

# Leaves in the Storm: Narrating Trauma of Children in selected Partition Stories


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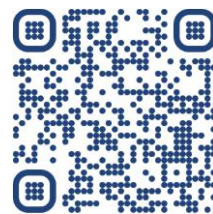
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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received in revised form: 08 May 2023; Accepted: 10 Jun 2023; Available online: 20 Jul 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p>  <p><b>Keywords—</b> Partition, Violence, Children, Trauma, Partition Stories.</p>	<p>The 1947 partition of India has been synonymous with a saga of unspeakable violence and trauma. Mostly shrouded in silence among the communities on both sides of the border, the narratives nevertheless, found their way into the literary works of writers such as Sadat Hasan Manto, Amrita Pritam, Bhisham Sahni, etc. While most works in partition literature, portray women as being the primary victims caught in the communal strife, forced displacement, sexual abuse, and violence, in some at least, the focus is on children who suffered a similar if not a worse fate. Several of them were killed or ended up being separated from their parents and families, or else, were left struggling to survive without their guardians. The childhood lost forever; they were like leaves caught in a freak storm with almost no hope of survival. The present paper turns to a few partition stories to explore how their experiences are recorded and narrated. Even as the focus is on the children's predicament, the authors unwittingly end up telling their tales of horror and trauma. The paper attempts to trace the narratives as felt and suffered by the first generation of the young in India after freedom.</p>

## 1. Introduction

Partition continues to be one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history that the common people experienced on both sides of the independent India and Pakistan. What should have been a day of great rejoicing, turned into a terrible tragedy as people who had lived together for centuries were divided in the name of religion and nation. The cataclysmic event overturned the lives of ordinary people; men, women, children, who were brutally killed even as they were forced to move to the country



of their religion. As per an estimate, approximately twelve million people were uprooted and at least one million people died. Urvashi Butalia, the Indian feminist writer, publisher, and activist in her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) estimates that about 75000 women were abducted and raped by men of the other religion as also sometimes, by men of their own (Butalia 3). In a similar vein, Jason Francisco states that the number of

those who were “beaten, maimed, tortured, raped, abducted, exposed to disease and exhaustion, and otherwise physically brutalised remains measureless” (Francisco 371). The pain and trauma obviously were unprecedented and could not be forgotten long after the horrible event. Yet it was hardly expressed, talked about, or discussed within or outside the homes.

## 2. Literature Survey

The dark legacy of partition however could not be erased as it affected writers of the period who were not able to ignore and remain unconcerned about what took place in the society around them. Hence many wrote to convey their shock and trauma at the violence and horror of what humans could do to other human beings. As they conveyed the suffering of the masses, they were careful not to go into the reasons of the carnage or to fix the blame. Short stories, such as Bhisham Sahni's “The Train Has Reached Amritsar”, Saadat Hasan Manto's “Toba Tek Singh” and “Cold Meat”, Ismat Chughtai's “Roots” (*Jadein* in Punjabi Translation), Rajinder Singh Bedi's “Lajwanti”, Kamleshwar's “How Many Pakistans”, Krishan Chander's “Peshawar Express”, Lalithambika Antharjanam's “A Leaf in the Storm” etc., constitute a sensitive, literary response to this horrible event. In addition to the stories, there are novels such as Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (*The Skeleton* in English translation) (1950), Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Yashpal's *Jhootha Sach* (1958), Rahi Masoom Raza's *Aadha Gaon* (1966), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1980) etc., that powerfully depict the turbulence of partition.

While acknowledging that all of these works tremendously add to the partition literature, and ensure, that the memory of the dark event does not disappear from the collective conscience, the present paper limits its focus on narratives of children's ordeal as depicted in short stories such as, Bhisham Sahni's “Pali”, S.H. Vatsayan's “Post Box”, Gurmukh Singh Musafir's “The Abandoned Child” and Attia Hosain's “After The Storm”. The paper explores how these stories sensitively convey the

bewilderment, confusion, trauma, and horror of children suddenly brought face to face with the ugliness of the adult world realities.

