
Identity Crisis: Alienation and Religious Demarcation in Bhisham Sahni's Pali

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Abstract

Bhisham Sahni's "Pali" the novel, delves into the devastating fallout of the Indian-Pakistani split and emphasizes the severe suffering brought on by religious enmity. Pali the protagonist of the novel a representative of solitude and melancholy, moves through a range of feelings, from solitary to identity-crisis. This research highlights the wider impact of religious prejudice and parallels the suffering of individuals caught in the crossfire. The narrative, which is linked with contemporary partition literature, reveals common trauma and its lingering effects. Pali's anguish highlights the universal narrative of suffering and reveals the pervasive effects of hatred. Despite Sahni's efforts to link experience and understanding, some agonies are still indescribable. The anguish that Pali, the main character, endured resides imprisoned, scorched too deeply for words. The book serves as a conduit for these profound effects, reflecting inexpressible sentiments. Pali encapsulates generational trauma, testifying to the religious enmity that birthed the India-Pakistan division. Pali's journey unfolds into a tapestry of emotions, revealing identity's complexity, coexistence's fragility, and prejudice's destructiveness. Sahni's work transcends his works portraying humanity's spirit, historical shadows, and a call for harmony amidst discord. This research revitalizes "Pali," its resonance reaching those seeking to comprehend the past and shape an inclusive, empathetic future.

Keywords: *identity crisis, alienation, trauma, partition violence, communal riot*

Introduction

This research explores a sense of alienation and religious demarcation between people during the partition period of India as reflected in Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*. The partition of India-Pakistan was one of the most violent and traumatic events faced by the people in contemporary time. The slaughter in that partition war was utterly brutal. Massacre of millions of innocent people was just because of certain people's narrow ideology in power. Certain ideology of people in power created communal riots between people, parted them as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Consequently, the partition occurred. Partition line was drawn on the basis of religion. Various sadistic war crimes were committed in the violence. On the basis of religious lines, two countries were formed. The minority got tortured and given

unnecessary pressure to leave their homeland along with their culture and tradition. Thus, the fierce bloodshed and unlimited death of the people of Indian subcontinent partitioned India and Pakistan.

Amidst a world ravaged by the merciless grasp of religious division and animosity, Sahni's literary masterpiece, *Pali*, emerges as a poignant journeying into the human soul's struggle for identity during the riotous period of the Indian-Pakistani partition. This research peels back the layers of history and sentiment, unveiling the unhealed wounds inflicted upon both individuals and societies by the cruel hands of religious intolerance. At the core of Sahni's narrative lies the affecting figure Pali, a tragic emblem of alienation and desolation. As the researcher delves into Pali's experiences, a tapestry of emotions unravels - the isolation, despair, and the immense burden of a fractured sense of self. Through Pali's lens, the researcher exposes the distressing impact of religious bias on human lives, each page echoing the haunting cries of those ensnared within the turmoil of separation. This exploration transforms into a quest to understand the profound depth of the wounds inflicted by religious intolerance. By drawing parallels with contemporary partition literature, the researcher unearths the shared trauma of an era and how its reverberations through time. Pali's struggling act magnifies the broader narrative of suffering, ultimately illuminates the profound effects of hatred on the human psyche.

Sahni's words endeavor to bridge the gap between experience and comprehension, the researcher grapples with the painful reality that certain suffering transcends the confines of language. The trauma etched into Pali's essence remains elusive, incommunicable, forever contained within the depths of his tormented soul. Sahni asserts in the novel as, we have the illusion that the ends have really joined (p.56). The novel serves as a vessel for these deeply visceral impacts, its pages stained with the residue of experiences too profound to be confined to mere words. This research forms a compelling argument - that at its core, Pali encapsulates the generational trauma, a searing reminder of the religious alienation and retribution that culminated in the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. As the researcher traces Pali's path, the narrative unravels into an intricate tapestry of human emotions, laying bare the intricacies of identity, the fragility of coexistence, and the destructive potency of intolerance. Ultimately, Sahni's *Pali* transcends its role as a literary creation; it becomes a testament to the unyielding spirit of humanity, a mirror reflecting the shadows of our history, and an impassioned appeal for unity amidst the discord of division. When Pali was lost from home, his parents are searching him and Shakur was tracked for the child's search. Here, the novelist mentions, a large number of refugees still had to migrate. Shakur feared the police might come to know about the lost child and create serious trouble for him (p. 61). Through this research, the words within *Pali* gain renewed resonance, reverberating with the hearts of those who strive to comprehend the past, thereby molding a future marked by empathy and acceptance.

