

**Communal Trauma and Erosion of National Consciousness: A study of Roy's  
*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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**Abstract**

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) is a political novel written with realist impulse to present a more holistic view of Indian history, trapped in the enervating temporal structure, repeating itself compulsively. It articulates the personal traumatic experiences of different characters involved as a witness or victim in the recurring communal riots. The study focuses on the representation of communal trauma in the novel as a compulsive repetition of traumatic past. It analyzes modern communalism in novel as an aftermath of a larger historical force shaping the experiences of different characters reflecting postcolonial interests of native bourgeoisie. It explores these multifarious traumatic experiences of multiple characters with different backgrounds leading to the erosion of national consciousness causing disintegration and fragmentation. Caruth's (1996) idea of enervating structure of trauma as a compulsive repetition has been coupled with Fanon's (1963) "pitfalls of national consciousness" to study India's post-partition journey from a secular national ideology to a Hindu nationalist state. Fanon (1963) describes that native bourgeoisie in post-independence states continue their own dominance and surveillance over lumpenproletariat by re-joining the colonial bourgeoisie and re-establishing the leader and the led relationship same as that of colonizer and colonized. Caruth (1996) provides a psychoanalytic framework for the study of native bourgeoisie's reliance on colonial bourgeoisie through the concept of traumatic past that pervades into present history through its compulsive performance.*

**Keywords:** Communal Trauma, National Consciousness, Enervating Temporal Structure, Native Bourgeoisie

**1. Introduction**

Communalism has become a burning issue in India claiming thousands of lives in the last four decades. The political leadership feeds communal hatred resulting in lynch, loot and murder. Arundhati Roy has highlighted this issue in many of her fiction and non-fiction writings. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a political novel which has raised many contemporary issues of modern India. Monaco (2018) states that novel talks about numerous issues including political ones such as "Hindu nationalism and independence of Kashmir" (p. 57). However, the major focus of the story is on dying national consciousness and rise of communal strife. This study focuses on communal trauma as a larger historical force operating through its enervating temporal structure blurring the boundaries of past and present. It explores various traumatic experiences of different characters on communal lines leading to the destruction of post-independence national consciousness promised by the native bourgeoisie. It investigates the impact of erosion of national consciousness and rise of Hindu nationalism on the impoverished masses of India. Insights have been taken from Caruth's idea of re-enactment of traumatic past and Frantz Fanon's "Pitfalls of national consciousness".

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## 2. Literature Review

The theme of communal violence takes central place in the Indian English literary writings. Communalism in India can be divided into three historical phases. The first phase covers pre-partition colonial period. The second phase comprises period of partition. The third phase covers the post-partition period. Communal forces became operative under the colonial administrative control culminating into communal fundamentalism in the partition and post-partition periods. Modern Indian English literature has focused on the representation of experiences of communal trauma of partition and post-partition periods. Partition novels cover the trauma of partition on communal lines resulting into immense violence. Most of the authors have witnessed this violence taking place. They have written fictional works to bear witness to the trauma of partition to lower the risk of perpetuation of the history of trauma of partition into the history yet to come. *Train to Pakistan* (1956), by Khushwant Singh, gives a marvelous account of communal brutality. It shows the penetration of communal fundamentalism into the local politics. *River of Fire* (1959), written by Quratulain Haider, is another such novel that reveals the communal history of India from ancient to modern times. Similarly, *A Bend in the Ganges* (1965), by Manohar Malgonkar, gives an excellent account of communal movements gaining power during struggle for liberation. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* covers various phases of Indian history through the story of Saleem's three generations. It assimilates multiple traumatic experiences of three generations to witness the transgenerational trauma of communal fundamentalism. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), gives a stunning view of the communal plight during and after the partition. *The Shadow Lines* (1988), by Amitav Ghosh, discusses the major historical communal forces operative in the Indian history from ancient to modern times shaping their lives. *Tamas* (1972) by Bhishm Sahni, is a remarkable novel that explores inter-communal hatred in colonial rule and its aftermath in the form of modern communalism. *Curfew in the City*, by Vibhuti Narayan Rai, is based on the personal experiences of the writer who witnessed different communal riots during his police service.