While partition horrors are generally perceived in terms of deaths, rapes, and looting, there were many other connotations to having lived through the time. Survival itself was marked by scars of constant trauma even as the authorities tried to help the affected children. M. Asaduddin rightly observes, “Closely linked with the plight of women is the plight of children who were lost, adopted by surrogate or childless parents, and then snatched once again when the real parents or their relatives turn up, much against the wishes of the adoptive parents and, sometimes, of the children themselves” (Asaduddin 327). Hence many of them ended up being uprooted all over again a second time.

## 3. Bhisham Sahni's “Pali”

Bhisham Sahni's “Pali” is a sensitive portrayal of this very dimension. In addition, he also exposes the religious bigotry that added to their suffering. Sahni locates the tale amidst the riots while the exodus of people is going on. The four years old Pali, his parents, along with other Sikh and Hindu families, run towards the newly created border to find safety and security. As they reach the station to go to the newly formed India, Pali loses the grip of his father's fingers and gets separated from his parents. After the turmoil at the station when things get back to normalcy, Pali finds himself alone there. Within a moment, he is picked up by Shakur, a Muslim who takes him to his wife Zenab. The couple adopts him, and they become the child's parents.

Though separated from his real parents, Pali is cared for with love and compassion by the couple. As Sahni narrates, Pali is lucky as compared to other children in a similar situation who were subjected to a lot of mental and physical torture. Urvashi Butalia documents how many such children were adopted not with the feeling of love but for labour. While the girl children were adopted to act as maid servants or prostitutes, boys were in for hard labour (Butalia 281). Pali however enjoys the love and affection in the house of

Shakur, but consequently, he has to go through lots of difficult situations that leave a deep impact on his mind. Firstly, he must lose his religious identity. He is made a Muslim by going through the circumcision process. On the day of circumcision, Pali is shocked and traumatized when he sees the razor in Maulvi's hands. "Little Pali was terrified at the sight of the razor and clung to Zenab's legs" (Sahni, *Stories*, 127). Sahni brings out the irony of the situation when he narrates how Pali in extreme pain calls out to his real father, muttering the words "Pitaji" "Pitaji." No one however comes up to console and comfort the child who has recently lost all his family. The circumcision done, the maulvi pets the little Pali ignoring his words uttered in great agony. "The maulvi did not mind it at all. He just smiled indulgently. The neighbours came and felicitated Shakur and Zenab" (Sahni, *Stories*, 128) Thus, as Sahni portrays, both--religion as well as the social community, fail to come to the rescue of a little child. In fact, they are the actual perpetrators of injustice against the child even though they live in a culture that traditionally treats children as innocent representatives of God Himself. Sahni thus powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of actions performed in the name of God, religion, or faith.

Just as Pali is coming to terms with the trauma of conversion, he has another ordeal to face. Not Pali anymore, he is Altaf now with his new identity of being a Muslim. As per the prevalent rituals and tradition, Altaf now wears a Muslim kurta and a Rumi cap. He begins to learn to recite the holy book *Koran* and murmur the prayers rhythmically from it. Altaf's new life in the home of his foster parents stands shattered again when his real father, whom he called "Pitaji" appears before him. His father Manohar Lal has come back to reclaim his lost child as per the campaign under Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, 1949. As Manohar Lal stakes his claim over the child Altaf, it is bitterly contested by the foster parents. Altaf is made to stand in front of the crowd and asked to point out 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,

*Translating Partition*, 44). At one point, the Magistrate places the photographs of the two men in front of the child Pali and asks him to point out the one of his father. Though hardly a surprise for the readers when Pali identifies both as fathers, one as "Pitaji" and the other as "Abbaji," the answer powerfully exposes the false narratives put up by the adults to justify their unfair, hateful, and sinful actions. At the end, the child is handed over to his biological father, Manohar Lal. This way, he is uprooted again to go back to India. No one cares about his wishes whether he wants to go to India or not. The child thus becomes a symbol of ordinary masses without a voice or choice in a totalitarian regime overtaken by communal hatred; forced to undergo circumstances determined by the rulers and political leadership.