This study delves into the agonizing narrative of the partition war that shattered the fabric of India and Pakistan. *Pali* has the vivid instance mentioned by Sahni as, the mental

anguish of the passengers itself expressed in the moans of the insane, and then changed into heart-rending cries before petering out into an anguished silence (p. 58). The conflict tore separates the very identities of people in the region, leaving unendurable scars on their collective historical memory. Even today, the wounds inflicted by that war continue to haunt societies. Among the most vulnerable victims of this upheaval were the children, who suffered acutely from its effects. This research unveils the stark imagery of the profoundly tragic state of these children during and after the war, as mirrored through the experiences of the protagonist, Pali. Countless innocent lives were stripped of their humanity in the wake of this conflict, and the emotional turmoil inflicted upon them often went unnoticed. Pali's struggle with identity mirrors the broader crisis of nationality that India faced at the time. The psychological trauma etched into Pali's psyche remains as agonizing as the memories of the partition war itself, both of which are enduring sources of pain. The far-reaching impact of war remains immeasurable, and the scars it leaves are permanent, serving as a somber reminder of the depths of human suffering.

Critical Responses in Sahni's *Pali*

The researcher through this research portrays the real picture of the partition violence, chaos, split, communal upheaval and the killings of both countries' people. The text brings the related issue as, all of them had their own worries to contend with. They were all shouting and crying. Hers was not the only family being driven from its home (p. 57). That was the seamy underside of humans' history where partition brought separation not only between countries but also within family, religion and the culture. The partition brought adversities for the people regarding their settlement in their newly formed countries.

Sahni's *Pali* presents a child Pali's trauma, who gets separated from his parents during the partition. The child Pali is the main character of the novel. The child finds himself confused when he is transfigured into different religion. Manohar Lal's expression makes disappointed to the readers, he was searching his child, here he says, the child must be somewhere here (p. 58). Pali feels awkward for facing dual identities; first he is forced to abandon his previous religious practices and the second, he is compelled to assimilate new religion in his present life. Human being has the vibrant issue of body and hatred of the spirit. The literature is derived through the social replica. Dhungana (2009) says, the body is compelled to get its space or existence through the acceleration of the time or world. Context determines, language crystallizes its meaning because it is the product of the social discourse (P. 16). Here, Pali has the same condition, he neither forgets his parents nor his tradition, language and culture. He is mentally tensed and entangled with the problem of existential crisis. Therefore, this research concentrates on the pathetic condition, chaos and trauma that Pali faces wherever he lives either in India or in Pakistan. That is why, the situation occurs due to religious fanaticism. The partition made people refugees and they faced bitter experiences. It was chaos, nightmare, unprecedented traumatic experiences they had gone through their life. The contemporary situation brought inhuman behaviors towards people

who belonged to minority.

The people were assumed haphazardly with ill treatment. They were beaten, raped, tortured and kidnapped but no one paid attention to the situation. People were treated inhumanly. Muslim religious gurus were fascinated to transform the religion Hindu to Muslim. Here is reference as, it was bearded maulvi of the neighboring mosque standing there, holding a thick lathi (p.61). The purpose of this act was to transform Hindu to Muslim. Thus, the psychological pang and trauma, which the people could not forget even after the years of the tragic events. No one can tell the story of the tragedy in a realistic frame as well. In this context, the partition history scholar Pandey (2001) highlights, one is to declare such violence non-narratable: the 'limit case' of history as it has been described in the instance of the Holocaust (p. 45). The awful murderous savagery of the division cannot be described by any storyteller. Consequently, it qualifies as an unprecedented occurrence.

In the novel *Pali*, we can find the issue of desolation, people were too absorbed in themselves to think of what lay in store for them. Perhaps their minds had stopped thinking. Fate had thrown a black curtain across their eyes, and they could discern no ray of hope through it (p. 59). The commoner had nothing to do with decision about the partition but had to face a great catastrophe. Ambedkar (1940), the prominent critic asserts his view as,

There is hardly any hope in that behalf. So long as the Hindus and Muslims regard each other as a menace, their attention will be engrossed in preparation for meeting the menace. The exigencies of a common front by Musalmans generates[...] a conspiracy of silence over social evil. (p. 237)

The literature has been written about the partition focusing on the real tension of the tragic situation. Both religion communities are involving on preparation for causing harm on human dignity. The attention of people was dragged towards conflict. Both religions communities generate conspiracy creating communal riots. The main objectives for troubling others bound to cause emotional detachment and feeling of hatred.

