

## Rebuilding Identities amidst the Cultural Trauma in “Pali”

Tek Bahadur Chhetry  
Pokhara University  
Email: tek@pu.edu.np

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### Abstract

*The Indo-Pak partition of 1947 has not only invaded the physical space by making two independent nations - secular India and Islamic Pakistan - creating a demarcation between Hindus and Muslims but also intruded upon their psychological space tearing and ripping off their mindsets with the clear division of cultural identities between the two. This paper examines critically how the aesthetics of art employed in the story “Pali” does full justice in distributing the equal burden of trauma on both the parties- Hindus and Muslims-to arouse a special affect in the minds of readers in the post-partition of 1947. Such affect is quintessential and very meaningful while reshaping and rebuilding the identities in the community to reconcile with peace and harmony. It also examines how the shadow of an individual trauma falls on communal families and then on the society caused by the handful of bigshots-Maulvi and Chaudhri for their identity politics. The story spins around the little boy, who was lost in Pakistan during the partition riots, got separated from the Hindu family, lived with the childless Muslim couple, and was restored to the Hindu family eventually. It portrays the sufferings of both the child-Pali Yashpal and his parents due to communal superiority and religious fanaticism. “Pali” by Bhisam Sahni can be analyzed in the light of trauma art - the trauma of the partition, traumatic experience of religious conversion, identity politics, morality, and ethical concern.*

**Keywords:** ethics, fanaticism, identity, morality, partition, rebuilding communities, trauma

### Introduction

In the history of India, never had partition been ever imagined even during the regime of Aurangzeb who was interpreted as the most ruthless ruler of the time and was reported to have kept abreast Muslims, and in defense of them, he had even destroyed the Hindu temples.

Although the rift was sharp with rivalry, the partition was not the subject of thought. But the British regime in the twentieth century had been successful enough in creating a division between Hindus and Muslims and turned them to be ready for communal riots crossing swords against their brothers and sisters. Since then, the Indo-Pak relationship turned into identity politics of the communal superiority between the two and proved to be irrevocable cultural trauma. Torn apart, it proved to be a colossal migration in 1947 for its cultural integrity in world history. The loved ones who lived with peace and harmony indiscriminately now turned into the surest enemies of the world to each other.

The story begins with the traumatic condition of Manohar Lal and Kaushalya, his wife and their children, a Hindu family that had to leave Pakistan for India during the partition. The forced migration itself was a traumatic experience for the family, but it added to their insanity again when the family came to know that their four-year child, Pali Yashpal was lost. Kaushalya bursts out crying and feels, "...plight like that of a bird whose nests were being destroyed" (Sahni, 2007: 57). There was no trace of sympathy by the migrants as everyone's mind was filled with full of terror. They had desperate feelings of homelessness and apprehension. The only thing was the mounting pressure of survival. The people were transferred from Lorries to Lorries as if they were like the damaged goods. The Hindus were like the uprooted people from Pakistan and so were Muslims from India. Pandey (2004) calls it a genocide that cannot be narrated: "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 writers in the post-partition literature have tried to capture a realistic picture of the traumatic events by employing their different strategies. Some have spotlighted the pathetic situation of the large migration, separation, homelessness, and displacement while others have shed light on rape, bigotry, devastation, and blood pool. Das (1995) states, "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). The state and the media apparatus many times fail to administer their strategies in rebuilding the communal feelings and oneness and even resulted in naming and blaming the one over the other. It then becomes more of a cultural and political subject than social coordination when it comes to settling identities in society. From the dimension of trauma art and aesthetics, Sahni captures the specificity of both psychological and physical pain of the lost child Pali and transmits the pain to his readers to develop a sense of critical inquiry in readers' minds only to acknowledge their communal wrongdoings. Never does he name and blame any party but makes them yield upon the traumatic condition of the boy distributing an equal burden of trauma on each side. The affect that the writer has evoked in the readers can be interpreted as a significant step in the right direction to reconciling Hindu and Muslim communities with peace and harmony. The story ends with the return of Pali to his biological parents.

