

Children of the Divide: Physical and Psychological Partition Trauma on Children in Cracking
India and “Pali”

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In the months of August and September 1947, India was forced into a diabolical state. Wickedness, violence, and pure evil erupted into a powerful mass that soared out of control and consumed everyone in its path; no one man, woman, or child was able to escape it. The Partition forcefully divided India in two: India and Pakistan. People were forced to uproot the only life they had known and endured a long, terrifying, and most often tragic journey of migration.¹ Thousands of people were murdered or mutilated, women abducted or raped, and both men and women beaten, discarded, and left for dead. Unfortunately, such vicious acts were not only enacted upon adults; children were also exposed to the same violent and angry world. As highlighted by the characters Ranna, Pali, and Lenny, in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, Cracking India, and Bhisham Sahni's short story, "Pali," children who were lucky enough to escape Partition alive were condemned with the memories that forever changed their lives both physically and psychologically. Children not only witnessed the brutal deaths of their parents, siblings, and relatives, they were savagely beaten, struck down by unimaginable objects. Those who were lost or orphaned were abducted by men and women and recreated or reinvented into someone else's child. Although children suffered the same tortures and fates as others during Partition, they paid the ultimate sacrifice to their country with their innocence.

In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, Cracking India, Ranna, a small boy, both witnesses and endures extreme levels of violence. When Ranna's village Pir Pindo becomes infested with sword-wielding Sikhs, his nightmare commences. Ranna is torn away from his mother and forced to hide in a tiny room. The room is packed with men and boys of his village, but this room is their only hope of survival. From within his "windowless room," Ranna hears the endless screams of people of his village being tortured and murdered. With no one able to help them, "Ranna

¹ During Partition, Muslims in India were forced to migrate to Pakistan and Hindus in Pakistan were forced to migrate to India.

becomes charged with fear as he notices the grown men around him crying like children”(212). It is here that Ranna becomes aware of his inevitable fate: no one can protect him, not even his father. As the murderous Sikhs infiltrate Ranna’s and the other men’s hiding place, Ranna witnesses the beheadings of his father, uncles, brothers, and cousins- all of them taken from him within seconds. Then, Ranna himself “feels a bow cleave the back of his head and the warm flow of blood” (213). In his unconscious state, Ranna is hidden amongst a sea of dead bodies and blood; this ultimately saves him from his imminent death. Although Ranna escapes his death, his struggle to stay alive is just beginning. He hangs on to false hopes of finding his mother as he begins a search of his death-stricken village; but all he finds is the dead and mutilated bodies of the people he has known his whole life. Ranna realizes that if he wishes to stay alive he must flee for safety. Starving, and falling in and out of consciousness, this small boy embarks on a miraculous journey where his survival is solely based on his will to live.

Ranna’s drive for survival entails substantial physical and psychological damage, both of which do not allow for an end to his journey. Ranna, being such a small boy, is innocent to the capabilities of men and is thrown into a world where he is a stranger to violence and brutality. Ranna suffers a great deal of pain at the hands of others; he has a massive gash in his head, spear punctures in his legs, and extensive body damage from his flight to safety (213). It would be difficult for any child to fathom a reason for why this is being done to him or her; however, Ranna accepts his wounds and easily adapts to a will to survive. While Ranna’s physical wounds will heal, the scars left behind will forever remind him of the treacherous day when his family was stolen from him.

Aside from physical ailments, Ranna primarily suffers from the psychological effects of what he has witnessed. At first, Ranna does not understand “why he too is not dead” (214). He is

left all alone; the undetected sole survivor of the attack on his village. As Ranna becomes more involved in his new world, he is overwhelmed by the atrocious acts he has seen; he mentally takes note of every detail brought to his eyes. This is noticeable when Ranna recalls the moment his father dies:

There was a sunlit sweep of curved steel. His head was shorn clear off his neck. Turning once in the air, eyes wide open, it tumbled in the dust. His hands jerked up slashing the bleeding stump of his neck. (213)

Ranna's ability to re-enact such a gory scene proves just how cemented the events are in his mind. Ranna remembers every detail of his father's head, his bodily actions, and his blood- a sight that he will retain forever. Along with his father's beheading, he witnesses the scene replicate repeatedly with all of his family members. Perhaps after witnessing so many deaths Ranna has become immune to the scene. As the narrator comments on "how soon he [has] become accustom[ed] to thinking of the people he [has] known all his life as bodies", and how "he [feels] on such easy terms with death" (214). Based on actual accounts of children in Partition, it can be assumed that Ranna will remain haunted by the day he was robbed of his family and his innocence; he will have to live with this the rest of his life.

