of interconnected phenomena behind the insurgencies in what is perhaps India’s most disputed territory ravaged by unprecedented political tension and religious animosity. An anonymous character in the novel insinuates that Muslim insurgents in Kashmir are all terrorists and vehemently asserts that they “do not deserve human rights” (Roy 60). The narrator then clarifies that the reason behind such resentment is the “mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley when the freedom struggle had turned militant in the 1990s and some Muslim militants had turned on the tiny Hindu population” which led to the massacre of “several hundred Hindus” in macabre ways (Roy 60). History also tells us that during India’s partition, “significant inter-religious violence” took place in Kashmir where “pro-Indian Hindus and Sikhs murdered and harmed Muslims” and “pro-Pakistan Muslims harmed and murdered Hindus and Sikhs” (Snedden 47). It is important to note that even though Muslims are minorities in India in terms of its overall population, there are still large territories where Muslims represent the majority. As a result, attacks against the Hindus by Muslim mobs during times of communal tension are not uncommon in India, whereas in Bangladesh, the Hindu minorities do not enjoy such sequestered territorial domination; therefore, attacks by Hindu mobs on Muslims in Bangladesh are quite literally nonexistent – a significant difference in the nature of communal violence between India and Bangladesh that Taslima Nasrin commendably illustrates in *Shame*.

The insurgency in Kashmir is a persistent problem in India, and its geopolitical impact goes beyond the national borders. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy examines the Kashmir conflict from a comprehensive point of view so that the readers can assess both sides of the reality. The novel gives the readers a rare access to the psyche of a teenage Kashmiri Muslim separatist named Aijaz who joins a jihadi group believing that this is the only means of achieving freedom for Kashmir. When asked by a journalist why he joined the separatist force, Aijaz replies, “I did it for Azadi [freedom] and for Islam...I wanted to kill the murderers of my people. Is that wrong?” (Roy 110-111) Here, Aijaz is referring to the plight of the innocent Muslim Kashmiris who had been either persecuted in the government’s hunt for terrorists or brutally murdered in ghastly communal riots, as historian Sumantra Bose points out that “mass murder and expulsion of Muslims occurred in Hindu-dominant eastern Jammu districts” (40). There is no denying the fact that there are terrorist activities in

Kashmir that must be quelled. However, if innocent people suffer in the process, they will forever bear the scar of loss, which in no time would turn into a vengeful rage. This is precisely what happens in the case of Aijaz and Musa, whose wife and the only daughter get killed by the Indian army in one of their anti-terrorist operations that went horribly wrong. Aijaz claims that he is also fighting for Islam, and one might wonder why religion is coming into the picture when the desire for freedom should have been enough. This is precisely where the jihadist groups come into the scene. There are militant jihadist groups in Kashmir masquerading as freedom fighters (Bose 229). They indoctrinate young Kashmiris with jihadist ideologies, telling them that the Hindus are the “others,” and therefore the Muslims must fight them. They recruit young Kashmiris who are looking for every single opportunity to avenge the wrongs done to their community, and turn them into ruthless terrorists. Thus, young Kashmiri Muslims become pawns in a far larger religious and political game. Fair argues that the jihadists are determined to resist “what they perceive to be an illegal occupation of Kashmir by India” and to fight back against the “posited brutality of ‘Hindu’ India” (128). Here, the stress on the Hindu religion must be noted because geopolitical conflicts are not the only reasons why the Jihadists fight; the majority of them adhere to the most deranged and hostile interpretation of Islam and are motivated purely by misguided religious fervor where their “desire for martyrdom and the celestial benefits” play a pivotal role (Fair 127). They not only call the Indian army “oppressors” but also contemptuously label them as “Hindus” and “infidels” (Fair 128). While identifying the Indian army as the oppressors is substantially grounded in the Kashmiri Muslims’ legitimate grievance, the contempt against them because they are Hindus and therefore infidels is deeply rooted in religious convictions. Sadly, when religious hatred gets added into the mix of pre-existing legitimate grievance of horrendous mistreatment, it becomes a deadly concoction of vengeance that poisons the very fabric of communal harmony.

