

Confused Identities: Questions of Religion and Alienation in Bhisham Sahni's *Pali*

**Dr. Anil Sehrawat
&**

Diler Singh

Jaypee University of Information and Technology
Waknaghat, Solan.
Himachal Pradesh, India Pin-173234

The Partition of India-Pakistan was one of the most traumatic events experienced by people in the recent times. The massacre that followed the event was barbaric. The violence provoked by a handful of selfish and insensible people made Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs commit various inhuman crimes on each other. As the two countries were formed largely on the basis of religion, the people who were in minority in a region were forced to leave their homes and all their life-long possessions. The partition resulted in creation of approximately ten million refugees and at least one million deaths.

The literature that has been written about the partition has very realistically portrayed the violence and the killings on both the sides. It deals with a variety of themes woven around the event. While some writers have talked about the massacre during the refugee migration, others have written about the difficulties that people had to face during their rehabilitation in a new country.

Short story 'Pali' by Bhisham Sahani deals with the trauma of a child named Pali, who gets separated from his parents during the partition. Pali finds himself bewildered when he is converted to different religions twice. Also, he finds himself at crossroads when he is expected to forget his past life and accept the new one immediately. He is not able to forget either of his parents. The present paper focuses on the chaos and the mental trauma that Pali goes through during his life in Pakistan and India. It also takes into consideration the issues related to religious bigotry.

The Partition of India-Pakistan was one of the most traumatic events experienced by people in the recent times. The massacre that followed the event was barbaric. The violence provoked by a handful of selfish and insensible people made Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs commit various inhuman crimes on each other. As the two countries were formed largely on the basis of religion, the people who were in minority in a region were forced to leave their homes and all their life-long possessions. The partition resulted in creation of approximately ten million refugees and at least one million deaths. The population which was beaten, tortured, raped and abducted remains unmeasured. Above all, the emotional pain and trauma, which people could not forget even after the decades of the tragedy, could never be estimated or narrated in its actual form. According to certain scholars like Ayesha Jalal and Sugata Bose, the Partition was "a cataclysmic event that impinged upon the lives of millions on the subcontinent, in a way that even two the world wars had not, in terms of the sheer brutality and damage that it inflicted upon a considerable portion of population, the mass exile and displacement that it caused and the new schism that it created among people. (Rituparna 132) The common man, who had nothing to do in deciding about the partition, had to pay a great price.

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. (Das 382) The literature that has been written about the partition has very realistically portrayed the violence and the killings on both the sides. It deals with a variety of themes woven around the event. While some writers have talked about the massacre during the refugee migration, others have written about the difficulties that people had to face during their rehabilitation in a new country. Even after so many years of the event, the people haven't been able to forget the painful memories of the incident. Works such as *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahani, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidwa's and *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie's are considered significant in the genre. Short stories such as 'Toba Tek Singh' and 'Open It!' by Saadat Hassan Manto, 'Lajawanti' by Rajendera Singh Bedi, 'A Leaf in the Storm' by Latitambika Antarnjanam and 'Exile' by Jamila Hashmi also depict the turbulence of partition.

When we talk about partition literature, we find that there are certain issues which haven't been dealt with by many writers. Especially the children, who may be considered the most vulnerable and affected members, haven't been given a prominent place in the partition literature. They remain more or less invisible in the books of the genre. However there have been certain writers, who have tried to portray a true picture of the sufferings of these victims. Pali by Bhisham Sahani is one such work which deals with the trauma of a child named Pali, who gets separated from his parents during the partition. Pali finds himself bewildered when he is converted to different religions twice. Also, he finds himself at crossroads when he is expected to forget his past life and accept the new one immediately. He is not able to forget either of his parents. The present paper focuses on the chaos and the mental trauma that Pali goes through during his life in Pakistan and India. This work by Sahni is considered unique as it deals with the "issue of religious conversion with a sensitivity rarely found among progressive writers." (Prakash 141) The paper takes this issue also and tries to delve into the issues concerning religion.

During the exodus of people on both the sides of the border, many children got separated from their parents. Most of them fell prey to indiscriminate killings, abduction and conversion. Such children were left without any help and support from anyone. Pali was one such child who got lost in the partition turbulence.

When Pali is left behind during the partition in Pakistan, he is adopted by a Muslim family and then again taken back to India after some years by his biological parents. He is made to face many ambiguous situations and go through difficult procedures and rituals of purification. During all this drama of conversion and displacement, nobody cares about the feelings of the boy. The trauma that he experiences remains on the back foot. It is the religion and the communism that is held supreme by the society and its members. Pali by Bhisham Sahani very tenderly brings forth the irony and irrationality of the religious bigotry and its consequences.

At the time of partition when people had to migrate with their families from India and Pakistan, Pali was four years of age. Pali and his family, along with other Sikh and Hindu families rushed towards Indo-Pak border. When they reached the station to go to India, Pali "loses grip of his father's fingers"(Sahni 30) and gets separated from his family. When the chaos at the station comes to normalcy, Pali finds himself all alone. At that moment, he was picked up by Shakur, a Muslim, who takes him to his wife Zenab. They adopt him into their family. They become his new parents.