In the novel, people were voiceless even if in the condition of their family loss. In *Pali* we get, you know Lekhraj's three children were killed before his very eyes. It's God's will. We must resign ourselves to it (p. 58). People do not forget the tragic events and the heart-rending pictures of suffering and killing. It is uncommunicative in words keeps on hunting their brain and heart. Das (2006) mentions in the article "A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956, Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy" as, the arson and abduction, rape and physical cruelties which followed the partition haunted the memory of the writers and continued to be a strong thematic component in our contemporary literature (p. 382). He indicates the miserable condition on human history which has clearly mentioned the savagery, mass violence and human massacre on both countries India and Pakistan. Everything is expressed through literature, human behavior, society, art, culture and day to day activities. In the article, "Architecture and Body Associates in Newari Culture of Bhaktapur" (2023) manifests as, the body is also a subject of artistic expression (p. 2). Art and literature carry out the realistic picture of the society. Thematic aspects are deeply

rooted and realistic pictures of pathetic condition of the population have been portrayed in the literature. Many scholars have originally brought an issue of massacre during refugee displacement from one corner to another while other writers have written about the hardship and famine during the peoples' settlement in a new land completely being new comer.

The novel has traced the place and people afflicted with partition history. Here in the novel, *Pali* we get, on reaching the border, the refugees were transferred to other lorries, which had been parked there to receive them. The lorries raced through the darkness towards Amritsar. The sky, studded with myriad stars looked so mysterious (p. 59). Likewise, the pieces of writing such as *How Many Pakistans?* by Kamleshwar, *Mozel* by Saadat Hasan Manto, *Father* by Prafulla Raj, *The Train Has Reached Amritsar* by Bhisham Sahni, *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam, *God's God* by Mohan Rakesh, and Alok Bhalla, *The Owner of Rubble* by Mohan Rakesh and Alok Bhalla, *Parrot in the Cage and Riot* by Mulk Raj Anand, and *The Dog of Tetwal* by Saadat Hasan Manto also give a realistic picture of the dark aspect of partition and its consequences. The side of Hindustani and Musalman do not equally remain the same banding of religion but later when the people scattered into the parts; the Musalmans have to go to Pakistan from India and Hindus have to go India from Pakistan. However, one compels to leave one's homeland and the tradition that concerned with identity crisis. If both religious people supposed to live in the same country having their different religious beliefs they would not think about the prosperity of the nation because of the religious dogmatism. Prasad (1946) focuses here about the critical condition of the people due to religious matter. He explains, we had two peoples, Hindu and Muslim, living side by side in equal servitude to an imperial despotism, and both devoid of any national feeling or national ambition (p. 22). Religion, according to him became the matter of separation which creates religious bigotry and the same religion became the part of human massacre. Autocratic notion of religious intolerance penetrates to be the cause of separation.

Findings and Results

In the *Pali*, Sahni presents psychological trauma as a chronic trauma in the mind of the child Pali, who gets parted from his parents during partition. He is transfigured twice to different religions. He is in critical point because he has to forget his past life and accept the present which is new. When he is in new environment with new parents, he always remembers his biological parents. He was standing at the corner of the lane crying, Pitaji! Pitaji! (p. 59). This expression depicts the memory of the past and the pathetic condition of the character caused by partition. Pali is psychologically traumatized and his mournful expression signals mental disruption. The child mumbled in his sleep, heaved a deep sigh (p. 61). In deep mental anguish, one cannot express one's emotion and feeling directly. The boy Pali expresses his obstructed feeling through subconscious mind in his dream. On the one hand, the child's mind is haunted by his parents' memory and on the other hand his parents are also in great torment. Assmann (1945) in his book *Cultural memory* says, cultural

memory is a system of values, artifacts, institutions, and practices that retain the past for the present and the future (p. 26). One cannot forget traditional practices in one's life time. Shani has the same illustration as,

Since partition, the blood on the road and streets had dried, but its strains were still visible here and there. The fire that had engulfed the houses had died out long since, but the charred frames were still standing. The mad frenzy of partition had abated, but its effects still lingered in the minds of the people. (p. 67)

During partition, millions of populations ruined. There was a bloodshed and its deformation is still seen. However, the traumatic experience is still hovering in the human psychology. The physical aspects were no more there but the ruined skeletons of trees are still appeared lifeless. The partition brought unprecedented and unforeseeable events in entire humans who were directly victimized in contemporary times. Therefore, the paper highlights on the confusion, the psychological distress and traumatic effect that the little boy faced during his life in Indian sub-continent.