## Literature Review

Alexander et al. (2004) coined the concept of “cultural trauma,” underlining that social facts are not causes, but attributions:

Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real-time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. Sometimes, deeply traumatizing events may not have occurred at all. (p. 8)

Cultural trauma thus stems from the psychological construct of an affect and this very emotion is saved by our own rooted identity. Trauma becomes mediated culturally and gets political to serve the purpose of the large group identity. "If trauma is to serve as a political commentary on violence, it must move beyond personal experience" (Kilby, xii). Trauma goes beyond personal and soon it becomes cultural-the Hindu-Muslim matter. The state politics had perpetrated the trauma by inviting the famine of colossal migration tearing the two major independent countries. Pandey (2008) says, “Cultural trauma emerges as a socially mediated attribution which emphasizes the representational aspect of culture” (p. 125).

There are many ways how the writers depict the situation of the partition which is a subject to the aesthetics of trauma art during reshaping identities in course of building nationhood in the post-partition literature. “The Owner of Rubble” by Mohan Rakesh depicts the trope of xenophobia when Giani Miyan, the protagonist returns from Pakistan after seven years to see his house in Amritsar, India, and senses the prose of otherness. At last, trauma is acknowledged by the major characters Giani Miyan and Rakkha. The irony is that the rubble belongs to the dog and trauma is evacuated through the animal, dog. “How Many Pakistans?” by Kamleshwar portrays the haunting psychological divisions of communal identities between the Hindus and the Muslims Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Khol do” depicts the specificity of trauma caused by partition violence with pure affect. But unlike many story writers, Manto does not see the perpetrators as Hindu or Muslim- Hindustanis or Pakistanis, he just sees and depicts them as human beings with all their wilderness and barbarity. Interestingly, in “The City of Sorrow” by Intizar Husain, there is no identity politics. Readers cannot even identify who the characters are and where they are from. In this story, the writer employs the technique of moral working to evacuate trauma from the representation of the soul, the embodiment of characters. In the aesthetics of trauma art, the special affect is evoked to transmit the pain to readers without naming and blaming any particular community between Hindus and Muslims. Likewise, *The Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh writes a novel to sanitize the sides of the Sikhs who had committed violence twice the size of the Muslims. It is written orienting towards the cultural part to patch up its tear in the society and to rebuild the communities. Again the graphic representation is felt to transmit the somatic trauma and violence directly to the readers in the graphic novel *Palestine* by Joe Sacco. The somatic trauma is very much upper-hand in Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar*. All these are the representations to make readers feel the pain of the traumatic event during the partition of 1947 and acknowledge them and seek from them, the redemption of trauma.

All the same, the story “Pali” by Bhisam Sahni has no xenophobic traces nor any othering tendency of one over the other at the community level except for the bigshots of the community who try to play identity politics within their culture. He has tenderly chosen the character Pali and portrays the predicament that is yielded by both Hindus and Muslims. Sahni makes them feel an equal burden of trauma on both sides.

### **Methodology**

This paper critically analyses the text in the light of Ron Eyerman's concept of cultural trauma, its repair, and Deleuze's sense of morality and ethics against the backdrop of the perspectives of Cathy Caruth and Jill Bennett on memory. The main aim of this paper is to examine how trauma has been portrayed from the aesthetic dimension of trauma art. It depicts how the story writer has employed his techniques of balance without making a superior one over the other. Because children possess divine qualities, Sahni deliberately chooses the little boy Pali and his helpless character drawing upon his context in both Hindu and Muslim communities only to compel them to develop a sense of critical inquiry and a new perspective on a communal society in a good health. This not only helps the readers to acknowledge their act of trauma but also plays a significant role while rebuilding new identities in the post-partition life of 1947. Thus, the aesthetics of art appeals to the societies to come close to each other and to think about their lost peace and harmony.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The following themes present the critical analysis how trauma has been portrayed from the aesthetic dimension of trauma art.

