

Ruptured, Reinvented and Re-ruptured ‘Home’ in Bhisham Sahni’s Short Story “Pali” (1989)

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On account of the Pahalgam attack that happened on 22 April 2025, the Indian government issued a “Leave India” notice to all Pakistani nationals staying in India for various purposes. On the list were some children who were of mixed-blood, belonging to Pakistani fathers and Indian mothers and vice versa. While *Al Jazeera* reported the story of Haleema Begum, a Pakistani citizen married to an Indian man who had to part ways with her sons and husband, *The Times of India* reported the case of nine newborn children born to Indian mothers and Pakistani fathers in Madhya Pradesh. This new political tension between India and Pakistan has led many families in India into turmoil, as it did during the Partition of India in 1947. The decade-long hostility between the two countries has its roots in the Partition of 1947. In this paper, I delve into children’s experiences in the history of the bifurcation between India and Pakistan through the analysis of Bhisham Sahni’s short story “Pali” (1989).

Bhisham Sahni was an Indian writer, actor and screenplay writer who received Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998. His fame rests on the novel *Tamas* (1974), for which he received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1975. The novel was made into a film by Govind Nihalani in 1988 with the same name. Sahni’s family was also affected by the 1947

bifurcation and moved to India from Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan). As a child, during that time, he was deeply moved by the truncation and the human suffering he witnessed. His experience of the event was later reflected in many of his works. Sahni's "Pali" (*Translating Partition* 2001) is a short story about a four-year-old Hindu boy named Pali, who was lost on the "other side" during the Partition riots and exodus of 1947. He was adopted by Zenab and Shakur, a childless Muslim couple in Pakistan. They raised him as their own child, but because of the community's pressure, they were forced to circumcise him as part of accommodating him into the religious order of the Muslim community. After seven years, his biological father recovered him, brought him to India, and shaved his head according to Hindu religious beliefs, as it was needed to restore him to his parents' community. Along with a discussion on religion and its role in the Partition, Sahni puts forth the mental anguish of a child who is caught between two nations, two religions and two identities. Pali is not able to understand the unnecessary distinctions and boundaries made by the adults in the world. In this analysis of "Pali," I examine how the state and the communities complicated the life of a child during the time of the Partition by posing questions about his religious identity and belonging. The story also sketches how the religious identity of the child became synonymous with the nation's identity during the time.

The Partition of 1947 and the "Community's Child"

The concepts of 'pollution' and 'purity' embedded in the community notions in most of the South Asian countries are often practised through the bodies of women. These notions were also tied up with the nation-building process of the time because India was bifurcated based on religious and communal lines. Therefore, the concept of "pollution" practised inside homes and communities became crucial to the nascent nation as well. This complicated many children's lives in 1947. The Indian state excluded children of "mixed" blood—children born to Pakistani Muslim fathers and Hindu mothers as a result of marriage (or

rape) of Hindu women by Pakistani Muslim men—but restored their mothers. For children whose blood got equal shares from both the communities, as Urvashi Butalia states in her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), the physical boundaries of the state “remained fluid. ... No separation could be made ... no clear lines drawn about where these children should go. No boundaries could be set to their beings” (282). Butalia further mentions in her book that the state decided “Better, then, to forget about them altogether, perhaps even to pretend that they did not exist” (1997, 282). Thus, the notions of “purity” and “pollution” practised inside the Indian communities pushed many children’s lives into a limbo between inclusion and exclusion during the conflict, not only inside homes but also inside the newly formed boundaries of the state.

Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan, in her book *Growing Up and Away* (2011), observes that the restoration of women to family “would also aid the process of their re-entry into the original religious community and allow them to access citizenship rights of one of the two states. [However] the position of children born of these unions and of children born to unattached women remained underdetermined” (20). Balakrishnan rightly observes that “in coming to terms with Partition, the Indian state did not accept the singular view of the child as a subject. Instead, it chose to define the relationship of the child with the state through carefully developed rules of inclusion and exclusion” (32). Since the nation’s honour and the majority religious community’s honour were thought to have been protected only through the restoration of the lost women and missing children, both states were keen on the search for them. It is important to note here that the Indian state was clear that those children who were born of “mixed blood” could not be a part of the new country, and, at the same time, the state wanted to restore all children born to Indians (mostly Hindu children who were lost or abducted during the riots and the subsequent migration) who were lost in Pakistan. In “Pali,” Sahni portrays one such instance where a Hindu child lost during the Partition is restored to his Indian family after a few

years. The story describes the emotional turmoil to which the child was pushed and exposes the violence the state and communities inflicted upon the child during the bifurcation and the restoration.