While Ranna's character is a fictional account of a child enduring violence during the time of Partition, Urvashi Butalia's The Other Side of Silence depicts non-fiction accounts of children who suffered like Ranna. One of Butalia's examples is a man named Kulwant Singh. Kulwant, also a small boy at the time of Partition, "lost virtually all his family." He witnesses his fathers' slaying: "they cut him up into a hundred pieces and the first blow they struck on his neck." Kulwant's mother worries he is such a small and weak child and that he too will be

caught; so, she decides to sacrifice him to open flames to preserve his honour. Kulwant remembers, “lying next to his father’s dead body, flames rising up all around him”; however, he, like Ranna, acquires a will to live and somehow survives the horrific flames. Kulwant explains how he “[gets] up, [his] hands are cut, blood [is] flowing from [his] body and he is burnt [all over]” (201). Not only is Kulwant physically scarred, but also he expresses that “many children, like him, develop severe psychological problems. They find they cannot live in families anymore” (200). As a result of the traumatic experience, Kulwant is not able to live amongst his uncles and cousins, as he is “full of grief and unhappiness, and eventually ends up an orphan of the state” (201). Kulwant’s horrific experiences as a child still affect him today. He is psychologically wounded by the horrors he has seen, and years later continues to “have nightmares” as vivid as the day the event initially occurred (204).

Illustrations of physical abuse and horror are not the only type of violence children suffered during Partition. Just as Ranna endures pain-inflicting events and traumatizing scenes, Bhisham Sahni’s character, Pali, undergoes a forced transformation of identity, not once, but twice. Sahni’s short story, “Pali,” recounts seven years of Pali’s life, from the age of four when he is grammatically separated from his parents during the Partition migrations and is adopted by a couple, up until the age of eleven when he returns to his original parents. Pali, along with his and other Sikh and Hindu families, make a mad dash to the Indo-Pak border. Upon their arrival at a station with many lorries waiting to transfer them to India, Pali “loses grip of his father’s fingers” and is accidently separated from his family (30). When the dust from the lorries clears, four-year-old Pali is left behind, huddling and crying in a corner. A man named Shakur finds the abandoned Pali and takes him home to his wife, Zenab (34). This couple then becomes Pali’s new parents. For days after his separation, Pali sits in a corner, maintains a grim silence, and

continues to cry and call out for his father (36). Being a four-year-old child, Pali does not understand what is happening or why his father is not there with him. Because Pali is born a Hindu, and has become a Muslim couple's child, he has to convert to the Muslim faith. Pali is no longer Pali; his new identity is "Altaf." He is taught to say the Kalma,² is circumcised, and is clothed in a new rumi cap and Muslim kurta. Gradually, Altaf, formerly Pali, takes to his new life. He becomes a normal Muslim child, taking after his parents, playing in the yard, and memorizing the Quran (38). Seven years pass, and Altaf no longer remembers the day he lost his parents. Yet, Pali's real father has not given up hope of finding him.

When Pali is eleven years old, he is once again forced into a traumatic event. Pali's biological father shows up to claim his son. As soon as he proves that Pali is his, Pali must leave to live with him in Hindustan. Once in Hindustan, Pali is not allowed to practice his prayers or even wear the clothes to which he has become accustomed. Snide remarks and looks of disapproval are cast at Pali from all directions. In order to be accepted in his new community, Pali must experience a second religious conversion. Pali is once again forced to transform his identity; his hair is cut, his Muslim clothes are taken off, and he is newly clothed in a "dhoti and kurta" (Sahni 52). Pali is left confused and bewildered. He does not know which religion he is supposed follow, nor does he know who his parents are: his biological parents or the parents that took care of him and raised him.

