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Thesis Summary

Tage der Unzufriedenheit: Identität und Gesellschaftsbild in den Romanen muslimischer Hindischriftsteller (1965–1990) [Days of Dissatisfaction: Identity and Society in the Novels of Muslim Hindi Writers (1965–1990)], Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995.

IN VIEW of the growing Hindu-Muslim antagonism and its increasingly violent manifestations, the situation of Indian Muslims represents one of the most controversial and complex social issues in present-day India. While political and social sciences have shown a considerable interest in the country's largest religious minority, research in modern literature has largely failed to take notice of "Muslims in India today," be it as a literary theme or with regard to the producers of literature. Focusing on the theme of identity, the present thesis is concerned with the question of how contemporary Hindi writers belonging to the Muslim community depict the Indian Muslims' historical and social destiny in their novels. The underlying observation that in modern Hindi novels Muslim life is almost exclusively dealt with by Muslim writers indicates that the widening chasm between the two religious communities has spread to literature as well.

The thesis examines the following ten Hindi novels published between 1965 and 1990: Nafis Afridi, *Khule hue Darīce* (Delhi: Indraprasth Prakashan 1977); Badiuzzaman, *Chāko kī Vāpsī* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan 1975); Abdul Bismillah, *Jhīnī Jhīnī Bīnī Cadariyā* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan 1986), *Dantkathā* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan 1990); Manzur Ehtesham, *Sūkhā Bargad* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan 1986); Rahi Masum Raza, *Ādhā-Gāṁv* (Delhi: Kamal Prakashan 1966/Rajkamal Prakashan), *Ṭopī Sukla* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan 1969), *Dil ek Sādā Kāgaz* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan 1973), *Asantoṣ ke Din* (Delhi: Rajkamal

Prakashan 1986); Shani, *Kālā Jall* (Delhi: Akshar Prakashan 1965/National Publishing House 1986).

In view of the authors' openly expressed secular if not irreligious outlook and their leftist leanings, the categorization of them as "Muslims" can only refer to their Muslim family background and cultural affiliation. The writers' critical intellectual distance, however, is taken to qualify them as important "participant-observers" of their own social and religious community.

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the complex question of Muslim identity in India, pointing to the fact that Indian Muslims are a heterogeneous and highly diverse community. The term "identity" as used here is based on E.H. Erikson's concept of "subjective experience of continuity,"[1] the role-and-interaction model of sociology,[2] and Erving Goffman's three-fold typology of identity as social, personal and ego identity.[3] The writers are then introduced. Although not viewing themselves as a distinct group, they are united in challenging the distorted picture of a Muslim identity defined exclusively on religious grounds. Chapter 2 gives a short summary of each novel. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with content and themes, focusing on the factors that emerge as constitutive features of Muslim identity as well as on the political, social and economic circumstances that, according to the writers, have posed a threat to this identity in the recent past. Two main identity-related phenomena can be distinguished in the novels: an external menace to identity due to general developments in Indian society, and an internal process of identity change within the Muslim community. Hence the separation into an outer (ch. 3) and an inner world (ch. 4). Chapter 5 deals with the symbolic and metaphorical representation of both shattered and preserved identity in four specific novels. Chapter 6 is devoted to questions of literary aesthetics and narrative technique, i.e. narrative structure, point of view, style and language. Against the background of the Hindi-Urdu controversy, the section on language combines

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[1] *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers,* New York 1967 (1959).

[2] Krappmann, L., *Soziologische Dimensionen der Identität. Strukturelle Bedingungen für die Teilnahme an Interaktionsprozessen,* Stuttgart 1973; Berger, P. L./Luckmann, T., *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie,* Frankfurt a.M., 1980.

[3] Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity, Englewood Cliffs, N.Y., 1963.

an analysis of the authors' individual literary language with the content-related question of how language is depicted as a central identity factor in the novels.

The novels clearly attest to the existence of an identity crisis among Indian Muslims. The partition of India and the foundation of Pakistan in 1947 are shown to be a crucial turning-point and traumatic rupture in their experience of continuity, resulting in individual suffering, the breakup of families, the sudden loss of social status, and political disorientation. While the Muslims remaining in India are depicted as the real victims of Partition, those who migrate to Pakistan meet with disappointment, since Pakistan cannot fulfill the dream of a new homeland, even though it may provide security and material comfort. The younger writers are concerned with the difficult historical legacy of Pakistan: the stigmatization of Muslims in India, due to persistent suspicion of their national loyalty, is seen as one of the gravest consequences of Partition. Deeply resentful of this mistrust, the authors challenge it by asserting their genuine commitment to India and emphasizing the Indian Muslim's right to his hereditary homeland.