Nonetheless, one must not put the Indian army in the position of the obvious antagonist, as doing so would be an extremely superficial and biased take of a much more complex phenomenon that is the Kashmir insurgency. Sometimes, the army is left with no choice but to use brutal force, and if history has taught us anything about the clashes between terrorist groups and law-enforcement agencies, it has to be the cruel reality that such clashes almost inevitably end with a significant number of innocent people being the tragic sufferers. As a result, innocent victims become ruthless separationists, which yields further military action, which in turn creates more victims who later on become brutal and hate-filled separationists, and sometimes even worse – jihadists. This is how the never-ending cycle of othering continues fueled by the poisonous essence of retribution, and this is precisely what *The Ministry of*

Utmost Happiness captures brilliantly, thanks to the masterful craftsmanship of Arundhati Roy.

THE CONTAGIOUS NATURE OF RETRIBUTION

A particularly pernicious aspect of religious fundamentalism is that it fractures communal harmony, disintegrates intercommunal trust, and gives rise to religious tribalism that, like a deadly contagious disease, spreads at an astonishing pace, overcoming the limits of culture, ethnicity, and national border which, in turn, fans the flame of fanaticism even more vigorously than ever. Such a cynical cycle has an uncanny ability to repeat itself, and with each repetition, it gets harder and harder to dismantle the near self-sustaining mechanism of religious fundamentalism that ultimately leads to religious tribalism – an insidious force that alters the psyche of the fanatics in such a way that anyone who does not subscribe to their worldview is bound to be categorized as the “other” and therefore is always under the threat of persecution. Both Nasrin and Roy capture this cynical aspect of religious tribalism in the two novels in question.

The omniscient narrator in *Shame* questions, “Was Suronjon to be held responsible for the destruction of an Indian mosque? Do country and nationality become irrelevant in relation to religion?” (*Shame* 219). In *Shame*, the rioting Muslim mob would chant, “Kill the infidels, break temples and make mosques” (*Shame* 62), while the rioting Hindu fanatics in India demolished the Babri Mosque, claiming that there used to be a Hindu temple in its place. In *Shame*, Shuronjon’s family could hear processions of angry mobs go by with slogans like “pick up Hindus, one or two, and snack on them, won’t you?” (*Shame* 30), which bears a chilling resemblance to the Hindu fanatics’ slogan in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, “The Mussalman, he doesn’t like the Other ... His Faith he wants to spread through Terror” (Roy 26). *Shame* reveals how the rioting Muslims would shout, “Hindus, if you wish to live, this land of ours, you must leave” (*Shame* 91), much the same way as Hindu fanatics in India “believed India was essentially a Hindu nation” and Muslims should go to either Pakistan or Bangladesh (Roy 26), as revealed in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Also here, the marauding Hindu mob shout during the 2002 Gujarat riots, “Only one place for the Mussalman! The Graveyard or Pakistan!” (Roy 36), which has an eerie resemblance to the Muslim rioters’ slogan in *Shame*: “Pick up Hindus, one or two, and snack on them, won’t you?” (*Shame* 30). Regardless of what the religion is, religious fanaticism and tribalism speak only one common language

– the language of violence, retaliation, and otherness. This is undoubtedly the overarching theme of both *Shame* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

CONCLUSION

Both novels reveal how religious fanaticism plays the most pivotal role in almost every incident of communal violence against the religious minorities in India and Bangladesh. Sadly, the problems still persist. There have been many incidents of communal riots in both countries in the past just like the ones occurring after the demolition of the Babri mosque, and the most recent events of cross-border communal violence started as recently as on October 13, 2021, when deadly anti-Hindu attacks broke out in Bangladesh after a copy of the Quran had allegedly been found in a Hindu shrine. In an article published by *The Guardian* on October 31, 2021, author Hannah Ellis-Petersen reports:

The incident on the morning of 13 October set off some of the worst anti-Hindu attacks in years and left seven people dead. The violence seeped over the border into the neighboring Indian state of Tripura, where more than a dozen retaliatory rallies by rightwing Hindu group Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and others escalated into violence and anti-Muslim attacks. Muslim residents were terrorized, Muslim shops were torched, and at least 16 mosques were vandalized. (Ellis-Petersen)

Again, the retributive and infectious nature of religiously-motivated communal violence is revealed in the most recent events of cross-border violence, and if necessary measures are not taken to build inter-communal solidarity, the odious history of communal violence will surely repeat itself in the foreseeable future. This is precisely what *Shame* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* predicted years ago, and the authors' remarkable foresight in this regard is frankly astonishing, and at the same time, quite alarming as well. As the Hindus and the Muslims form the overwhelming majority of the subcontinent's population, they must learn to get along with one another, and this message is the most precious takeaway from *Shame* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Works Cited

- Ali, S. M. *From East Bengal to Bangladesh: Dynamics and Perspectives*. The University Press Limited, 2009.
- Azad, Abul Kalam. *India Wins Freedom*. Orient Longman Limited, 1988.
- "Genocide, 1971." *Banglapedia*. https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Genocide,_1971. Accessed 21 September 2021.

- Bass, Gary J. *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Bose, Sumantra. *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace*. Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Chaudhuri, Kalyan. *Genocide in Bangladesh*. Orient Longman, 1972.
- D'Costa, Bina. *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*. Routledge, 2011.
- Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "Hindu-Muslim violence crosses border from Bangladesh to India." *The Guardian*, 31 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/31/hindu-muslim-violence-crosses-border-from-bangladesh-to-india>. Accessed 28 September 2021.
- Embree, A. T. "Religion and Politics." *India Briefing, 1987*, edited by M. M. Bouton, Westview, 1987, pp. 49-50.
- Fair, C. Christine. *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Hay, Jeff. *The Partition of British India*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2006.
- Hodson, H. V. *The Great Divide: Britain-India-Pakistan*. Oxford UP, 1993.
- Khan, Yasmin. *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. Yale University Press, 2007.
- Mamun, Muntasir. *The Vanquished Generals and the Liberation War of Bangladesh*. Translated by Kushal Ibrahim, Somoy Prokashan, 2000.
- Mascarenhas, Anthony. *The Rape of Bangladesh*. Vikas Publications, 1971.
- Nasrin, Taslima. *Split: A Life*. Translated by Maharghya Chakraborty, Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- . *Shame*. Translated by Anchita Ghatak, Penguin Books, 2014.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*. Oxford UP, 1985.
- Prasad, Bimal. *Pathway to India's Freedom: A Nation within a Nation 1877-1937*. The University Press Limited, 2001.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.
- Saikia, Yasmin. *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Singh, Jaswant. *Jinnah: India – Partition – Independence*. Rupa & Co., 2009.
- Snedden, Christopher. *The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir*. Hurst and Company, 2012.
- Talbot, Ian, and Gurharpal Singh. *The Partition of India*. Delhi: Cambridge UP India Pvt. Ltd., 2009.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*. Hurst and Company, 2017.
- Wolpert, Stanley. *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India*. Oxford UP, 2006.

BIONOTE

Sheikh ZOBAER is a Lecturer in the Department of English and Modern Languages (DEML) at North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He completed his MA in

Sheikh ZOBAER

English Literature from the University of Surrey, UK, before joining as a Lecturer at North South University. He is the current Editorial Assistant of *Panini: NSU Studies in Language and Literature*, a peer-reviewed academic journal of DEML. Currently, he is working in a project funded by NSU which documents the oral narratives of the survivors of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. His areas of interest are postcolonial literature, feminism, and gender studies. ORCID: 0000-0002-0008-1053.
E-mail: zobaer.nsu@gmail.com