The story of the child Pali/Altaf does not end with his restoration as he again is made to lose his present identity. This time, he must learn to adjust himself to the Hindu way of life. As the lady social worker wants to remove the Rumi cap from Altaf's head, he protests her action. But the lady social worker has no sympathy towards the child and says, "You are a Hindu boy. Why should you wear a Muslim cap?" (Sahni, *Stories*, 138) Too young to understand what the woman wants to convey through her words, the child is confused and unable to understand the difference between the religions. For him, there is no symbolic significance of the Rumi cap, it is just a piece of cloth for him meant to cover his head. There are other instances that show the influence of religion in the activities that he performs. Even after reaching India, he continues his way of life by offering his *namaz* and wearing Muslim clothes. But his actions give rise to great tension and aversion among the community as people look at him with disgust and demand that, "He must at once get rid of this nasty habit. We don't want to have a Muslim among us" (Sahni, *Stories*, 140). The child once again must go through the purification ceremony to assimilate back into the communal fold. His, "tuft of hair was left in the middle of his cropped head. Pali was bathed, given a brand-new dhoti and kurta to wear" (Sahni, *Translating Partition*, 52). This time, it is difficult for the child to decide which

religion he should follow. Thus, unable to understand the nuances of the religious practices, he is reduced to be a mere puppet in the hands of religious and communal fanatics. Sahni thus without taking sides, reveals the ugliness that had overpowered both communities making religion merely a tool to enslave and control the people rather than providing a window to connect with God and adopt a higher way of living.

#### 4. Attia Hosain's "After the Storm"

The next story taken up for discussion follows a similar theme. Attia Hosain's "After the Storm" poignantly brings out the trauma and the pain of the refugee children caught in the turmoil of partition. The story portrays the spirit of survival that becomes instrumental in overcoming the tragic loss of parents and family. As Jason Francisco aptly remarks, it "is an exquisitely told vignette of the first meetings between a resettled housewife (or so it seems—the narrator's gender is not given) and a child-servant who lost her family during the riots" (Francisco 390) The story is about a young girl named Bibi who has lost her mother and relatives during the event. From her name, dress, and her memory of the ceremony at Shahji's tomb, it is evident that she is from a Muslim family. During the communal frenzy, she had run away from the refugee camp to the fields for her safety and survival. Later a man helps her and puts her on a train and that's how she has reached the narrator's home. The little Bibi is satisfied to live with the narrator who has adopted her. Unsure, Bibi repeatedly asks, "... Will you always keep me with you?" (Hosain 103) Soon she starts to perform the tasks in the narrator's house as a maid servant and seems to be quite happy. Being spiritually strong, there is no sign of suffering on her face. But her suffering is reflected in her physical appearance. Here the narrator says,

I could not tell her age. Her assured manner made me feel younger than herself. Her eyes had no memories of a childhood. Her body was of a child of nine or ten, but its undernourished thinness was deceptive; she could have been eleven or twelve. There was no

telling how many years of childhood, life had robbed her of (Hosain 102).

As her daily routine, she brings fresh flowers in the morning and puts them in a bottle. And every evening, she brings garlands and decorates the narrator's house. It is as if the flowers help him deal with the trauma of the past. Whenever she comes across a new situation or task at the narrator's house, she starts remembering the similar events that had occurred in her life. For instance, after bringing fresh flowers and threading garlands, she turned towards the narrator and says, "Aren't they pretty? In my home we had two big bushes near the well. I made garlands for my mother and aunt" (Hosain 102). Again, as the writer narrates, the child Bibi is very fond of bright colours and bangles but there is no one who fulfils her wishes. Her pitiable condition gets reflected from her wearing of discarded clothes, "... which were cut down for her and hung loosely on her. . . . She used to dye them herself..." (Hosain 102). When the narrator gifts her the discarded clothes and glass bangles, Bibi once instead of feeling happy, grows sad as she remembers the gold earrings and bangles that her mother had promised her before the outbreak of communal violence. As the writer writes, "I had gold earrings, she said proudly, but with no reproach. My mother said after the next harvest she would buy me gold bangles" (Hosain 103). Despite being the daughter of a rich man who employed labour to help in the fields, she now is a servant in the narrator's house. She neither complains nor expresses regret at her fate and carries on with life. In another scene where she comes with tea and cakes to the narrator, she says, "Do you like these English cakes? My mother made such lovely halwa - you would have loved it" (Hosain 103) She not only recounts the past incidents of her experience but also remembers the days of bloodshed. She recalls how Chand Bibi in whose big house she used to play, "fought and fought and killed so many of them - ..." (Hosain 104). She further remembers her sister, her brother, and the man with whom she ran away when Chand Bibi's house was attacked by the rioter, her plight in the refugee camp and the policeman who brought her to the house of the narrator. The way she takes it without sharing