Without taking the side of any of the religious communities, Sahni describes the situation of a child caught between two nations (India and Pakistan), two religions (Hindu and Muslim) and two identities (Pali son of Manohar Lal and Kaushalya and Altaf son of Shakur Ahmed and Zenab). The story critiques the kind of religious ideas propelled by radical religious leaders during the conflict, which complicated the lives of many children in post-Partition India and Pakistan. For instance, when the child Pali is in Pakistan with his foster parents Zenab and Shakur, the Maulvi, in their area comes to them and addresses Pali as a *kafir* and a snake. He asks Zenab, “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?” (38). He declares that only after circumcision and learning of Kalma that the child can be a part of Shakur and Zenab’s family and by extension, the Muslim community. He even warns Zenab as follows, “Bring this kafir’s son to the holy mosque. Early morning. Or you must be prepared to face serious consequences!” (38). Zenab and Shakur were happy that the Maulvi did not ask them to give up the child, so they took Pali to the mosque and circumcised him. After the ritual, the Maulvi gives the boy a rumi cap and Zenab gives him a brand new muslin kurta. The Maulvi then lifts the boy and places him in Zenab’s arms and says “Take him! He’s your own child, not a kafir’s. He belongs to the whole community” (38). Zenab and Shakur then changed his name to Altaf Hussain and raised him as a Muslim child who could memorise the Quran and “sway his head rhythmically in consonance with the lines from the holy book” (39). Pali lived with them as a Muslim child in Pakistan for seven years until his biological father Manohar Lal and Indian social workers located him.

When the team comes to recover the child, the Maulvi is the one who seems most agitated by the process because, for him, Pali is now a

rightful member of his community. He cannot leave a member of his community to the “enemy” community. He even bribes the police officers to make him stay in Pakistan. Sahni writes about Maulvi’s intention behind his resistance to give the child back to its biological parents as follows, “This is not the question of a small bribe, nor one of returning an adopted child. The matter was taking a religious slant. By not sending away the child, they were doing a service to the religion—something which was considered to be a pious act” (42-43). Sahni’s description of what happens to Pali in his ‘Hindu’ house after restoration points to the fact that it is not just Maulvi’s problem or the community he represents. This has something to do with ethnic and religious identity and how it is interpreted by its followers.

After returning from Pakistan, Pali has to undergo the same religious and ritualistic practices of his Hindu family to make sure that he is now purged from all the “impurities” of living a Musalman’s life for seven years. The Hindu community is shocked when Pali aka Altaf sits down in their garden to say *namaz*. They blame Zenab, Shakur and the whole Muslim community for making a Muslim convert out of a Hindu boy (51). Then Chaudhri tells Pali that he should not do *namaz* anymore and makes a remark in front of everyone gathered there, that the “Muslas have planted the poison of fanaticism in his mind ... at such a tender age! ... those rascals! They have planted a Musla on us” (51) Then they call a pandit and shave Pali’s head and asks Pali to repeat his Hindu name Pali aka Yashpal five times to restore his Hindu identity. The child is seen as utterly confused between his two identities, different names and the different beliefs he is exposed to. Through these instances, Sahni stresses the fact that the restoration of the body of the child was not enough to ensure him a place in the community. The restoration of his beliefs was also demanded from him to accept him back as a legitimate member of the community. Sahni’s story hints at the fact that people develop a certain kind of affinity towards their ethnicity and religion over the years as being part of it. When people attach the notions of “honour” “purity” and “pollution” to their ethnic and

religious identities, it becomes a virulent mixture. As the state decides to represent the majority's religion or ethnicity, the scenario becomes more complicated. When the state starts protecting only the majority's beliefs and practices, then the minorities are often forced to assimilate, if not suppressed.