Arundhati Roy has discussed communalism in many of her fiction and non-fiction writings. In an interview to OPENINDIA, conducted by Syed Hamad Ali on August 29, 2011, she says that we may colonize our people, put them in Abu Gharibs and torture them with starvation as long as we are doing it "within the idea of a nation state it is alright". Roy (2003) writes in *War Talk* that the nationalism, in twentieth century, is the major cause of most of the cases of genocide. She says that flags are the bits of colored cloth used by the government to blindfold the minds of general public or to use them as "ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead" (p. 47). She has extended this resistance even to her fiction. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017, is a political novel that is written with realist impulse to describe the role of communal fundamentalism in the erosion of national consciousness. Roy (2017) has successfully depicted the political and ideological journey of India from a secular to a Hindu-nationalist state. Roy (2018) discussing her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, claims that if novels have enemies then the enemy of this novel is the idea that there must be one nation with one religion and one language. Her anti-nationalist stance suggests Fanon's non-national orientations of decolonization. It refers to communal divide as a colonial policy which was later on adopted by native bourgeoisie to safeguard personal gains eroding national consciousness.

## **2.1 Communalism as a colonial policy in India**

Horowitz (2000) states that communalism aims at constructing religious or ethnic identity inciting strife and stimulating violence against people from other groups or communities. Killingray (1991) claims that the term was initially coined by the British colonial administrators to control violence between religious and ethnic groups in colonies specifically in Africa and South Asia. According to Pandey (2006), communalism has become a significant social issue in the countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. India seems to have no answer to prevailing communalism which has claimed thousands of innocent lives in recent years. Some historians link communalism with colonizer's 'Divide and Rule policy'. There is a strong evidence to suggest that, before the Britishers came here, India was inhabited by the Muslims, Christians, Jews and the followers of Vedic order (Hindus). Similarly, there were different tribal and regional cults practicing different family traditions. There are no records to suggest communal riots or violence. These people belonging to different faith and tradition used to attend each other's religious ceremonies. During Mughal rule, many princes and kings married Hindu brides to have a matrimonial alliance. Furthermore, the puritan Mughal emperor Aurangzeb had more hindus than muslims in his army. Similarly, some princely states ruled by hindu rulers had muslim soldiers in their army. It can be observed in the battle of Panipat in 1761.

However, when English came here, they presented a distorted version of Indian history. Akhtar (2013) claims that the colonizers divided the historical period into three phases as Ancient (Hindu), Medieval (Muslim), and Modern (which was not called Christian). Maulana Muhammad Ali expressed his reservations on it addressing the First Round Table Conference session. He said that the second most heinous crime that Great Britain has committed towards India after colonization is preparing the wrong histories and teaching them in our schools. Mill (1817) introduced division of Indian history which became a framework of communalists introducing them with their heroes and reshaping their identities on communal lines. Thus, Upadhyay and Robinson (2012) claim that the idea of the 'glorious past' and separateness of the communities was propagandized through these history books. These history books thoroughly discussed the wrongs which Muslim invaders had done through destroying Hindu temples and humiliating Hindu rulers. Singh (2003) narrates that those Hindu and Sikh warriors who fought against muslim invaders were portrayed as real heroes. History was presented as a war of religions highlighting the discord, strife and acrimony while deliberately ignoring the periods of assimilation.

## **2.2 Liberation struggle and reformulation of political identity**

Indian independence movement involved continuous struggle to end the British rule in India. The beginning of the struggle can be alluded to the 1857 war of independence and it lasted until 1947. During the course of liberation struggle, Hindu Mahasabha and all-India Muslim League represented respective communal interests. Akbar (1988) states that Indian National Congress reflected a secular nationalist vision.

Initially, all factions irrespective of religion or culture, participated in freedom movement to safeguard the interests of Greater India. Indian Nationalism was the chief slogan which united all religious and political factions in India to fight against British Imperialism. Hibbard (2010) states that it was promised that all the people, no

matter which religion they follow or which ideology they believe in, will be considered Indians and hence treated equally. This view was reflected in the constitution when India was declared as a secular state. However, post-independence India could not materialize the dream of nationalism and it turned out to be Hindu Nationalism. This Hindus and Others ideology seemed to destroy the dream of nationalism and united India.