#### **Religious Conversion, Identity Crisis, and Trauma**

The locus of trauma lies in the religious conversion of Pali (Yashpal) a-four-year Hindu child who was converted into a Muslim under the coercion of Maulvi, the Muslim priest. Maulvi was desperately unhappy that a non-Muslim kid was living with Shakur's family. Maulvi stands for religious fanaticism where molar politics gets the upper-hand. Pali was traumatized when he looked at the razor, as he could wince at how hard it could pierce his private part, though he was not aware of those rites and rituals going on with him. He was caught and circumcised. It was a somatic trauma. He was given a new name- Altaf! The child was already in trauma at the loss of his parents but before he could realize anything he was converted into a Muslim and given a name. Here he loses his identity of Pali and gets a new identity- Altaf. In the post-partition life of India, often that there were a handful of people who played with identity politics with their selfish and insensible motifs in the community. Nobody cared what went in the psyche of the boy who was suffering for no mistake of his own. As the exposition part of the story reads that it never comes to an end with undoing a knot, Pali, supposedly Altaf, receives another setback in the story that causes the trauma to him again upon returning to India.

The boy at 11 was again traumatized when he was converted into a Hindu forcefully by the big shot-Chaudhri. The boy's head was shaved with the razor and the boy kept sobbing with

the bowed head. Though he wanted to run away in the middle like a deer, the hunter caught and had him shave his head with a proper tuft in the middle. He looked like a Brahmachari with a holy thread and in a Hindu dress. Like in the past, the boy was dazzled and puzzled and hardly could he imagine what time of his life was going to be like. The sense of the Hindutwa, imposed on him, was not resisted by the boy and denied to accept the new name which was another traumatic dimension in the story.

### **The Identity Politics, Ethics and Morality**

The stereo-typing of identity politics which is inculcated in the minds of the leaders of the community is the root cause of the trauma in society. In cultural trauma, the verbal abuse to name and blame one over the other is central and it is evident in this story. The complexity of the problem grows when Maulvi does not allow any non-Mussalman or Hindu in his place whom he considers a serpent. Maulvi abuses: "Why don't you speak? You give a kafir's polluted child a place in your lap. You give him your breast to suckle. Do you want to nurture a snake?" (p.62).

On his return to India, no sooner had they crossed the border than the lady social worker and facilitator, took away the boy's cap and threw it off on the road, and to Manohar Lal's mild reaction to it, she asserted that he was a Hindu boy and he should not wear a Muslim cap anymore. This shows how religious identity was set even in the minds of the social workers who were on the frontiers of government organizations and whose primary job was to retrieve the lost children and women by facilitating and settling the disputes on either side of the borders. The social worker in this sense is the hidden agent to cause the trauma to the little boy. Again when the Hindu bigwig- Chaudhri dawns upon the boy with disgust after he has read the *namaz*, he starts blaming the other side. Chaudhri abuses: "Those Muslas have planted the poison of fanaticism in his mind. And at such a tender age! Those rascals! They have planted a musla among us" (p.72).

In cultural trauma, it is evident that trauma, which is registered as a trace in our mind, is accessed by constructing the affect and it is further shaped by our rooted cultural identity. The little boy was traumatized for not being circumcised and not saying *namaz* in the Muslim community. On the contrary, again he was traumatized for saying the *namaz* in the Hindu community. The poor boy could not act upon the scene what to do next.

Cultural trauma posits the contestation between ethics and morality where each party withstands their proposition so vehemently that it is very difficult to blame on sheer outside. Pali's both biological parents and foster parents stand for the former whereas the two leaders of two different communities represent the latter. Morality comes from traditions and a set of values that one should shoulder from generation to generation but Ethics stems from critical inquiry that is encounter of morality, out of the contemporary experience. Ethics is often contingent on the situation. This is exactly where the politics of trauma lies. In the story, both Muslim and Hindu families do not opt for moral conventions as strictly as Maulvi and Chaudhri did for cultural identities. However, the families yielded to the conventions with silence and even did not trespass on moral grounds provided that it would harm their religious identity. Bennet (2005) says:

In Deleuze's terms, it is precisely what distinguishes ethical from moral art. Ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation; that is, precisely by not assuming that there is a given outside to thinking. Morality, on the other hand, operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be resolved. (p.15)

Devotional art gives some sensation of morality but good trauma art helps to encounter the phenomenon and opens a new window to look at the art from a different perspective. It is exactly at this juncture it appeals to ethics over morality.