Ashgar Ali Engineer in his essay "Ethnic Conflict in South Asia" states that in the context of South Asia, "it is often the logic of the majority which becomes the rationality of the state. Its symbols are universalised and when a substantial minority refuses to accept these symbols, conflict occurs" (541). Engineer quotes Akmal Hussain, an economist and social activist from Lahore in this context,

It is important to understand ... whether communal riots are mere episodes or part of political processes. One has to take the ideology of the nation-state which evolved in Europe in the 19th century. The ideology of the nation-state became acceptable there primarily on account of homogenisation of culture due to rapid industrialisation. But in developing countries due to inadequate industrialisation no such homogenisation is possible. Large sections of population are deprived and hence sub-national assertions emerge on the surface. This assumes the form of ethnic conflict. (*EPW* 1987, 541)

Engineer also quotes Radhika Coomaraswamy—the former UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict—in his essay. In Coomaraswamy's opinion, "the state can also use or misuse the powerful instrument of ethnic identity to play one ethnic community against the other. It also showed how the state understands the dynamics of human passions" (*EPW* 541). Combining all three scholars' perspectives on ethnic conflict in South Asia, it is evident that the ethnic and religious structural dynamics are powerful in South Asian countries, which often galvanise political conflicts in the region.

and political conflict but as receptors (victims) of it. In the mental map of children, these ideas of ethnicity and religion are not inscribed as strongly as in adults. For instance, Pali, as a Hindu child, could easily adapt to a Muslim family and their belief systems. He did not find any difficulty in switching from his Hindu religious identity to a Muslim's, as his Hindu religious identity had not been so strongly formed by then. But as children grow old, they gradually grasp these ideas through the people around them. It is to be noted that after seven years of practising Islam, Pali finds it difficult to give up the belief. That is why even after restoring him to the Hindu family, he was not able to give up his Muslim religious self. But there are people around him, like Chaudhri, like Maulvi on the other side, who are keen on restoring his older Hindu self. This particular feature of ethnic and religious communities, as something difficult to evade by its practitioners, as Coomaraswamy mentions, is often used by the states as their tool to gain and preserve power.

During the time of independence in 1947, the state was not an organised entity, and statelessness prevailed. The above-mentioned fierce religious consciousness of the people in the region along with the notions of honour led to violence that unfolded in unprecedented ways. Its most horrifying result was violent communal riots. In her essay "'Pali' and Communalism Today," Anuradha Marwah Roy talks about the turn of religion into a diabolic torture machine during the Partition. She writes, "Religious observance and symbols—the circumcision and the shaving of the head—are foregrounded [in the short story] as diabolical rituals, eroding the primal image of innocence (*Translating Partition* 2001, 112-113). She further observes that "The story gets its emotional power from this profanation—the inversion of the conventionally accepted role of religion from a faith that sustains, to an instrument of torture" (113). For instance, the fear of children and women getting converted by the other religious community members and thus tarnishing the honour of their own community led to the honour killing of many children and women inside their own homes by

the men in their family. The story of Mangal Singh and his brothers, who killed seventeen members of his family, including children, is an example. When Urvashi Butalia asks Singh, “Why the women and children ... did not deserve a chance to live?” Singh replies that “they offered themselves up for death because death was preferable to what would almost certainly have happened: conversion and rape” (*The Other Side of Silence* 195). The question here is not the reliability of what Singh said about the children’s willingness to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the honour of the family/community, but how deeply rooted the religious community’s notion of “purity” and “pollution” that the members are not able to renounce it even at the face of the greatest adversity.

Based on this idea of honour, which prevailed in the religious communities involved in the conflict, the Indian state made categories among the children who could be included and excluded from its boundaries. Even when the foundation of the Indian state was secularism, the state implicitly considered the idea of the majority religious community and supported the majority’s feelings. This led to physical and psychological violence against certain categories of children by the state and the communities. As Hannah Arendt posits, “Violence appears when power is in jeopardy” (*On Violence* 56). After the Partition, when it came to the case of children, the state once again considered the majority community’s interest in the matter. It was a moment where we saw the state clinging to the power that was in jeopardy. As Arendt points out, “loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power” (54).

The state was keen on restoring children like Pali in Sahni’s story (a Hindu child “rightly” belongs to the Indian state), through the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act that came into being in 1949, it also made sure that the children of “mixed blood” could not be part of the new state. The state viewed these children as carriers of “enemy” blood within them and as a potential threat to the absolute

power of the sovereign state. The state thought that these children could jeopardise the authority and even the very existence of the sovereign state; therefore, they should be excluded from the boundaries of the state. Since the Partition of India into two states was based on the notion of the majority religious community, accepting children who carry Pakistani Muslim blood as citizens was not possible for the state.

Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" and "the state of exception" and Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" can be read along with Arendt's arguments in this context. As I mentioned, the state did not exclude all children; instead, they created categories of children who should be and should not be excluded from its boundaries, to save their power from jeopardy. Mbembe, in his book *Necropolitics*, argues that modern liberal democracies create categories among their citizens to decide who should be protected and who should be excluded. The exclusion is often done through "states of exception", i.e., the state will create a state/space, often within its boundaries, through suspension of laws. Mbembe calls these "death worlds," in which the boundaries of life and death are always blurred (*Necropolitics* 92). After the Partition, through the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, the state restored its future citizens who were lost on the other side. However, at the same time, it excluded certain children whom the state thought could not be a part of its boundaries. The state also created spaces like permanent liability camps and orphanages inside the state that served as spaces for excluded or "unwanted" children whom they could not either exclude from or include in its boundaries. While the state designed policies for its future citizens, the children in these orphanages and camps were outside of such policies.

In Agamben's conceptualisation, these children were "bare lives" who were included in the state only as a form of "exception"—someone who was "included solely through exclusion" (*Homo Sacer* 11). As Agamben explains, "Exception is [also] a kind of exclusion" (12). In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe argues that, "No democracy exists without its

double, without its colony—little matter the name and the structure. The colony is not external to democracy and is not necessarily located outside its walls. Democracy bears the colony within it, just as colonialism bears democracy often in the guise of a mask” (27).

In *Memories and Postmemories of the Partition of India* (2019), Anjali Gera Roy argues that,

The Partition refugee camps did not offer a state of exception nor were refugees exempted from the operation of the sovereign state in zones of exemption. As politicized beings protected and represented by the state, refugees of Partition were not legal subjects of exclusion and, therefore, do not qualify as homo sacer in its meaning as bare or depoliticized life. (47)

She further states that “The positioning of refugees as homo sacer is complicated by the absence of a sovereign act of abandonment, which places individuals outside the law” (48). Of course, this argument can be true in the case of the Partition refugees. However, in the case of children in the Partition, there is the act of abandonment from the part of the sovereign state and through the act of Recovery and Restoration created a ‘state of exception’ to exclude such children whom can be called as ‘bare lives’ or depoliticised bodies in Agamben’s terms.

In Sahni’s story the boy Pali is a Hindu child. To restore him from the clutches of Muslims becomes a necessity and the duty of the Indian government. In “Recovery, Rupture, Resistance,” Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin state that,

It was obliged, as a ‘responsible and civilised’ government of a civilised country to rightfully claim its subject-citizens.... [and] simultaneously cast Pakistan itself as the abductor-country and India as the parent-protector, safeguarding not

only her women [and missing children] but, by extension, the inviolate family, the sanctity of the community, and ultimately, the integrity of the whole nation. (*EPW* 1993, 8)

When the social worker throws away the red rumi cap the child was wearing is one instance where Sahni draws out the relationship between the state and the community. When Pali starts crying, the social worker leans forward to Pali and asks, “You are a Hindu boy. Why should you wear a Muslim hat?” (48). This act not only shows the state’s interest in restoring the child but also shows that any religious or cultural identity could be located in even a garment or sartorial object. The act of throwing away the rumi cap indicates the attempt at stripping away all the Muslimness in the child and restoring him to the lost Hindu identity, and thereby to a nation created on the notion of the majority Hindu religion.

Ruptured, Reinvented and Re-Ruptured Home of Pali

In the case of children in the Partition, the “home” was disrupted with the incursion of the majority community’s and the state’s interests into the interiors of the home. The first rupturing of homes was initiated by the state (both newly formed states) through the bifurcation of the country into two, and then the religious communities through violence. The homes were uprooted from their original places and the inmates had to move to the other side to reconstruct their homes. The riots, bloodshed and the abduction of children and women caused a serious rupture inside homes during the Partition. The second rupture of the home, again initiated by the state, was more complicated for women and children because it demanded another round of physical and emotional pain from people who were still trying to overcome the first round. The second round of rupturing of the home was materialised by the state through the Abducted Person’s Recovery and Restoration Act in 1949. The abducted or lost women who were then mothers or pregnant were

again forced to leave their child/children and forced to go to their respective countries “no matter what the women said they wanted” (*The Other Side of Silence* 1997, 265). The older women who were “above thirty-five or so, ... were ashamed at having to do [an abortion]. They felt they had reached a certain kind of status in their original families and now they were ashamed at having to go back to them after having had an abortion” (*The Other Side of Silence* 1997, 268). Such women were also not keen to take their children, if they had any, with their abductor/protector. It should be noted here that the man of the other community was not always an abductor. There were many who were also protectors. Most women already had children on the other side, and they did not know how to explain the presence of the new child to their previous ones.

