

## RETHINKING SECULARISM: SACRED AND PROFANE IN RAHIMASOOM REZA'S TOPISHUKL

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### ABSTRACT

*Those who are born are only infants. By the time they die they are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, atheists, Indians, Pakistanis, whites, blacks, etc., etc. (TS, 18)*

*India is declared a secular state constitutionally. However, the recent political, social and religious events and turns have challenged secularism with its communalist, religious fundamentalist and separatist attitudes. Secularism, one of the main political ideologies of the post-colonial state in India, has been at the centre of scholarly and political debates among the intelligentsia in recent times. The present paper explores how counter-discourses of sacred and profane are projected and negotiated in the narrative of TopiShukl by RahiMasoom Reza and what possibility the narrative contains of reconstructing the secular vision of our nation by rewriting its culture.*

**Key words:** *Secularism, Sacred, Profane, Religion, Pseudo, reconstruction. nation*

### **Introduction:**

India is constitutionally declared a secular state. However, The recent political, social and religious events and turns have challenged secularism with its communalist, religious fundamentalist and separatist attitudes. Secularism, one of the main political ideologies of the post-colonial state in India, has been at the centre of scholarly and political debates among the intelligentsia in recent times. Secularism is a very contested term in Indian context. It becomes more pertinent when we take the translation of Secularism (DharmNirpekshta) into consideration. Several scholars find that Dharma is used in Indian thought in much broader sense and in different contexts than the word 'religion', though often Dharma and religion are used as synonyms... for example Dharam is also used in the sense of duty. So in social context Dharam is important. Dharam is essence of the rules and regulations followed in various facets of human life of an individual and the society as a whole. Mahatma Gandhi describes the correct attitude towards religion as Sarva Dharma Sambhav is somewhat different from the European secularism which is independent of religion. We may say that the Indian concept of secularism is that of Sarva Dharma Sambhav which is not against any religion. It treats all religions with equal respect. And therefore it can be said that the Indian concept of secularism is inclusive more positive and practical and i think that is the best way to adopt for the of India and

Ancient Indian society was based on absolute freedom to search the truth with out getting attached to any particular belief system and that is the goal of any Dharma. Ancient India realized the purpose of secular thinking long before West discovered secularism.

Shashi Tharoor Calls India “athali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast. (Tharoor 62)

Indians are used to multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India, an India which safeguards the common space available to each identity.

The Idea of India is of one land embracing many. It is the idea that a nation may endure differences of caste, creed, colour, conviction, culture, cuisine, costume and custom, and still rally around a consensus. And that consensus is about the simple idea that in democracy you don't really need to agree—except on the ground rules of how you will disagree.

### Sacred and profane in TopiShukla:

Rahi Masoom Raza (1927-1992) occupies an important place in the front rank of the Hindi novelists. In his career spanning 35 years, Rahi Masoom Raza has written lyrics, dialogues and stories for various movies and television series. He became popular with the telecast of TV series 'Mahabharat' that was based on the Hindu epic Mahabharat. Rahi, a Muslim, wrote the screenplay and dialogue of the TV series that went on to become the most watched TV series in India.

Rahi detested communal and vote-bank politics, and he fought against the divisive forces in the country through his writings. He was a strong nationalist first and a Muslim next who strongly opposed pseudo-secularism. He was upfront against the fundamentalists on both sides of the divide. He was against politics of hatred, and believed that the interest of communal elements among both Hindus and Muslims lies in keeping the two communities aloof from each other and to create distrust among them.

Raza was a staunch secular and he hated pseudo-secularists. Unforgiving of neither Hindu nor Muslim zealots, Raza spent a lifetime in a continuous quest for the Hindustani identity.

Raza wrote in one of his articles: Hindu word is not connected to any religion. Indian Muslim is being called Hindu by the people of Arab and Iran means Hindu is the name of Hindustani kaum.

### Raza said:

*I am a Musalman Hindu. Any Victor would be Christian Hindu and any Matador would be Vaishnav or AryaSamaj Hindu. Many religions can exist in one nation. But many Kaum can't exist in one country. The names of Tulsi and Kabir are also my forefathers including Galib and Meer.”*

*(Razaqtd. In Agrawal)*

The narrative of Topi Shukla is a provocative experimental novel, which focuses on the real India and Indianness. The story is set in the city of Aligarh about fifteen years later from 1947 when Pakistan is already a reality. In this narrative Raza discusses freely all kinds of factors-- religious, cultural, political, economic, and linguistic factors which may be the causes of impeding or preventing good relations between Muslims and Hindus and stand in the way of such friendship or threaten to undermine it. He fearlessly speaks about sensitive topics like religion, Hindu Muslim relationships and is courageous enough to point out all the prejudices that poison these relationship. Such stark rather naked deliberations affirm Raza 's faith that it is only by exposing, expressing, acknowledging these prejudices we will be able to identify and correct them.