her real feelings indicates the deep trauma that does not let her feel anything anymore. Bibi thus inhabits the two worlds located in the past and the present simultaneously. By referring to such seemingly trivial details, Hosain enhances the effects of trauma caused due to Partition that completely shattered the dreams and desires of countless children who now lived at the mercy of others. The story told without lapsing into sentimentality showcases a child's spirit to retain purity and positivity even when undergoing extreme cruelty and grief.

### **5. S.H. Vatsayan "Post Box"**

"Post Box" by S.H. Vatsayan, is an account of the pain, suffering and trauma experienced by a child abandoned amidst the raging winds of conflict. Like Bibi, Roshan, is a bright and active five years old child. His eyes still exude the innocence of childhood, but they are full of suffering. He is in pain at having lost his family members and relatives in partition riots. His ceaseless longing for his father magnifies his suffering as revealed in his continuous attempts to post a letter without mentioning his address on he does not know about his father's whereabouts. As the narrator finds out, Roshan is on the way to cross the border in the company of other refugees. Roshan's father has left to fetch Roshan's Bua (aunt) and Phupha (uncle) who are old and have lost their two sons during the Japanese war, promising to rejoin them in Lahore. "He had left his home with his mother and his chacha for Lahore. His father had accompanied them upto Sheikhpura, but then had left them to go to another village to fetch Roshan's Bua and Phupha. . . . His father had promised to meet them in Lahore" (Ajneya 107). But this separation from his father is extremely traumatic to Roshan. He yearns for his father's arrival even as he and his group of the migrants are attacked several times by the marauders. Roshan's chacha is killed as also several others in their group. He also witnesses the terrible loss of his mother who dies at the hands of one of the attackers. As Roshan watches, the abductor throws his mother on the ground and smashes her face with the sharp end of an axe. Unable to bear the brutal attack on his mother, "Roshan had shut his eyes, and

when he opened them he had seen that her eyes, nose, jaws had been reduced to a bloody pulp. There was nothing left of her face. Yet the man, who had planted one foot on her chest, continued to hit her with his axe" (Ajneya 107). The vivid image projected through the eyes of a child profoundly displays the depths to which humanity had sunk during the time. Moreover, as the writer narrates, the trauma remains fresh and is reinforced every time he has a conversation with Roshan. Roshan tells how he is rescued by some of the survivors of his group who drag him away with them. After struggling for days altogether, they finally reach Jullunder. Yet, despite his suffering, Roshan takes great pride for being the only survivor of the group who, "... first sets out from his village to reach safely" (Ajneya 108).

The wounds of partition never fade from Roshan's mind. He is constantly restless even after reaching safely in the refugee camp. The memory of his father haunts him. That's why he wants to post a letter to his father to know about his whereabouts. Though he does not know his address, he lives with the hope that his letter will reach his father and soon he will reunite with him. The image of an innocent child waiting and not being aware whether his father is alive or not, continues to haunt the reader long afterwards. Despite the narrator's advice to go back to the camp and stay there, the child Roshan remains standing near the post box with the hope that, "... someone more knowledgeable would come to the post-office and tell him how to send his letter to his father" (Ajneya 109). Thus, the story depicts the pitiful condition of numerous children like Roshan caught in the trauma of the worst kind and with no hope of ever getting out of it throughout their life.