The majority of the writers express a pessimistic view of society, seen in the protagonist's social failure and the lack of a happy ending. In a number of novels a "frustrated young man" serves as a paradigm for the process of disillusionment that Indian society underwent soon after Independence. Frustrated hopes and a thorough disappointment with the political and social structures of postcolonial India lead this character from committed idealism either to resignation or into the hands of the fundamentalists. Those novels that in the tradition of progressivist writing deal with the living conditions of the Muslim proletariat show an only subdued social-reformist optimism. With Marxist ideology no longer regarded as a path to salvation, the writers demand reforms from within the Muslim community and stress the need for education if social conditions are to be changed. The struggle for jobs, economic resources, and political dominance fought between castes and religious groups appears as an up-to-date variant of the class conflict. It leads to a continuous fragmentation of Indian society into different interest groups, a process perceived as dangerous. In this context, the novels aim to show that Hindu-Muslim conflicts, seemingly motivated by religion, are, in actual fact, part of this larger power struggle.

The frustration with the political establishment and the deep lack of confidence in the state expressed in the novels is very pervasive in modern Hindi literature and does not reflect a specifically Muslim viewpoint.

Ironically distorted or reduced to a caricature, the stock character of a corrupt politician lusting for power mirrors the failure of political parties and the decadence of political culture in India today.

One central theme emerging from the novels is the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations. The destruction of traditional structures of peaceful coexistence serves to exemplify how the virus of communalism has spread in both public and private life. Love relationships between members of the two different religious groups are generally foredoomed to failure. In their plea for mutual tolerance, and in depicting both model friendships between Hindu and Muslim as well as the absurdity of common prejudices and the mechanism of communal agitation, the novels take a clear stand against communalism. While openly condemning violence, the authors describe the dubious role of politicians and fundamentalist organizations in instigating communal conflict. It is not religious differences, but the failure of politics and state organizations, economic problems and the machinations of criminal elements that are shown to be the real reasons behind so-called communal riots. The more recent novels bear witness to the increase in violent confrontations and depict the Muslim's fear for his life as a new aspect of endangered identity.

Several novels treat the social decline brought about by political and socio-economic changes as an important aspect of the Muslim identity crisis. As a simultaneous loss of property and of social status, this decline takes an especially drastic form in the case of the former Muslim élite groups, viz., the north Indian landlords and the educational élite, recruiting itself from lawyers and court officials. The vast masses of the Muslim population naturally appear excepted from this particular identity crisis. They are shown, however, to be afflicted by poverty and social misery.

The wide-ranging attention paid by the authors to social, economic and cultural factors of identity contrasts with the comparatively scant treatment of questions concerning Islamic faith and dogma. The authors' attitudes towards religion are summed up in a critical inquiry into the meaning and function of religion in a society marked by severe social problems. The portrayal of religious identity, now objective, now ironically distanced, focuses on everyday religious life and customs, thus creating an image that contrasts with official, "high-tradition" Islam. Religious festivals, fairs, and devotion to saints and martyrs serve to exemplify the Indian Muslims' roots in indigenous religious traditions and the synchretistic character of their religious identity.

In discussing the hierarchical social stratification of the Indian Muslim community several authors describe a phenomenon unique to

India, though contrary to the basic tenets of Islam. While depicting affil-
iation to caste or status group as a main factor of social identity and an
effective way of in-group ranking, the authors condemn or ridicule all
notions of caste superiority. Élitist insistence on superiority of birth is
perceived as a hindrance to the community's progress and contrasted with
the actual moral decadence of the groups ranking at the top of the social
hierarchy. The gradual decay of this hierarchy is shown to cause serious
identity problems in the case of the Sayyid élite.

The writers' look at the inner world focuses on the changes the
Muslim family is undergoing. A mirror of society, the family appears no
longer able to provide the individual with security, orientation or a set of
values. Sacred notions of family life are systematically destroyed in some
of the novels. Through the example of archetypal role-conflicts between
parents and child, husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law,
the authors show how traditionally sanctioned structures of power and
repression encourage moral misbehavior, lead to the inner decay of the
family, and bring forth individuals with problematic personalities.