Kumar (2002) has highlighted three different facets of reformulating the political identity of India during the liberation struggle. Those, who sought to reformulate the political identity of India as a nation-state, focused on the establishment of representative institutions and popular democracy. These liberal nationalists desired transformation in the economic structure ignoring the moral texture of regional culture and linguistic solidarity. Mahadev Govind Ranade was a distinguished exponent of this view. Gandhi tried to resolve the tension between regional identities and the pan-Indian identity. He proposed inclusion of existing institutions to reshape a civilization into a state. These time honored institutions, he believed, were very crucial in the process of transformation of a civilization into a state. These liberal and orthodox ideologies were challenged by the radical section of leaders. They targeted economic aspirations of masses and struggled to sharpen their consciousness.

### **2.3 Nationalist literature and national consciousness**

Nationalist literature moves side by side with the political history of nationalism. Writers from all sections of society, [Vinayak Damodar Savarkar](#), [Subramania Bharati](#), [Rabindranath Tagore](#), [Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay](#) and [Kazi Nazrul Islam](#), used their writings as a tool to spread political awareness. Chandra et al. (2016) state that Sarojini Naidu championed the cause of emancipation of Indian women. Dena Bandhu Mitra wrote *Neeldarpan* (1858) to reflect the Nilbidraha revolt when farmers, as a protest against exploitative farming, refused to plant indigo. In *The Spirit of India*, Hema Chandra Banarjee, is referred as he, “voiced in his national lyric the sense of importance of his people to assert their legitimate rights and self-respect against their British masters”. Rabindra Nath Tagore urged the people of his time to work together for the glory of India. According to Ramsay Macdonald, Tagore’s poetry is the product of his commitment to Indian culture. He says that Tagore’s poetry presents “systematic view of life not merely poetic mind, culture, not merely a tune”. (Macdonald, 1919, p. 245). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, assessing the religious zeal of his people, associated nationalism with the dignity of religion. He called his motherland Durga, Laxmi and Saraswati. Singh (2005) says that *The Anand Math* of Bankim Chandra is called the bible of modern patriotism. Similarly, Bhartendu Harishchandra has drawn a sketch of miseries of the people of his time in his drama *Bharat Durdisha*. Subramanya Bharthi was the exponent of nationalism in Tamil literature. His poems reflect nationalism. His poetry is an object of national pride. Munshi Prem Chand is a staunch supporter of patriotism. He wrote *Soz-e-Watan* that contains stories of patriotism. He also wrote *Duniya Ka Sub Se Anmol Ratan* which reflects patriotic tradition. Chiploonkar made his literary contribution through the *Kavyeithasasangraha* and the *Nibandhanmal*. He is called as Brihaspathi of the Marathi literature. His works reflect the latent patriotic sentiments of the people of Maharashtra.

## **2.4 Post-Independence national consciousness**

National Liberation Movement in India brought all factions in the stream of national consciousness. Indian National Congress had two opposing factions representing secular nationalism and Hindu traditionalism. Despite their differences, they stood united against British Raj (Hibbard, 2010). Hindu traditionalists established Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 to inculcate in the minds of Hindu youth anti-muslim sentiments and Hindu fanaticism. Van der Veer (1994) says that they, even, hated Gandhi for his pluralist views. According to Hibbard (2010), Nehru called it “an Indian version of fascism” (p. 123). Another religious party Mahasabha was established that started Hindutwa movement spreading hatred against muslims and promoting Hindu nationalism. Despite the vigorous opposition of RSS and Mahasabha, Nehru was successful in declaring India as a secular socialist state.