As a result of Pali's adoption he is thrown into multiple states of confusion, leaving him psychologically impaired. At the tender age of four, Pali endures disconnection from his family,

² The Kalma (usual spelling is "Qalma") is required to be stated upon conversion to Islam. By declaring the Kalma one accepts Islam as his/her true religion and believes that there is only one Almighty Creator and his last messenger Muhammad (IFSA).

the adoption into another family, and the conversion from Hindu to Muslim, and all the while his pain and suffering is ignored:

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. (38)

Pali cannot understand what is happening to him or why, but as the years progress, his memories seem to fade and he becomes comfortable in his new life. Being such a small child during this traumatic incident, Pali is able to recover from it quickly. However, when he is eleven years old and forced again into a traumatic situation, psychological effects do take a toll on him. When Pali’s biological father returns for him, Pali is made to stand in front of a large crowd and point out his father of seven years earlier (45). Pali is nervous and terrified, enthralled and in complete confusion; predictably, once again, no one cares how Pali himself feels:

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. (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” (46). Ultimately, Pali is forced to leave behind his family of the past seven years, and has to return to Hindustan with his real father.

If the pain of losing a family all over again is not enough, Pali must now endure an entire community’s unacceptance of him, for he is a Muslim. Pali continues his normal ways of life in Hindustan, saying his namaz and wearing his Muslim clothes. While doing this, Pali can feel the

tension the community has 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” (50). Inevitably, Pali once again undergoes a transformation of his identity. Pali is left confused: he does not know what religion he is, or even who he is, anymore. He is a stranger to his community and to himself. 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 (52).

Many children, such as Pali, were lost or orphaned due to Partition. Even though Pali’s displacement results in the confusion of his identity, he is lucky to have a loving family take him in, for in the real world, most children were not so lucky. Butalia explains that many “children were abandoned or left behind. Their parents’ mental makeup changed and the important thing to do was save themselves, so they left their children behind” (Butalia 197). Lost children flooded the lands in India and Pakistan with no one willing to claim them as their own. These children were small, innocent, human beings left to fend for themselves. If these children did not starve to death, or were not murdered for sport, they ended up in state orphanages. Here, the displaced children were adopted out, and the boys of course, were always first to go (199). The small boys were sought out by women and men, not looking for a child to love and care for, but for labour. These children became work mules and servants. When small girls were adopted, sadly enough, most ended up as domestic workers or prostitutes (221). Furthermore, all of these children, like Pali, suffered with misplaced identities; they grew up in a world where they had to continually change and adapt to appease people around them. These children may have never received the chance to be a true child, have a real family, or be able to fully understand their identity.

Although Ranna and Pali are both directly affected physically and mentally by Partition, a third character, Lenny, falls victim to Partition solely at a psychological level; this is explained by her inability to ascribe meaning to events occurring around her. Like Ranna and Pali, Lenny's character endures the trauma of Partition as a child and develops the similar states of confusion. Sidhwa's novel, Cracking India, as well as Deepa Mehta's film, Earth, portray Lenny's character as an eight-year-old girl who is coming of age in a world to which she cannot relate or even recognize.³ Lenny's seemingly normal idealistic life, as a child with polio who has everyone's sympathy, slowly shatters as events of Partition begin to directly affect her world. Lenny is unable to comprehend visual and verbal situations that she is a part of and struggles to give each situation some type of meaning that will make sense to her. She witnesses traumatic incidents which ultimately steal her innocence and leave her to question her own identity. Lenny is thrown into a psychological battle as she desperately tries to grasp an understanding of the ever-changing world around her.

Lenny's inability to understand verbal explanations of the Partition is a direct result of her eight-year-old mentality, for when Lenny is told that India will be divided, her immediate reaction is that the statement is literal. Lenny truly believes that India will crack all over as she questions herself: "can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where the house is? Or crack it up further up on Warris road? How will I get to Godmothers then? (Sidhwa 101). In the book Unsettling Partition, Jill Didur explains that when "Lenny overhears discussions about partitioning the nation she understands them in physical terms" (Didur 72). This becomes apparent in Mehta's film when Lenny smashes a plate on the ground to watch it crumble and crack, as she believes India will crack in the same way (Mehta Ch.1 2:05). Lenny is only able to

³ Deepa Mehta's film is a condensed version of Sidhwa's novel, and the film is used to further develop Lenny's character in additional ways.

comprehend a fragment of the idea of India 'cracking' because she creates a physical image which she can give meaning to in her own way.