Young women and first-time mothers did not want to part ways with their children. They were also convinced that their families and their community would not accept their new children. Many pregnant women were advised to do *safai* or “cleaning” (abortions) by social workers. These programmes were sponsored by the state but under cover since abortion was not legal at that time. That is why they used the term *safai* instead of ‘abortion’. Butalia writes,

While some women agreed to have abortions (and indeed, every social worker I spoke to confirmed these mass abortions, but several said they did not wish to be quoted on the subject: ‘you see’, they said, ‘abortion was illegal at the time’) or more precisely, were coerced into agreeing to have abortions, others went through with having the children, or indeed, by the time they were recovered, had already had children. For them, ‘they would hand over their children to the home in Allahabad.’ (1997, 267)

Like women, children also had a complicated and volatile existence inside homes during and after the Partition. The country was bifurcated only once, but that bifurcation initiated multiple dissociations and

deracination in the case of women and children through multiple ruptures imposed upon their homes.

The short story “Pali” opens with the first rupture of home, which is the migration of minorities across the new borders. The readers see thousands of people whose homes have been uprooted, who are now crossing the borders. Sahni describes the commotion through the portrayal of refugees with their bundles waiting for trucks to carry them to the other side. Among the refugees, we see Pali’s family. Sahni writes,

Manohar Lal, his wife and two children—a little girl in her mother’s arms, and Pali, a boy of four, holding his father’s finger—trudged along, carrying their bundles on their heads, their weary eyes searching their way through the haze, their ears pricked for any stray remark that might guide them on to the correct path. They were anxious to know the lay of the land and, more than that, what was in store for them. (30)

When the convoys of lorries come, the thousands of families like Pali’s waiting for the trucks to carry them to the other side, frantically throw their luggage “storming their way into the vehicles, some of them wiggle in through the windows” (30). In the commotion, Manohar Lal loses the grip of Pali’s fingers. But he “shows no alarm, thinking the child must be somewhere around ... [because] the sensation of the child’s grip still lingered on his hand” (30). When Kaushalya realises that Pali is missing, she starts panicking and shouts at the lorry driver to stop the vehicle. “Nobody listened to her. 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” (31). Sahni writes, “Then she burst out crying, her plight like that of a bird whose nest was being destroyed before its very eyes” (32). Sahni uses the metaphor of a bird’s nest to represent Kaushalya’s loss of her son and her home. This metaphor intensifies the pathos and draws the reader’s attention to the pain of Kaushalya. The comparison of the home to a nest also points

to the efforts that went into the making of that home. Then the destruction of the nest means the years of efforts went in vain due to the moment of the conflict. Sahni describes how all the comfort, nourishment and security offered by a home were destroyed and ruptured by the unexpected moment of the Partition.

Pali, the child, suffered the loss of home twice; first at the age of four and a second time at the age of eleven. This doubles the traumatic effects of the event on Pali. Sahni describes the first experience of separation of Pali from his parents as follows,

The husband and wife could not decide whether to get down from the lorry or proceed in it. Having failed to find any trace of Pali, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya kept looking out on the road. Slowly, the town was left behind, and the noise abated. Only Kaushalya kept wailing. The trees, the fields full of greenery, swept past their gaze. Pali lost somewhere in the crowded small town, receded from his parents. (32)

At the hands of fate, Manohar Lal and Kaushalya were helpless. They could not afford to get down from the lorry and search for the child. If they got down, they might not get another chance to move to the other side. The other people around them were also in the same pathetic condition, so they were not ready to wait. Sahni says that “the people had suddenly become callous” (32). They tell Manohar Lal and Kaushalya that if they want to search for the child, they have to get down; the lorry cannot wait. Thus, the boy gets lost in the chaos, and his home is scattered. Sahni’s Pali stands for thousands of children who lost their families in the Partition. As Butalia says, “Indeed, no one knows: the ‘disappearance’ of thousands of such children is one of the many tragedies of Partition history” (1997, 267-268)