The novel starts with the Topi's statement" So, brother, do you now see how politics enters religion? ( TS 17)

Through Topi's story the author aims to reach to the daily realities of life confronted by common men and women. The locale of the novel is thus the whole of India. Raza says:

But this story, or this biography, is not Topi's alone. This story is a slice of the story of this country, well.... Of this universe. . A piece of roti, though separated from the main roti, retains all its qualities. (TS 36 )

The novel has a distinct value so far as the authorial interventions are concerned. In the Introduction, the author calls the novel "the story of time." (TS ) The strategy behind this suggestion is evidently aimed at making the novel as much of a political critique as another story of time by him, AdhaGaon. The author makes it clear:

I want to tell Topi's story without making it into a thriller because Topi's saga is the veritable theme of this era. This is a disgraceful era. Low people are being born. Beauty is covered with multi- coloured muck. ( TS 15)

The novel is written from Topi's perspective who belongs to the category of so called majoritarian class Hindu and firmly affirms and establishes author's belief in the pluralistic and assimilative culture of India. A person is not a Hindu, a Muslim, a Sikh, or a Christian by birth; he is only a human being. Topi advocates the abolition of castes and communities.

At the time of birth everyone is only a child. By the time they die they become Hindu, Muslim, Christian, atheist , Indian, Pakistani, White , Black, and so many such more." (TS, 25)

Raza interrogates the idea of nation as monolithically constructed space by associating Topi's saga with other segments of his life which are indivisible in any case:

This is a story only about Topi. But it is important to keep flitting into Iffan's consciousness every now and then, because one cannot see the changes happening in the country merely from Topi's frame of vision. Iffan, too , is a varied form of Topi. This Topi has a myriad forms. In Bengal , Punjab , U.P., Andhra, Assam... in the entire country, this Topi, burdened with his problems is knocking at the doors of ideologies, philosophies, politics... but no one supports him. I cannot expand the story to include all the forms of Topi. So I have chosen only two forms of Topi. (TS 54)

TopiShukla, the protagonist, staunchly believes in Indianness rejecting the sectarian and casteist communal considerations. A born non-conformist, he exposes the hypocrisies of both communities by anchoring himself to a Muslim family.

Partition has its shadow on the Muslims who have stayed behind. Though some of them still, at times cherish a wish to shift to Pakistan, major concern of them is how to remain and coexist.

For years, no Muslims name had appeared in the IAS and IFS lists..... And when, despite keeping his (Iffan) eyes open through the night, no dream filtered in, he decided to let his beard grow. ..he was a fellow member of a scared generation... But Iffan did not go to Pakistan. He was scared. He wanted to overcome this fear. (TS 55)

Partition has created a world of people who are pushed in a vague atmosphere filled with doubts, fear and insecurity:

And for the first time Topi was perplexed by his hatred. What was untrue---the friendship or the fear? Friendship or hatred...?

When Iffan asks Topi why do the Muslims not get jobs? Iffan asks this question as if it were in continuation of a long drawn debate on the Hindu-Muslim problem.

Because their hearts are filled with guilt,' said Topi.

What guilt?

The guilt that now that they have made their Pakistan they cannot really claim a right to India. Bhai in Every Muslim's mind there is a window that opens out towards Pakistan.'

Then why did I not go to Pakistan?'

Topi had no answer to this question. Come to think of it, why had this Iffan not gone to Pakistan? Why had four or four-and-a-half crore Muslims stayed back in India? Why has my neighbor Kabeer Mohammed built a new house...? (TS 73)

There are such innumerable questions Raza very boldly has posited in TopiShukla through the dialogues of Topi and Iffan:

But why do the Muslims celebrate when Pakistan hockey team wins a match?

We could ask this question differently—why is it that in the Indian hockey team there are no Muslims? Have the Muslims forgotten to play hockey?" (TS 73)

No, but there is this constant fear that they will join hands with the Pakistani side.'

Fear!

'So, this fear exists on both sides! The sadness deepened further, darkness increased. Where all does this fear exist? Is there any possibility of getting rid of this fear?