People from both sides lost their valuable things during the division. Number of children were abducted and separated from their parents. They were brutally murdered, suffered from butchery, kidnapping, and transformation, and were abandoned without human care. Most of the children were killed and some others were bound to live in the street. The boy was such a victim, who got lost in partition inclemency. Time and again, he lost his identification. Pali faced dual identity in his life time. When he is adopted by a Muslim family, he is forced to flow Muslim rites and ritual for purification. Again, when he is taken back to India after years by his biological father, he is compelled to do the transformation process of purification. This sort of inhumane practices was done only in the name of religion but nobody favors the boy and reads his sentiment. He is compelled to face traumatic experience due to orthodox religious ideology. The author enthusiastically brings the conservative notion of religious practices as well as irony, irrationality of its dogmatism and also the consequences of it. Therefore, in the name of religious virtuousness and holy culture, the boy is to be used as a prop and scapegoat.

Likewise, partition creates decadence and disordered scenario on entire humanity. At the time, when the people's forceful migration occurred to India and Pakistan, the little boy turned four. Pali along with his family, Hindus and Muslims hurried towards the border line. At the time of their heading to the station for India, the boy, dissects grip of his father's fingers (p. 57), gets parted from his family and religion. When the station turns into peace from disruption, Pali finds himself in isolation. An encounter of good heart, Shakur and Zenab, a Muslim, adopt him and become his foster parents. However, the Muslim parents adopted Pali, who were affectionate, loving, caring and brought him up. Pali can be taken the fortunate child in comparison with other children who were abducted, killed and raped. They were, in fact, victimized to various mental and physical anguish. If children were not murdered, they would have been turned themselves into street child, and have been compelled to survive on their own. However, Pali got an opportunity to be a son of good

heart. Pali fell asleep against Zenab's bosom in a sea of affection (p. 59). Even though the dissection of religion the boy's new parents provided him good parental affection. A person finds it awkward to assimilate with new ideology and faith. One's initial faith is imprinted in one's mind,

Before partition and for some time after there had been clashes between Hindus and Muslims that had culminated in arson, bloodshed, and murder. No person of either community would trust anyone of the other; there prevailed only mutual hatred, malice, and suspicion. (p. 153)

A community howler motivated by religion also occurred prior to the split. The whole populace was tormented as a result of the religious culminating, and distrust and backstabbing are deep-rooted in society. When partition occurred, the conflicts and community riots within religion sarcastically increased. Killing, kidnapping, rape, mass destruction and loss of identity created due to partition.

At the time of division, people lost their individuality, their customs and traditions. Pali, here in the story, separates from his culture and loses his identity. When Shakur's family adopts him, the question automatically raises on Zenab's mind about religion and the rites of baptizing even the name. These Hindus have such queer name. What a funny name! Pali! If I had a son, I would have named him Altaf (p. 60). Thus, identity is in demarcation line. 'Name' and 'Religion' are in crisis because there is a boundary between religious belief and culture. Pali's name changes as Altaf and the name itself creates a confusion. There is also an ambiguity in the people's psyche because the beliefs is traditionally imprinted on their mind dissecting between religion and culture. The boy's foster parents shelter him, kind to him. They have given parental care to him as their own child but he could not forget his biological parents. That is why, culture plays a significant role and it controls human psychology.

Similarly, Pali is converted into Muslim by practicing rites of circumcision. The very day of circumcision he encounters Maulvi, feels shocked and gets traumatized when he sees the razor in his hand. Little Pali was terrified at the sight of the razor and clung Zenab's legs (p. 62). In the ceremony, no one reads Pali's psychology but Maulvi consoles little boy ignoring whatever the little boy thinks. After religious rite, Maulvi hands over Pali to Sakur's family in an emoticon face saying, Take him! He's your own child, not a Kafir's. He belongs to the whole community (p. 62). Therefore, Pali's conversion into Musalman symbolizes the crisis in identity. He is traumatized, emotional and psychologically retarded but nobody concerns him. Now, Pali's identity is regenerated as Altaf, compelled him to wear Muslim kurta and Rumi cap, parroting Quran and parroting daily namaz.