For Pali, his home was first ruptured during the riots and migration, but he was one among the fortunate children who were adopted and taken care of. Pali was able to somehow reinvent the home through the love

and affection of his foster parents Shakur and Zenab. Years later, during the recovery and restoration process, Pali was recovered by the Indian state, which once again ruptured his reinvented home. This rupturing, reinventing, and re-rupturing of the home was a common phenomenon during and after the Partition in India as well as in Pakistan. Many children ended up in camps, hospitals and orphanages with severe injuries. There were also instances of children being “picked up by gangs and organized cartels and sold into prostitution and begging—many people remembered that there were many more children on the streets of major cities in the north than had been there before. But there are few records that shed any light on this” (*The Other Side of Silence* 1997, 261). Only some were fortunate to reunite with their remaining family members. Some children, like Pali, were lost but were found and taken care of by some good samaritans like Shakur and Zenab, but again, they lost those homes too during the restoration process initiated by the two states.

Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* and Anis Kidwai in *In Freedom's Shade* mention several such experiences of women and children. Butalia mentions the plight of Qamaruddin Ahmed, the father of a young girl who got lost in India during the migration. Qamaruddin paid several visits to India after Partition in search of his daughter but was arrested and jailed by the Indian police who mistook him for a spy. He was released after his sentence, but later he again appealed to the Pakistan government to help recover his daughter. However, he was told that “the government of Bharat had declined to return [the] child and the [Pakistan] had also dropped the matter. In 1957, the recovery programme for abducted women was officially closed. And with it, this father’s—and that of many other parents’—search for children” (*The Other Side of Silence* 1997, 284).

Kidwai mentions a girl named Rasheeda, whose limbs were torn through by swords in the Partition riots. Rasheeda used to call Kidwai Ammi and told her to make her daughter because she had no one left in her family (*In Freedom's Shade* 2011, 74). Another boy, “whose leg had

been broken in several places”, met his father when the caretaker took him along with other children in the Okhla home to the market to buy new shoes (81). Kidwai writes, “The poor man’s entire family had been wiped out, but now, unexpectedly, he found that one reason for living had still been left for him—his precious child! To describe his joy is beyond words I possess. ... the young boy again, happy at home again” (81).

Kidwai and Butalia mention several stories of children whose homes were irrevocably ruptured by the Partition. Many children had become accustomed to spaces like hospitals, orphanages and camps as their second home and the caretakers as people who were left for them. Such is the legacy of the Partition. Sahni’s Pali is the representative of many such children whose entire lives were turned upside down by the Partition. Even if they were restored to their homes like Pali, the image of home acquired a convoluted structure in their minds like an intricate labyrinth difficult to disentangle.

Trauma, Resilience and Memory of Children in Conflict

Sahni does not show the readers any violent memories of Pali, but after his first separation from his biological parents, he becomes numb for a few days. This can be inferred as the result of the sudden separation from his parents and the violence he must have witnessed during the migration. For hours after his separation from Manoharlal and Kaushalya, Pali was not able to utter any word other than Pitaji and his name Pali. When Zenab asks Shakur about the name of the child, he replies, “How do I know? When I asked him, he said “Pali, Pali” (69). Sahni writes about Pali’s emotional status as follows, “Pali stopped crying Now he sat in a corner, maintaining a grim silence and emptily staring this way and that. He kept sighing” (36). This cognitive inability to speak in Pali might be a result of the shock of violence that he witnessed during the communal riots and migration. It might also be induced by his separation from his parents.

The Partition throws the boy Pali into the same tormenting identity crisis and he does not understand where he really belongs. He has the same emotional attachments to his foster parents as he has to his biological parents. Since the story ends with the restoration of Pali back to his Hindu home in India, the story could not show the complexities awaiting Pali in the future, like Rashpal or Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988). But after the second rupture of his reinvented home—the separation from Zenab and Shakur—the child once again starts “whimpering as he had done many years ago on the first two or three days of his arrival in Shakur's house” (49). Sahni only suggests the trauma of Pali through his numbness and silence at both instances of separation. Yet, we can imagine what sort of complexities he would have to undergo in future, like millions of child victims of the Partition.