The situation of Muslim women receives special attention in the
novels. It is conspicuous that the authors accord only a secondary role to
controversial Islamic themes such as *ṭalāq,* purdah or polygamy, and
instead focus on general manifestations of injustice against women in a
patriarchal society. The portraits of female characters in the novels illus-
trate both the tedious everyday life of traditional women who submis-
sively acquiesce in their age-old role, as well as the changing
self-perception of a new generation of young Muslim girls who boldly
question the traditional role model. The endeavors of these girls to
achieve independence and self- determination in their love relationships
inevitably lead to a clash with their tradition-bound environment. The
authors make concessions to reality and prevailing moral standards by
generally letting these young women fail in their aspirations or having
them meet with a tragic end. Nowhere in the novels, however, is there an
explicit condemnation of behavior that could be regarded as "disobe-
dient" or "immoral." Instead, the authors clearly support women's right
to self-determination and emphasize the importance of education in
improving their lot.

Endangered identity as a central individual and collective experience
of Indian Muslims is represented by different kinds of symbolism in the
novels of Raza, Ehtesham and Shani. With their common negative con-
notations the symbols of Moharram, black water and the dried-up banyan
tree reflect cultural and social decline, the uprooting and insecurity of

Muslims in India. An entirely different picture emerges from a novel by Bismillah, where the religious symbolism of weaving is used as an illustration of asserted identity and as an aesthetic counterpart to the critical social content of the novel.

The writers share roots in the tradition of literary realism. This is reflected in a common aesthetic approach: depiction of reality that lays claim to documentary truth, love of realistic detail, emphasis on everyday life, and commitment to social themes. The novels show a clear preference for scenic representation with its aesthetic effect of immediateness and authenticity; the influence of regionalism is noticeable in a concept of space limited to the representation of one's own private sphere of experience, i.e., a specific microcosm. Apart them these similarities, however, considerable differences can be noted regarding the artistic expressiveness and the authors' theoretical claim to the narrative structure of the novel. Specific novels are analyzed with a view to the aesthetic implications of compositional techniques and narrative discourse. Particular aspects that are discussed include the aesthetically effective harmonization of content and form, the extreme condensation of the time-space structure as a formal expression of existentialist concepts, the conceptualization of the time problem by means of an adequate discursive time structure, but also the lack of artistic dexterity in applying basic narrative techniques.

Several novels serve as examples in the discussion of how specific narrative perspectives and points of view are found suitable for the representation of reality and, especially, the treatment of identity as a literary theme. Multiple perspective conveyed through a combination of third-person narrative, interior monologue, direct speech and *style indirect libre* appears as an effective device in the authentic and direct representation of a subjective world view. First-person narrative with its proximity to autobiography and inherent scope for self-reflection is shown to be especially suited for the depiction of problematic or shattered identity. An interesting exception is the use of a self-conscious narrator in Raza's novels, ironically pointing to the fictitiousness of the novel. Here, in a curious fashion, autobiographical identity problems fuse with fictional identity problems.

The Hindi-Urdu controversy and the decline of the Urdu language, which represents an acute threat to the cultural identity of the Muslims in north India, form the background for the discussion of the authors' theoretical stance in the language controversy, the use of language in the novels, and the treatment of language and identity as a thematic topic. As Muslims who write in Hindi, the authors refute the widespread cliché

that Muslim identity finds its adequate literary expression in the Urdu language only. Instead, they argue for the co-existence and mixing of Hindi and Urdu and refuse to grant the language issue prominence as a fundamental ideological theme. This conciliatory attitude is reflected in the novels' language usage, where Sanskritic and Arabo-Persian lexical borrowings are employed in such a way that the distance between Hindi and Urdu appears to be bridged quite naturally.

Raza and Ehtesham are found to be the only authors to deal with the discrimination against and decline of Urdu as an aspect of the Muslim identity crisis and as a paradigm of the north Indian Muslims' social condition. The other authors direct their attention to changing patterns of language use and to the present linguistic situation. They are concerned with the penetration into Hindi of English vocabulary and the practice of code-switching as an indicator of the speaker's aspirations for a "modern" identity. The issue of standard language versus dialect is given prominence. It is reflected both in the narrative technique and the content of the novels: while mimesis, the claim to authenticity, and local color govern the use of dialect in narration, dialect is depicted as a central factor in the characters' regional, cultural and social identity. The use of dialect is shown to foster emotional integration and community identity. Against this, the dialect-speaker's marginalization and his exclusion from the official world of standard language are described as problematic aspects.

The contribution made by Muslim writers to modern Indian literature has up to now been largely overlooked by modern literary studies. The present thesis is limited to the evaluation of a small group of Hindi writers. While a more comprehensive examination is left to further studies, it can be concluded that in attempting an honest and aesthetically gratifying portrait of the historical destiny, social situation and everyday life of Muslims in north India, the authors discussed here have introduced a new theme into modern Hindi literature and made an important statement in the current debate on Muslim identity in India. ❒