Another situation where Lenny uses physical dramatization in an attempt to understand a wider view of events occurring due to Partition is the dismemberment of her doll. Earlier, Lenny witnesses a Sikh mob attacking the streets, burning buildings, and fighting with Muslims. Lenny's eyes focus on a man tied to several vehicles and then viciously torn apart:

[Her] eyes focus on an emaciated Banya wearing a white Gandhi cap. The man is knocked down. His lips are drawn away from rotting, paan- stained teeth in a scream. The men move back and in the small clearing, his legs sticking out of his dhoti right up to the groin- each thin, brown leg tied to the jeep. (Sidhwa 145)

At first, Lenny is upset and terrified; however, when she returns home she is curious and is eager to know the meaning of what she has seen. Lenny "selects a large lifelike doll" and begins to fiercely tear it apart until "the cloth skin is ripped right up to the armpits spilling chunks of greyish cotton and coiled brown coir" (148). In her essay, "The Repetition of Silence," Lopamudra Basu states that Lenny tears apart her doll in efforts to mimic the violence around her. By doing this, Lenny is "inflicting her psychic pain on a physical body, and is then able to return to a sense of everyday life normality and survive in the traumatic experiences she is exposed to" (Basu 18). Lenny's physical re-enactments prove her total confusion with the world around her. The innocence of her child mentality holds her back from reaching a true understanding of the events she is witnessing.

Another aspect of Lenny that reflects her inability to understand the madness around her is her lack of compassion when responding to those who are suffering. Lenny is oblivious to the

idea of showing compassion because she herself has previously not been exposed to violence. One reason why Lenny is sheltered from acts of violence is her Parsee religion. During Partition, people of the Parsee religion took a neutral stance during the religious battle between Muslims and Hindus. Parsees believe that “as long as [they] do not interfere [they] have nothing to fear. As long as [they] respect the customs of the rulers, [they] will be all right. They would not present a threat to either side and would live peaceably with whoever ends up ruling Lahore” (Sidhwa 48). Because Parsees are able to be on neutral ground with all religions, it spares them from being targets of hostility and violence. Lenny’s faith allows her life to be protected from the types of violence occurring during Partition; therefore, she does not know how painful the events are or how much people suffer.

There are several instances when Lenny does not acknowledge compassion to people around her because of her inexperience with violence and suffering. First is when Ice Candy Man’s sisters have been murdered on a train and stuffed in gunnysacks (159). Lenny accompanies Ayah and Masseur to Ice Candy Man’s home to give him their condolences. In the film version, the first thing Lenny says is “did you see your sisters in the gunnysacks?” (Mehta Ch.13 56:57). Although Lenny is curious to know what happened and what they looked like, she fails to realize the inappropriate nature of her question. She does not seem to feel any sympathy towards Ice Candy Man in his time of mourning; this is because Lenny has not yet lost anyone close to her, and therefore has no way of understanding how Ice Candy Man feels.

A second occasion where Lenny ignores the idea of compassion is when Ranna is explaining the attack on his village. Ranna states that “he found his mother hanging from the ceiling fan by her hair, and she was naked.” Ranna’s story is horrific, a little boy has just lost his entire family, and yet, Lenny’s response to him is “it is my birthday, do you want some cake?”

(Ch.16 1:11:09). Once again, Lenny is unaware of the effects that violence inflicted upon Ranna. In addition to her Parsee religion, Lenny has been raised in an upper class family which further hinders her ability to understand Ranna's pain. Having upper class status protects Lenny from having to endure violent and cruel situations; this is because Lenny is from the city and has her own ayah and many others living on her property who look out for her and take care of her. In contrast, Ranna is of lower class status from a village, and it is because of his lower class that he does not even know what cake is when Lenny offers it to him. Having so many people around, Lenny has been sheltered from violent and malicious acts. Therefore, Lenny cannot begin to understand what Ranna has endured because his story does not make sense to her; she has nothing to compare his story to in order to place meaning upon it.