While discussing the representation of trauma in the novels of the Romantic period in English Literature, Christa Schonfelder observes that “significantly, the novels repeatedly refer to the harmful impacts of ... [violent] experiences using the key term “wound.” This image of mental or psychological injury connects, through the etymological roots of the term “trauma”, to later notions of psychological trauma” (*Wounds and Words* 2014, 14). In fact, the word trauma is borrowed from Greek to English which denotes a “wound.” For instance, in “Pali” Sahni compares Kaushalya's (Pali's mother) mental agony of losing both of her children (one dies in the riot and the other one Pali gets lost) to a wound in her heart. Sahni compares her trauma to a termite which inhabits the mind and stays in the heart as a parasite that devours the person from the inside. Sahni writes, “There are some wounds which heal with the passage of time, leaving a mark on the mind. But there are certain griefs which slowly eat the heart like termites, completely ravaging the body. There is nothing a man can do about it” (40). Sahni does not even portray the trauma of Pali like he does in Pali's mother Kaushalya's case. A few days after the first separation, we see Pali adapt to the new environment. He starts seeing Shakur and Zenab as his parents. While Kaushalya fights with the trauma of her children's loss, Pali, on the other side, adapts to his new environment and transforms

into Altaf Hussain, son of Shakur Ahmad and Zenab. Years later, when the second separation happens in Pali's life, he cries again as he did during the first one. Pali cries when the social worker throws away his red rumi cap. Children sometimes associate the trauma of displacement with objects. Pali shows a displaced attachment to the cap that he cannot comprehend.

This attachment to the cap can be seen as a displaced attachment he has for his foster parents. This observation of Sahni on the child gives the readers insights into the workings of the child's mind and how it perceives trauma. Children sometimes tend to associate the trauma with the loss of a toy or a material thing. For instance, Pali cries and places his hands on his head when the woman social worker throws away his rumi cap while crossing the Pakistan border. The child does not know the distinction between a rumi cap which is usually worn by Muslims and other caps. For him, the cap is a precious possession that reminds him of Shakur and Zenab.

Here, the point on trauma leads to another question: the agency of children. I presume that children have agency, but due to the power imbalance, they can only exhibit limited agency.

And in catastrophes like communal riots, war or disasters, it is difficult to exhibit agency. Cultural texts also show that the children's desire to play in the midst of conflict helps them cope with their trauma. "Pali" shows instances where the child plays after a few days in Shakur's house and slowly adapts to the new circumstances, which helps him reduce the intensity of the separation from his biological parents. Childhood studies are still grappling with the idea of children's agency, and further studies should be conducted on this particular aspect to formulate a comprehensive idea about the agency of children in conflict zones.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of "Pali," I tried to understand the experiences of a child caught in the conflict that happened as a result of the Partition

of India into two states, India and Pakistan. The question of children during the Partition was indeed a challenge to the newly formed states because the states wanted to restore the children belonging to the majority community and at the same time wanted to reject the children, whose blood got so intricately mixed with equal shares from their parents belonging to two different religions (Hindu/Sikh and Muslim) which were perceived to be unable to co-exist. When the state thought that the restoration of the children belonging to the majority community was symbolic of the restoration of the lost honour of the nation, the children who had a 'mixed' origin were viewed as a threat rather than as future citizens of the new state. Shani, through the story of Pali, also shows how religion turned into an instrument of torture and exclusion for children during the 1947 Partition, which was also sanctioned by the majoritarian state with the motive of preserving its power. "Pali" shows how the children abducted or lost during the Partition and were of mixed blood were caught between two identities, two religions and two countries. As Butalia states, "inside the bodies of such ... children, the boundaries remained fluid" (*The Other Side of Silence* 282). They are like the bit of earth between the borders of India and Pakistan, which has no name and, as Manto says in "Toba Tek Singh" (1955), no boundaries could be drawn over their beings. It is quite disheartening that when another conflict (the Pahalgam attack of April 2025) erupted between the same countries, once again, the belongingness of children with 'mixed blood' became a question for the nation. The analysis "Pali" once again elucidates the fact that literary texts have the potential to foreground invisible or marginalised histories, such as children's experiences of a historical event, and can provide us with an alternative understanding of such untold experiences. The text not only underlines the importance of revisiting past histories but also helps understand the repercussions of the past in the present.

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