According to Avari (2012), secular nationalism did not mean anti-religious stance but it meant equal treatment of the followers of different religions. The issue of communal divide was dealt with constitutionally declaring constitutional supremacy over parliamentary supremacy. However, communal riots broke out in Delhi, Agra and Uttar Pradesh where muslim population decreased from 33 percent to mere 11 percent after separation. A Hindu orthodox Nathuram Godse, an ex-member of RSS, killed Gandhi for his support for Muslims. Understanding the gravity of matter, Nehru led Congress pass some legislations which included prohibition of using religious slogans in election campaigns. Citizen Act was passed to award citizenship to those who came from Pakistan. Although Nehru tried day and night to promote secularism but provincial governments did not carry it further. For instance, Congress government in Uttar Pradesh declared Hindi as official language in 1951. Similarly, in 1955, it imposed a ban on cow-slaughtering. Hibbard (2010) says that Nehru’s death in 1964 proved fatal for the secularism. Van der Veer (1994) claims that Vishva Hindu Parishad was established in 1964 to reform society on the basis of Hindu Dharma.

## **2.5 Rise of Communalism and Erosion of National Consciousness**

Indira Gandhi came into power in 1980 with two third majority in Lok Sabha. She started extending support to Hindu nationalists and abandoned congressional view of secularism. Khalistan movement surfaced as a reaction. Furthermore, golden temple was attacked to curb the movement. Mrs. Gandhi was killed for this blasphemous act by her two Sikh guards. Metcalf and Metcalf (2006) say that as a reaction, a thousand Sikhs were butchered in Delhi. Rajiv Gandhi, succeeding his mother, continued the policy of religious communalism. He violated constitutional directives of state policy that there should be a uniform civil code for all the communities living in India. According to Metcalf and Metcalf (2006), this violation lent Hindu nationalists an opportunity to stand for agitation. Roy (2017) has portrayed these turbulent times through the story of a hermaphrodite who is a witness to communal strife and dying national consciousness.

Arundhati Roy, who is a renowned anti-nationalist, describes the pathetic condition of India in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She claims that nationalism has badly failed in India and it has turned itself into a Hindu-Nationalist state protecting and safeguarding the interests of just one faction whereas plundering and looting the resources of other minorities. The novel is published two years ago. The narrative runs over decades and different places but the principal setting of the story is Delhi and Kashmir. It talks about a series of events that ensued the most violent episodes in

the history of modern India such as notorious land reforms, Godhra train burning and Kashmir Insurgency.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Insights have been taken from Fanon's psychoanalytical study of native bourgeoisie's re-enactment of colonial practices. Frantz and Richard (1963) say that "[n]ational consciousness, which is not nationalism, is alone capable of giving us an international dimension." (p. 179). Fanon's reflections on national consciousness, suggest non-national orientations to decolonization. He sketches the idea of national consciousness as emerging from the intensive action of the people embodying their aspirations and transforming the state based on "exceptionally inventive cultural manifestations for its very existence" (p. 179). His notion of national consciousness is not only confined to anticolonial struggle. It, rather, reflects a post-independence vision. He says that this is not the end-point of anticolonial mobilization. It claims social, economic, and cultural ownership by the people. He suggests that we need to switch from national consciousness to political and then to the social consciousness. The people should form an organic political and social entity to "consciously appropriate". (p. 143). He clearly states that if the national consciousness is not converted into political consciousness then it leads to a dead end. He states that if national consciousness does not merge into a social or political consciousness and further into humanism, "then it leads to a dead end" (p. 143). He claims that the post-independence state is captured by the elite bourgeoisie who continue the legacy of colonial master. He warns against this bourgeoisie. He says if a bourgeoisie motivates his people only through nationalism, then it will ultimately get "tangled up in a series of trials and tribulations" (p. 144). Insisting upon self-consciousness, he says the first responsibility of a post-colonial state is to "restore dignity to all its people" (p. 144). Young (2005) argues that Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* is as much concerned with a critique of possible forms of the post-independence state as it is with national liberation as such.