Though Pali is adopted by a family that was loving and caring, not all the children were lucky the same way. In fact, most of the children who survived the partition were subjected to various psychological and physical tortures that became a permanent part of their conscience. The lost children who were left to survive on their own. If these children did not starve to death, or were not murdered for sport, they ended up in state orphanages. The displaced children were adopted out, and the boys of course, were always first to go. (Butalia 199) They were although not adopted for love or family but mainly for labour. On the other hand when small girls were adopted, sadly enough, most ended up as domestic workers or prostitutes. (Butalia 221)

At the time of partition some people had killed even their own children so that they do not suffer further at the hands of killers looking for them. Young girls were given poison by their own parents in order to save their honour. Talking about a similar incident Urvashi Butalia tells us: A Sikh family that was about to leave Pakistan threw a small child in the fire:

...the six month old daughter, first of all they did Ardas and threw her into the fire, and they said, 'bibis, our ijat is in danger, we will save our honor or our children.' (Chopra 135)

Pali's foster parents were kind to him. But still, he had to go through a lot that had a very deep impact on his mind. He had to convert to a different religion. He was made a Muslim and for that he had to go for circumcision. On the day of his circumcision when he sees Maulvi, he feels really shocked. He gets traumatized at the sight of the razor in Maulvi's hands. "Little Pali was terrified at the sight of the razor and clung to Zenab's legs." At that also nobody sympathized with the little boy who had just lost all his family members:

The maulvi petted and consoled little Pali, ignoring the fact that all the time the child kept uttering "Pitaji! Pitaji!" in great agony. The maulvi did not mind it at all. He just smiled indulgently. The neighbours came and felicitated Shakur and Zenab. (Sahni 38)

When Pali was repeatedly saying Pitaji! Pitaji!, everybody knew that he is a Hindu boy who is very young to understand the importance of religion and rituals like circumcision. But they ignored the boy and proceeded with their rites.

After overcoming the initial confusion of being in a new family and the trauma of conversion, Pali gets a new identity. He is no more Pali now. Now he is Altaf. Clad in his Muslim kurta and his *rumi* cap, he memorizes Quran and starts taking daily *namaz*. But after some time when Pali is eleven years of age, he again is thrown into another chaos. His biological father, his Pitaji, appears from nowhere. He does everything to prove that Altaf his son and finally succeeds in it. But at this time also, it is Pali or Altaf who has to suffer. In front of a large crowd, little boy is made to stand and identify his real father.

The boy was made to stand before the magistrate. Seeing the crowd in the courtyard, he became nervous and clung to Shakur's legs. Putting his finger in his mouth, he looked around at the people as if stupefied. (Sahni 44)...At one point Pali is shown photographs of the two men claiming to be his father; surprisingly Pali identifies both as fathers, one as "Pitaji," and the other as "Abbaji" (Sahni 46).

The boy was finally handed over to his biological father and sent back to India. Nobody cares whether Pali wanted to go or not.

His journey to his homeland which he would have taken very happily a few years back turns out to be quite shocking on account of the things that get revealed to him. He was too young to understand the nuances of the so called religious sanctity and the codes associated with it. He finds himself torn between his present and the past. He witnesses everything like a mute witness who is not allowed any opinion in the matters regarding his own life.

On his way back home when the social worker woman carrying him takes his *rumi* cap, he protests but “the social worker woman has no feeling towards boy and says, “you are a Hindu boy. Why should you wear a Muslim cap.” Pali is left confused at this as he does not understand what the woman mean and what she wants to convey. He could not understand the difference between the different religions. For him, the cap did not symbolize anything great or puny. For him the cap was just a piece of cloth put on head. Nothing less, nothing more.

After reaching India, Pali continues his normal ways of life, saying his *namaz* and wearing his Muslim clothes. While doing this, Pali can feel the tension and the aversion that the community shows against him, as “people are watching with feelings of disgust,” and he is very strictly told that “he must get rid of [his] nasty habits, [they] do not want a Muslim among them” (Sahni 50).

Gradually he understands that in his new home, he is not allowed his *namaz*, Muslim clothes and cap. The biggest blow to his psyche arrives when he is once again made to go through the conversion ceremony in order to assimilate into a new religion. His “hair is cut, his Muslim clothes are taken off, and he is newly clothed in a “dhoti and kurta” (Sahni 52). Pali finds it difficult to decide as to which religion to follow. He did not know whether he loved his present parents more or the earlier ones. He couldn’t understand the complexities of the religious divide which had already taken countless lives.

If we try to interpret the story from an individual’s point of view, we see that when it comes to religious sentiments and the communal superiority, the sentiments of a person and the bonds of love do not find any importance anywhere. It is the selfish motives and pseudo-norms that command the actions and emotions of masses. A little child Pali, who had already suffered a lot is made to go through various rites and rituals which he couldn’t understand at all. He is not asked whether he wanted to go with his father to India or not. When he is made to learn Muslim ways and then suddenly expected to forget everything all of a sudden, he feels helpless. He feels alienated. He doesn’t seem to belong to either of the countries. Bhisham Sahni here raises many important questions and leaves them unanswered. The end of the story suggests that perhaps it may have been better to leave Pali with his adoptive parents, for when he was with them he was a happy child full of gaiety and joy (Sahni 52). But, would the decision to be considerate about a little boy’s happiness and sentiments be wise enough when the larger issues concerning religion are involved? This is the question which we all need to answer to ourselves.

Works Cited:

K. Tarum and Ravikant, eds and trans. *Sahni, Bhisham. "Pali." Translating Partition.* New Delhi: Katha Books, 2001. Print.

Butalia, Urvashi, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India.* Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

Chopra, K Vinod. *Partition Stories: Mapping Community, Communalism, and Gender.* New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2009. Print

Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956, Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy.* New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2006. Print.

Prakash, Bodh. *Writing Partition: Aesthetics and Ideologies in Hindi and Urdu Literature.* India: Dorling Kindersley, 2009. Print

Roy, Rituparna. *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh.* Amsterdam: AUP, 2010. Print