(TS 73)

This is a serious issue which Raza so openly raises:

How can the Muslim prove that they will not join hands with the other side if they are never allowed to play against the Pakistanis?

We cannot forego our gold medal just to test how loyal the Muslims are, Can we?

Then what is the solutions?'

'Supposing it is not hockey but war. If we recruit Muslims into the army to test their loyalty and if they join hands with the Pakistanis, then who will have to pay the price for this test? (TS 74)

This endless debate ends with no solutions." ... It was better to continue to be suspicious. It was good to continue with the hatred" (TS 74)

Raza critiques the post-partition atmosphere and directs our attention to the fault-lines which are instrumental to widen the rift between Hindus and Muslims. He tells us that the Hindu-Muslim relationship is plagued by three devils, namely" hatred, suspicion, fear:

Hatred!

Suspicion!

Fear!

We are crossing the river on these three floats. These three words continue to be sowed and reaped. These are the words that flow as milk from the mother's breast and into the child's gullet. From behind the crevices of the locked doors of people's hearts, these are the three words that peep out. Like homeless spirits , these three words buzz around in the open courtyards." (TS 69)

Iffan expresses his anxiety over this and says to Topi and Sakeena:

You hate the Muslims. Sakina abhors the Hindus. I... I am scared perhaps. Where will all this lead to Balbhadra? My fears and the hatred in your heart and Sakeena's -are these such fixed truths that they just cannot change?" (TS 72)

Raza lays bare and critiques the ways Muslims are treated in India. The following lines of a Muslim gentlemen who was travelling in the train depict his internal agony:

The author critiques the high proclamations and futility of the rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood:

If Hindus and Muslims are brothers, then there is no need to be going around talking about it. And if they aren't, merely calling them brothers will not make a difference." (TS 37)

However he is baffled over the bond, which these friends share. He expresses his bewilderment over the love and hate relationship of Hindu- Muslim friends:

What will the history teacher teach shortly? What sort of an explanation will he provide of a situation where I was afraid of you and you hated me. And despite this we were friends. Why don't I murder you? Why don't you kill me? Who is it that stops us?" (TS 72)

When Topi and Iffan meet once again in Aligarh, both brood over the current situation India is partitioned. Topi initiates the talk and asks about the family members. The following dialogue of Iffan and Topi reveals their baffled state as well as their bond of love:

Could we not have managed without Pakistan...

'Don't know,' said Iffan.

And now I cannot even abuse Pakistan.'

'Why?'

'Baaji's gone there na.' (TS 62)

Their bond was a strange bond of love and hate which they were trying to understand. Iffan was scared of the Hindus and so he hated them. Topi had fallen in love with ancient Indian culture, so he hated the Muslims--- but both became sad." (TS 62)

Rahattempts to showcase partition affected both; Hindus as well as Muslims:

When the old sense of friendship climbed up the wall of hatred to peep out a little, both became sad.... Both journeyed through the past event again and both felt disheartened with the thought that both were losers.( TS 62)

Iffan's drawing room gives us a glimpse how Hindu- Muslim sanskriti survived together," Over the artificial fireplace was a bust of Shankar".( TS 63) When Topi asks Iffan about the Shankar bust he says smiling: I hate the Hindus but I love Shankar because He is exactly like human beings...

The novel also addresses the problematic of the much-debated discourse of secularism and in the context of using religion for political ends. The secular credentials are challenged and ciphered by the fundamentalist forces of the time:

Man

Human beings.

Both words have the same meaning. Yet the sounds of these two words clashed with each other. Mahesh was a human being. Men murdered him. SayyedAabidRaza was a man. Human beings killed him."(TS 67)

He comments and draws our attention towards identity politics of the country which is based on the exteriority; external identity markers:

How people change when the colours change! The Topi is just one. But if it is white one, the wearer looks like a congress man, if it is red, then like a socialist; if saffron, then like a jansanghi" ( TS 26)

Rahi has portrayed the impact of communalism in the lives of two friends. Topi remains without job since the Hindu institutions do not employ him due to his intimacy with Muslims while the Muslim institutions would not take him due to his Hindu name. There are jobs for Muslims, Agrawals, Kayasthas, Christians, Sikhs. "But where should the

Indians go? It would seem that unemployment plays an important role in making people Hindus and Muslims" (TS, 13).

However, the novel presents his three brothers who have nothing except hatred and suspicion for Muslims:

"If all these Muslims are sent to Pakistan, the jobs they get will come to Hindus" (TS, 96). Even the supposedly secular parties like Congress are rather ambiguous in their commitment to secularism; they can both appear to appease Muslims and sometimes act as their enemy (TS, 97).