"Pitfalls of national consciousness" is one of Fanon's most telling theoretical contributions in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He argues that the failure of nationalism is linked with the aspirations of native bourgeoisie to replace the colonial rule to usurp their own dominance and surveillance over lumpenproletariat. He refers to this privileged middle class as responsible for the failure of nationalism. He states it as, "intellectual laziness of the middle class" (p. 149). This native bourgeoisie class desires to survey and control the colonized masses through the policies of colonial bourgeoisie it sought to replace. This national middle class which gains power at the end of colonial enterprise is underdeveloped having no economic power. It is not any different from the bourgeoisie of mother country it wants to replace. Fanon (1963) says that after independence, any catastrophe will lead it to "send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country". (p. 149). This economic dependence forces native bourgeoisie to rejoin colonial bourgeoisie establishing a relationship of leader and the led similar to that of colonizer and colonized respectively. He says that leader may promise political liberty and national dignity before independence. However, after the declaration of independence, his inner purpose is revealed when he becomes president of that company of profiteers that are "impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie" (p. 166). Fanon's idea of the native bourgeoisie's re-enactment of colonial administrative policies has been conflated with Caruth's concept of traumatic history and its unwitting compulsive re-enactment. Caruth

(1996) says that “trauma is a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (p. 4). She says that the victim of trauma has his sense of the world scrambled. She says that the trauma is an “oscillation between a crisis of death and a correlative crisis of life” (p. 7). She says that the victim is not only trapped in the encounter with death but he has his sense of the experience of survival scrambled. So, a traumatic experience is more grounded on the ongoing experience of survival. She claims that contemporary history is an unwitting performance of traumatic past history whose witnessing did not take place. She says that a traumatic history serves as a larger historical force penetrating into the contemporary history through its performance.

These two theoretical approaches have been conflated to study the novel from a psychoanalytic standpoint to understand various factors behind native bourgeoisie’s re-enactment of colonial administrative policy of communal fundamentalism leading to the erosion of national consciousness.

#### **4. Analysis**

The residents of ‘Khwabgah’ are watching the heinous act of terrorism on TV when two planes dash into gigantic towers of World Trade Centre. Roy writes that the residents of Khwabgah were watching TV as “the tall buildings buckled like pillars of sand” (Roy, 2017, p. 40). They are all sharing the grief and sufferings of Americans. The characters are not only affected by the regional but global politics. After some time, India suffers a similar terrorist attack on its Parliament just three months after 9/11. The Vajpayee government passes the notorious POTA act which allows detention without trial. Roy (2017) discusses it as “A new law was passed which allowed suspects to be detained without trial for months” (p. 42). Islamic terrorist groups are declared responsible for these attacks. These incidents trigger hostility towards muslims in India and their patriotism is in question. Many young muslims are detained and tortured under this act. This is a reference to religious communalism in India targeting muslim population and branding them as terrorists. According to Fanon, the first responsibility of a post-independence state is to restore the dignity of its masses to restore self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is a pre-requisite of national consciousness. However, to safeguard personal interests, native bourgeoisie sketch this self-consciousness on communal lines. This is how it leads to the erosion of national consciousness.

Roy discusses the Gujrat riots which started with the incident of Godhra Railway Station. A coach full of Hindu Pilgrims, returning from Ayodhya, was set on fire. It came as a reaction to demolished Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. This incident led to inter-communal riots in Gujrat between Hindus and Muslims. She describes the destruction of shrine of Wali Dakni as it “was razed to the ground and a tarred road was built over it, erasing every sign that it had ever existed” (p. 46). However, people kept placing flowers at road where once stood the shrine. She says that neither the chief minister nor the police could stop people from leaving flowers in the middle of newly constructed tar road at the shrine of Wali Dakni. Roy (2017) says that “when the flowers were crushed to paste under the wheels of fast cars, new flowers would appear” (p. 46). Roy (2017) portrays how Anjum and Zakir Mian are trapped in riots in Ahmedabad. The mob attacks muslims as “armed with swords and tridents and wore saffron headbands” (p. 45). Zakir Mian does not survive it. However, Anjum is found in a refugee camp clad in a manly dress with short hair. She has learnt to chant Gayatri Mantra. She is so terrified that, when she returns, she teaches this mantra to

Zainab as a safety measure. Impoverished and marginalized masses are more vulnerable to the blows of communalism. Erosion of national consciousness has a large impact on the lives of these masses. Zakir Mian dies and Anjum is so terrified that she has to learn and practice Gayatri Mantra to save her life. She even teaches it to Zainab to be able to survive communal riots.