### **6. Gurmukh Singh Musafir's "The Abandoned Child"**

Gurmukh Singh Musafir's story "The Abandoned Child" as the title signifies, is also a story about an abandoned child. However, unlike Roshan, she is abandoned by her parents to facilitate their own safety and survival during the tumultuous days of the Partition. This story also captures the utter

breakdown of the social system, ethics, and values amidst the storm of communal frenzy. As the riots begin in the village, Qasim and his wife Zeenat decide to abandon their child Mubina because they are afraid that the child's cries will attract the attention of the attacking mobs. However, the unthinkable act of the parents cannot be without consequences. When Qasim asks for the child, her mother Zeenat, is reluctant to hand over Mubina to her husband. She cannot bring herself to agree with his decision of leaving the child under the lasuda tree. "I don't think we should do that" (Musafir 183) Yet the situation compels them, and they end up leaving the child to God's mercy. As they hear the noise of approaching attackers, "Zeenat kissed Mubina. Qasim took Mubina from her hands and placed her down under the lasuda tree" (Musafir 183). As they run towards the newly created border, Zeenat stops saying, "Hai, Mubina must be crying" (Musafir 183). Musafir superbly builds up the tragic impact of the ill-advised action and its consequences. The image of a child left behind under the lasuda tree is bound to remain with the readers for long afterwards:

Rain fell throughout the night. Water would collect on the broad leaves of the lasuda tree and then roll down when they shook in the breeze. Drops of water fell on Mubina's face. She cried helplessly. She cried through a part of the night and slept through the rest (Musafir 184).

Such was the time which forced this couple to commit the sin against their own child.

Even as terrible things were happening all around, there were heart-warming acts of kindness as well. Moula, a servant of a Sikh Sardar among the attackers, finds the abandoned child under the lasuda tree. After seeking permission from the Sardar, Moula and his wife, a childless couple, happily take on the responsibility of bringing up the child. Hence, who was perceived as a danger to her parents now becomes the lifeline, a blessing to the adopting family. As Moula's wife says, "Strange are the ways of rasool. I didn't have a child of my own. I am grateful. . . ." (Musafir 186). Unfortunately, the spell of happiness is soon over with the arrival of Hindu and Sikh refugees

in the village from the other side of the border. Afraid, Moula and his wife decide to leave the village with the child Mubina. By God's grace, this time the Sikh Sardar shows humanity and risks his own life to help Moula and his wife to cross the border with the child. On the other side Zeenat is unable to overcome the guilt of abandoning her child. She curses herself, "I am not a mother, ... I am a demon. . . . It would have been better if I had been killed. I abandoned my own child..." (Musafir 188) Seeing her plight, her brother begins the search for the child. How a painful and emotional situation is where Zeenat who once feared the cries of her child, now yearns for the same child's shrieks. With the help of police, he is able to trace Moula and his wife who try to mislead with a false account of the child's death. Zeenat's intense grief however is too much to bear for Moula's wife. She brings the child and places her on Zeenat's bosom. The sweet smell of her child revives Zeenat. Bursting into tears of happiness, Zeenat with folded hands treats Moula and his wife as Mubina's father and mother and becomes herself child's massi. She also invites them to live with them. "The woman (Moula's wife) put her arms around Zeenat. Their tears mingled. With their arms around each other, it became difficult to tell the mother apart from the massi" (Musafir 190). The story thus has a happy ending as the writer, like host of other writers chooses to focus on positivity and humaneness even when surrounded by devastating breakdown of humanity. The story is similar to Sahni's "Pali" in demonstrating human capacity for affection and kindness. Moula and his wife's love towards the child Mubina is similar to Shakur and his wife's towards Pali. Moreover, both families undergo a similar kind of suffering as well. Hence, as the writers project, people belonging to different religions, essentially are the same. They love and experience pain and trauma in a similar fashion.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, all the stories selected for this article successfully narrate the searing trauma of the children caught in the communal crossfire of the historical event. Even though

they physically survive, they carry psychological scars throughout their lives. The incidents described in the stories may have had a fictional treatment, but, as the readers well recognize, these are rooted in real life situations. Since the actual happenings were too horrible to talk about, these literary accounts act as a repository of common people's histories while simultaneously acting as a warning against getting overtaken by communal sentiments, ever again. The fact that none of the writers goes into a blame game demonstrates how most people on both sides of the border do not wish to ever fall into the communal abyss again as they have witnessed the dark depths of such beliefs and actions. The partition stories thus point out the dangers of polarization and attempt to reinforce the secular tradition of tolerance and pluralism.

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