Since a major part of the action is enacted in and around the Aligarh Muslim University Campus, the novel depicts a lot of controversy and debate along the communal lines.

Topi admonishes students for their pro-Pakistan attitude at the time of a cricket match between India and Pakistan. When a famous historian reads a paper on the need for national integration, a Muslim woman blasts the whole exercise by calling it futile; she is not basically communal but is bitter, for she lost her father in a communal riot.

The novel has a perceptive comment on the sad controversy involving the two sister languages which are basically one.

This game of names is puzzling indeed. Urdu and Hindi are the names of one language-Hindavi. But you can see yourself how much misunderstanding can be created by the change of names. If the name is Krishna, they call him an avatar; if it is Mohammed, they call him a prophet. In this controversy of names, people have forgotten that both were milkmen and used to graze the cattle. (TS, 32)

Problematics of History: Raza raises serious issue of biased history of India and Pakistan which need to be reconstructed.. The dominant structures use the historical or cultural texts to indoctrinate the people with a jingoist version of history - often under the convenient camouflage of nationalism. The novel is not against the concept of the nation, but it cautions us about its possible misuse. It hints at the need of rethinking and rewriting our texts which are loaded with communal overtones:

Iffan is shocked to find a specimen of a highly communalized history in his class through a student in his class. Iffan is explaining that Shivaji and PrithvirajChauhan were reactionary and created hurdles in the way of nationalism. The student retorts:

"Sir! The Mughal emperors destroyed the ancient Indian culture. The era of Mughal rule is the blackest era in the history of Indian culture. Is there a single mosque that is half as beautiful as any of the ancient temples? It is because of this sense of inferiority that Aurangzeb had temples demolished...." (TS, 55-56).

Iffan is stunned to hear this version of history. He was a teacher of history He had to say something in such a situation. He tries to argue: When molten lead was being poured into the ears of the untouchables, were the high caste Hindus suffering from an inferior complex...? (TS 56)

Iffan feels very sad and he shares his grief with his wife Sakina:

And if these are the kinds of arguments being drilled into students' heads, what will happen to this country? The newer generation is at greater loss than ours.... It seems as if Hindustan is not destined to have a history at all. I was taught a history written by the British. Chandrabali is taught a history written by Hindus. The same thing must be happening in Pakistan. Their history may bear an Islamic stamp. Wonder when Hindustani history will ever be written (TS, 56).

When Sakeena says to go to Pakistan, Iffan denies strongly and says:

To teach that before the Muslims came the Hindustanis were uncivilized? He shook his head to mean a 'no'. 'No' Both nations are chasing a mirage." ( TS 56)

### The ending of the narrative:

The ending of the novel is pessimistic because in the end Topi commits suicide struggling against the problems of communalism where nobody tried to understand his agony. The writer declares in the beginning of the novel, "suicide is the defeat of civilization" There is a need to understand this suicidal strangling of innocent people. Rahi himself often experienced a profound grief and sense of failure. In one of his best known couplets, he said:

Lartelartehaargaye hum

Lagltahaibekaargaye hum

( I fought the good fight again and again

And lost. Did I live my life in vain.

(TS Rahi's achievement 12)

Rahi further elaborates as if in a tone of an appeal to listen and act:

Topi is born, in every era, in the very lap of fatal whirlpools. In every eevery era, he is born in the shade of falling walls and it takes him several days to clear off the debris from his body. And during these times, he is absolutely alone and without support." ( TS 54)

### Conclusion:

The text TopiShukla reveals the secular ideology of raza which is very much imbibed in the Indian soil. Readings of the narrative crystallize the fact that the misconceptions about Hindu Muslim relations are imagined or misplaced things.

TopiShukla reconstructs the image of the nation in which the Indianness of people like Topi, Iffan and Sakina is crushed under the weight of communalism. But in a nation that has constantly plagued with fragile communal harmony, such honest voices are very much needed to bring on surface so as separatist and sectarian politics can be eradicated and these honest voices can be highlighted because partition cannot be undone, it is a reality which needs to be accepted and confronted.

MasoomRaza has given a real picture of India as it is and has exposed the fears, beliefs, myths, doubts, pains of common people as if to understand the root realities of daily lives



which is very much different from the dominant discourses of history. The narrative has great possibility of re-structuring our nation by re-focussing on its essence of inclusiveness, cultural syncretism, mutual tolerance.

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