Again, when he turned eleven, another mental confusion materializes in him. His biological father, Manohar Lal came to take him when Pali had been enjoying his present life. But mental conflict is occurred in him. His identity is in transition. The magistrate, police officer, and social worker gather there to judge his identity. Photograph is shown to identify his biological father and vice-versa. After sometimes, the boy pointed his finger toward his father's photograph and expresses "Pitaji" and again another photograph appears,

he recognizes and says “Abbaji” and “Ammi” (p. 69). The problem is solved and ultimately, he was handed over to Manohar Lal and sent him to India. However, the boy’s psychology is not read either he wants to leave or stay with present parents. It would be his jubilant moment that years back he is getting a fortune day to be back in his homeland.

Pali was actually a child and did not understand the religious significance and its traditional norms and values, codes and conducts related to it. He discovers himself a tragic situation in the past and the present. Pali was always torn down due to the circumstances and the political bias of Indian Sub-continent. Similarly, when he was heading to India all of a sudden, his Rumi cap flew in the air and he cried. But the social worker without concerning about his feeling threatens him saying, you are a Hindu boy. Why should you wear a Muslim cap? (p. 70). In contrary, the boy did not understand a social worker’s intention. Even he could not differentiate between religions. He thinks the cap is merely for the head but he did not know the religious significance of it. When she threw it away, he became panic. However, child is traumatized due to partition and its effect. Innocence and powerless people are always victimized in this context.

After a long stay with foster parents, he was habituated in his daily activities. When he returned India, he gave continuity uttering Namaz and wearing Rumi cap and Muslim clothes. He was normalizing his life. All of a sudden, the situation transformed, the community’s way of watching him denatured and again for him perceiving the new life style was hardship. In the name of religion, he again traumatized because the people went against him. He must at once get rid of this nasty habit. We don’t want to have a Muslim among us (p. 72). The boy was obliged to yield the religious practices under the pressure of the big shots- Maulvi and Chaudhri. The people are showing their bias and prejudice to the boy merely for religion. The society did not honor the boy’s feelings and emotions. Thus, the boy was compelled to lose his identity and obliged to perceive the present whatever he did in the past.

Slowly and gradually, Pali understands the notion of the community that memorizing Namaz, Muslim dress and Rumi cap are not acceptable in the community. The people, again call a meeting for religious transformation that Pali had to convert into Hindu. Thus, Hindu priest suggested for boy’s ‘mundan’ and cut his hair, tuft of hair was left in the core of the head and, the Hindu ritual was practiced. Here, the line expresses, Pali was bathed, then given a brand-new dhoti and kurta to wear. To the chanting of mantras, he was given a sacred thread (p. 73). Partition brought Pali a pathetic condition because previously he was compelled to perceive Muslim religion and he had converted to Musalman. Again, according to rites and ritual of Hindu, the separate religion should change through religious rites. Pali’s hair is cut, dhoti and kurta is given to wear, holy thread is put on his shoulder and is transfigured him into Hindu. The boy did not even know about religious rites and ritual but he was by force twice transfigured in different religions.

Conclusion

The novel *Pali* revolves round the character Pali whose identity is in crisis. If we read the story of the novel idiosyncratically, personal identification, passion, and love for one's family and country are irrelevant in the face of religious conviction and collective dominance. However, the boy had to go through various rites and ritual of the community which he could not know the religious practices. When he was converted to Muslim, no one even tried to acknowledge one's feelings but the power played a dominant role ignoring his conscience. His identity also seems in crisis because he perceives religious practice twice and undergoes a traumatic experience. The boy not only witnessed physical trauma by circumcision in Muslim community but also experienced psychological trauma returning upon India being converted into Hindu with the religious practice of shaving his head. Neither community nor religion assisted him so he always felt alienated and traumatized. In the end of the story, the author glorifies emotional sentiment which is heart-rending. Nevertheless, the boy's sentiment was never estimated and measured. However, the boy's feeling was quite unrecognized. Therefore, the author raises the numerous questions and leaves them unanswered. With deep feelings we should try to seek the hidden reality of suspended reality.

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