Roy (2017) refers to 2004 state elections when talking about Narendra Modi as “Some people believed he ought to be held responsible for mass murder, but his voters called him “Gujrat ka Lalla” Gujarat’s Beloved” (p. 62). She has slammed him very often in her public interviews for promoting Hindu nationalism. Anjum is, however, happy with the defeat of RSS backed BJP government. Roy (2017) writes that Anjum was happy when lipping poet (Atal Bihari Vajpayee) was voted out of his office and she had felt “adoration on the timid, blue turbaned Sikh economist who replaced him (p. 81). The blue turbaned Sikh economist here is Manmohan Singh. As the story progresses, he is referred as a “trapped rabbit”. Roy (2017) wrote that it appeared as if “someone else was pulling the strings” (p. 81). Fanon describes the plight of native bourgeoisie by referring to its intellectual laziness as it desires to survey and control the masses through the policies of colonial bourgeoisie. Whether it is a lipping Poet-Prime Minister or blue turbaned Sikh economist the circumstances are not going to change as a result of non-assimilation of national consciousness.

There is a reference to anti-corruption movement of 2011 in the novel. This movement, started by Anna Hazare gained nation wide publicity. Roy (2017) writes, “the angry cadences of India against Corruption movement dominated media headlines in India” (p. 362). It was declared as India Against Corruption movement to end political corruption. Roy (2017) writes that protestors had stormed into urban centers raising slogans and demanding “an immediate end to political corruption” (p. 362). Anna Hazare is referred in the novel as “tubby old Gandhian, former soldier turned village social worker” (p. 101). Roy (2017) sates that in his interviews, he described the pleasures of the simple life he was leading. He admitted that his practice of Gandhian rati-sadhana had actually provided him enormous strength during his fast. She writes that on the third day of his fast, “he got off his bed, jogged around the stage in his white kurta and dhoti and flexed his flappy biceps” (p. 103). There are certain incidents in the political history of a state that stir the sentiment of nationalism among masses but fail to develop national consciousness. These incidents target to address a specific issue and do not extend beyond it. Whereas, Fanon (1963) urges for a massive anticolonial mobilization which would claim social, economic and cultural ownership by the people.

There is another political allusion to Una violence. BJP government, after coming into power in 2014, has been supporting and promoting right wing ideology. There is a marked increase in incidents of cow-vigilant violence. Roy (2017) writes that the government was backing the campaigns promoting cow urine as a drink and detergent. She says that the people accused of hurting the cows were being flogged and killed in the constituency of Gujrat ka Lalla. Roy (2017) states in the novel, “The Holy Cow became the national emblem” (p. 402). Roy (2017) refers to “Una Lynching Case” through Sadam’s story. He has changed his name and has left his profession of skinning the dead animals after public lynching of his father and friends on the pretext of cow slaughtering. The communalism practiced today is the same old version of communalism at the times of British Raj. The communal divide which was

created by distorting the religious identities of Hindus and Muslims on the pretext of controlling the masses is being used by the today's politicians. Governments back such lynching incidents to concede more votes. India claims to be the largest democracy whereas its democracy is sketched on communal lines and is a potential threat to no one but itself. Trauma narratives in Roy's novel function as testimonial acts of history telling presenting a holistic view of Indian history trapped in its hybrid temporal structure enervating compulsively. Contemporary communal trauma is a performance (re-enactment) of past colonial administrative policy of communal divide. It explains that the pre-independence history of communalism in colonial era is a traumatic history that has emerged as a larger historical force in the post-independence era through its compulsive repetition urging the present administrative officers to take up the role of colonial master.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a political novel reflecting on the challenges to the modern day India. It articulates communal fundamentalism as a larger historical force shaping the personal experiences of many of its characters. The study reveals that the representation of communal trauma in this novel presents a holistic view of Indian history trapped in its hybrid temporality repeating itself unwittingly and compulsively. This temporal hybridity creates a space for the past traumatic history to sneak into the present history through its performance. The study shows that the native bourgeoisie unwittingly repeat colonial administrative policy of communalism. They take liberation as end-point to their anticolonial struggle. This communal strife results into the destruction of national consciousness creating more divide and disintegration. The impoverished and marginalized classes are the ones to be greatly affected by the communal fundamentalism.

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