The Muslim family was god-fearing. Shakur and Zenab never thought of converting Pali into Mussalman. The family was happy and satisfied with having him with them except for the fear that someone would come and snatch him away from them. They vehemently believed that they had not committed any sin as they only adopted the child. Shakur responded to Maulvi: "I swear by the Holy Quran that we are not hiding any kafir in our house. We have only given shelter to an orphan boy" (p.60). Zenab also reacts to Maulvi because it is her motherly ego that made her speak that adopting a child is not a sin. The family was also in the know that some Mussalmans were having Hindus for tailoring work and that would not be an issue. Manohar Lal urged Zenab sisterly, "Bahen, I am not begging for my child. I am begging you for my wife's life. She has lost both of her children. She is missing Pali very much. His absence is driving her insane. Day and night she keeps thinking of him. Please pity her" (p. 69). Zenab was moved by the words of Manohar Lal and replied, "Take away this child. I don't want an unfortunate woman's curse to fall upon me. How could I know you had lost both your children?" (p.69). Nothing happened like Maulvi had thought despite he was strong in his moral grounds that he had converted the boy into a Muslim. The setbacks employed in the story by the writer lays the ground where identitarian politics on the moral ground is challenged by the ethical ground with humanism being contingent on the events in both Muslim and Hindu communities.

The first setback is when the boy recognized his father after having shown him the photograph. Caruth (1991) claims, "To be traumatized is precise to be possessed by an image or event" (p.4). It took a longer time than expected for him to do it. Though delayed in the response, he recognized his biological parents in the photograph. Caruth (1991) also asserts, "...the notion of trauma as that which most marks the past, and its structural description as a delayed experience, may lead to a seemingly universalizing description in which experience itself becomes tied up with trauma" (p.114). Similarly, Sharma (2017) believes that when we try to situate the victim's personal experiences in the past context in which the event has taken place, it will drive the person to that very particular time and place to remember the event. "The imagery of traumatic memory deals not simply with a past event or with the objects of memory but with the present experience of memory (Bennett, 2005, p. 24)." Bennett provides the reference of the abuse of trauma of Finley's evocation of the child's eidetic memory linked to the past objects and sensations first to affect acting out of the traumatic memory to retrieve the past. It is exactly what happens in the story. The little boy was taken to the past by showing the graphic picture of the photograph over and over again to recognize his parents. This is called acting out in trauma



through which he recognizes his parents eventually and helps his father to release his trauma. Although Maulvi thought that he was Mussalman and nobody could take him away, the boy proceeded to be sent off. The second setback was traumatic to Chaudhri and the community people while the boy, started reading namaz in front of all instinctively whilst on the other side, Hindu women were playing *dholaks* and singing songs. Though the boy was caught, tonsured and given a holy thread, he looked firmer than before in his proposition. He denied accepting the new values imposed on him. He even ran away crying out to their Muslim parents in the middle of the *mundane*. The final setback is when he denied that his name was Pali. He expressed his name as Altaf Husain, son of Shakur Ahmed. For all these happenings under their nose, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya had nothing to say. Hence, Sahni has very tenderly chosen ethical ground over the moral one without causing any distortions to any community.

### **Trauma Art and Rebuilding Identities**

The story writer, Sahni very carefully transmits the specificity of trauma and intensity of pain of the boy - Pali, through this story, to his readers to evoke the special affect on his readers so that they can open up the spot for critical inquiry through which the readers could feel the pain with empathy and acknowledge trauma with a greater sense of humanity. Eyerman (2001) says, "...cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that have achieved some degree of cohesion" (p. 4). This is the aesthetics of trauma art, employed by the writer while remaking identities in the community during the post-partition life of India. He neither villainizes nor valorizes any party but divides equal burden of pain to both sides of the family. In Eyerman's view, this is a tear in the social fabric that the aesthetics of trauma art tries to patch. In the story, "Pali" the political and religious antagonisms divide the Hindus and the Mussalmans far more deeply than the common things that can bind them together. For this, abandoned, forlorn, and alienated Pali simply served as the scapegoat to communalize the subject in both cases of conversion. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Maulvi and Chaudhri-like characters in the story are the focus of the writer's spotlight, only to depict how the issues of communalism and identitarian politics bring about social trauma in people's life. The writer through this story-"Pali" tries to patronize one community over the other so that it takes the place of social healing.