A third example of Lenny's lack of compassion and understanding of violence is when she watches Lahore going up in flames. As homes and buildings are burning to the ground, Lenny is "mesmerized by the spectacle. It is [to her] like a gigantic fireworks display" (Sidhwa 147). Here, Lenny "is interweaving pleasure in the demonstration of violence" (Basu 18). Lenny's comparison of the mass burning of her city to fireworks proves that violent images, such as this, do not normally exist in her mind. As with the previous examples, Lenny's dispassionate reactions to Lahore burning is also a consequence of her child mentality and her own inexperience.

The most traumatic event that Lenny witnesses is the kidnapping of her beloved Ayah. Lenny is thrown into the truths of the adult world as her child innocence fails to protect Ayah. Muslim mobs show up at Lenny's house in search of the Hindu Ayah, Shanta (Sidhwa 190). Lenny witnesses the mobs attack. She notices that people in the mob had been friends of hers and Ayah's from the park, and now these friends want to hurt Ayah. Lenny's family tries to protect

Ayah by lying to the mob, attempting to convince them she left the city days ago (193). As Lenny frantically tries to understand what is happening around her, she is approached by Ice Candy Man. Even though Ice Candy Man is a part of the mob who wants to hurt Ayah, Lenny's infatuation with him allows him to have her complete trust. Ice Candy Man, knowing how Lenny will react to him, uses Lenny's innocence against her to ploy her into telling him where Ayah is. Before Lenny takes a moment to think, she has already answered him, stating that Ayah is hiding in her house. Lenny realizes that she has made a mistake; however, it is too late, the mob is already infiltrating her house (194). In this scene, Lenny is forced to acknowledge Ice Candy Man's betrayal of her and Ayah (Didur 90). The abduction of Ayah reflects Lenny's childhood innocence falling prey to the treacherous adult world, as Ice Candy Man is responsible for fracturing her innocence and forcing her to face the brutalities of the real world (Basu 17). Lenny can only blame herself for Ayah's kidnapping; she is angry with her child innocence of always telling the truth. Because of her truth, Lenny continues to be haunted by the loss of Ayah as she feels responsible for her kidnapping (Didur 90).

A significant change takes place within Lenny as a result of Ayah's abduction. She is no longer innocent or blind to the atrocities of the outside world. Lenny is growing up, learning, experiencing, and coming to her own conclusions where she is forced to examine her own identity (Didur 90). While Lenny reflects on Ayah's abduction, she knows she accidentally betrayed Ayah because she told the truth (Basu17). She questions her ability to lie and wishes that she was able to, but since she was a small child Lenny has always been taught to tell the truth, as "lying does [not] suit her" (Sidhwa 93). From her mistake, Lenny learns that "truth, nothing but the truth can lead to a lot of harm" (Didur 93). Lenny's innocent truth telling is what

tears her apart. The results of her truth exposes her to the perfidy of Ice Candy Man and to her own betrayal of Ayah.

At the psychological level, Lenny suffers most intensely because of her encounters with Partition. She fights within herself to place meaning on what she witnesses and overhears; unfortunately, she is never fully able to reach an understanding that completely satisfies her. This is because Lenny is a child during Partition, and “she [does] not have a language to describe [her] experience[s], to make sense of it on [her] own” (Butalia 200). Yet, as an adult narrator reflecting on her memories, Lenny “continues to question and challenge the meanings” in an attempt to piece together something she will be able to understand (Didur 93). Lenny’s previously idealistic world, where her child innocence flourished, is shattered by the events of Partition, and she will continue to be confused by its events, as she cannot achieve a total meaning of them.

As seen in the fictional characters, Ranna, Pali, and Lenny, Partition changed the course of their lives. After such traumatic events, there was no way of returning to the life they had once known. Because Partition infected the children’s “growing and impressionable years,” it forced them into maturity way before their time; they will forever continue to be reminded of the time they were robbed of their innocence (Butalia 226). Whether children suffered physically or psychologically, the result was the same: trauma, misplaced identity, and confusion. Even today, the surviving children are still affected, tormented, and horrified with the events they had to endure (223). A whole generation of children were sacrificed to Partition, their lives and futures were decided for them while they themselves had no choice (226). Although children survived Partition, they succumbed to considerable psychological effects and remain haunted of a history they want nothing more than to forget (223).

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