The feelings of communal harmony can be traced in the story when both the parties meet for the proceedings after the child was found by Manohar Lal. His indebtedness towards the Muslim family, his sisterly attitude towards Zenab, his mild acceptance of the boy's wearing of Mussalman's dress with the social worker, and his silence while being said namaz by the little boy are some of the remarkable clues for religious tolerance. By the same token, the untold love of Shakur and Zenab for Altaf, their sincere adoption of the boy, considering him not as *kafir*, Zenab's motherly ego, the dreams are woven around Altaf to run their own business, and their all eyes to see their bride, the fear of losing the child- the hide and seek to Shekhpur and Lyallpur, and eventually sending back the child to Hindu family with heart-wrenching feelings are equally significant for the due respect of each other's culture. In addition, the Hindus working for the tailoring shop of Mussalman's owner represent that they didn't have communal intolerance with

each other. The delayed acceptance of the conversion of the boy from both the families and their representations in the story leaves the readers in a state of awe and give a glimpse of the harmonious life before the partition of 1947. “Cultural memory is a system of values artifacts, institutions, and practices that retain the past for the present and the future” (Assmann, 2021, p. 26). Their social life is honeycombed with each other’s culture. The story-writer doesn’t mention the violence much, because the writer’s focus is to spotlight the miseries and helplessness of the situation where neither side is to be blamed. Maulvi and Chaudhri are projected as the perpetrators of trauma but in fact, their voices are based on their religious conventions whose job was to secure their people culturally uniting them under the banner of religious identity. Maulvi evacuates his trauma when the boy was circumcised. He gave a boy an identity of Mussalman and wanted him to read Kalma and say namaz. Again Chaudhri and the pandits of the Hindu community were not to blame because it was natural they could not stand the boy reading namaz in their community. They again came out of trauma only when the Hindu rituals were performed to convert the boy into a Hindu. Similarly, Shakur and Zenab evacuate their trauma to a larger extent in the hope of having the boy with them during Eid or visiting Barailey, India to see the boy. The burden of trauma survived only with the boy because he doesn’t want to change his name again. Amidst the time while reforming the societies, discounting violence of the partition, by the literary artists like Bhisam Sahni in their art, Gyanendra Pandey (2004) objects to the way the writers induce too much with literature, as it becomes political then and thereby avoids the representation of actual violence of the partition. For him, the partition is a rupture and genocidal violence and art should capture the specificity of pain accompanied by the partition unlike Nehruian and Gandhian historiography. Ambedkar (1945) writes:

There is hardly any hope on 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- and is bound to generate-a conspiracy of silence over social evil. (p. 237)

Hence the literatures that have been written about the partition have focused on real tension because of the tragic situation. Both Hindus and Muslims claim their communal identity by creating a sense of hatred toward each other. It is the craftsmanship of Sahni, to have a magical balance between the two portraying the communities with a little amount of prose of otherness during the post-partition life. The writer himself was born in what is Pakistan today and brought up in India. Thus, Sahni’s focus is more on reshaping the identities in course of building nationhood, without villainizing or valorizing any party in the story. He chose the innocent victim to arouse the special affect of pain among his readers to transform pain from the character viscerally to the body of readers to acknowledge trauma from both sides. This artistic projection in literary writings has ample scope for reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

The writer, Sahni in the story- “Pali” portrays how communal identities are constructed by the handful of people with their culture as well as religious roots and how they are combatted



by the common people to reconcile with peace and harmony in the communities between Hindus and Muslims. The writer carefully employs the characters and plots the sequence of events in the story to contest the proposition of ethics with morality in identity politics foregrounding the abandoned, forlorn and alienated little boy. The mild representation or almost devoid of violence looks deliberate as it was time for reconstructing identities during the post-partition life of India more harmoniously than ever before. From the dimension of trauma aesthetics, Sahni evokes an affect in the minds of readers and transmits the pain to them to critically inquire about the situation created by the partition. Such a strategy employed in writing can be a remedy to bridge the relationship between the two parties. Overall, there is no induced somatic trauma nor any trope of xenophobia. Nevertheless, the prose of otherness is fairly represented from the perspectives of Maulvi and Chaudhri elevating their religious superiority and fanaticism.

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