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The 'other' of the Partition: In the stories of Bhisham Sahni and Rajinder Singh Bedi

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Abstract

This essay looks at the othering in different categories based on religion, class, caste and gender in the wake of partition. I have tried to accomplish this by analysing these concepts in the works of Rajinder Singh Bedi and Bhisham Sahni, prominent writers known for their contribution towards Indian Partition Literature. Their works are not just sagas of tussle, but a full-fledged confrontation of socio- cultural divisions which ended up shaping the future of three nations and lives of millions of inhabitants. The focus is on their short stories. The economic style and suggestiveness make these stories a perfect tool to present the grim pictures of the brutalities and massacre during the partition but at the same time questions the cultural hegemony and looks at Internal cultural and patriarchal structures which were always an underlying factor further extending and manifesting itself on such a large scale. I try to analyse and look at how factors such as religious backing, political propagandas etc led to this process of othering. Although the partition remains historical, it still shapes and underlines how one approaches and perceives the 'other' caste or religion in the present.

***Keywords**: Other, Identity, Class, Gender, Partition*

The 'other' of the Partition: In the stories of Bhisham Sahni and Rajinder Singh Bedi

Identity is always a never-completed process of becoming - a process of shifting identifications, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being."- Stuart Hall (16)

Identity is central to the process of othering, shaping how individuals and groups define themselves and their relationships during conflict. This marginalisation frames individuals as fundamentally different and inferior, reducing them to symbols of what the dominant group is not. As a socially constructed category, the 'other' is denied personhood and agency, their identity dictated by external

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societal labels rather than self-determination. Othering reinforces social boundaries based on race, religion, caste, class, gender, or nationality, upholding dominant ideologies and pushing marginalised groups to the periphery. However, identity is not singular or inflexible; it is an amalgamation of sub-identities shaped by migration, conflict, and cultural exchange. This fluidity becomes particularly evident during crises, such as the Partition of India in 1947, which sharply redefined identity boundaries along lines of religion, class, caste, and gender.

In this essay, I critically examine the multifaceted process of othering during the Partition through the works of Rajinder Singh Bedi and Bhisham Sahni, two prominent writers of Indian Partition literature. Their short stories, "Lajwanti" by Rajinder Singh Bedi and "Pali" by Bhisham Sahni delve into the dislocation and fragmentation of identities caused by this historical event. The economical narrative style of these stories enhances their emotional intensity, facilitating a nuanced exploration of themes like othering, identity, and cultural clashes. "Lajwanti" and "Pali" serve as microcosms of the nation, representing the collective trauma of millions. They act as lenses to examine the human cost of Partition, chronicling the histories of two nations steeped in blood and suffering. These narratives illustrate how personal experiences are inextricably linked to broader societal divisions, demonstrating the complex interplay of individual and collective identity.

Bedi's "Lajwanti" revolves around a woman abducted during the Partition and later returned through rehabilitation programs for women. Her husband, Sundar Lai, who once abused her, expresses regret for his past actions and becomes an advocate for the social reintegration of women, vowing to honour and cherish her if she ever gets back. In contrast, Sahni's "Pali" follows the story of a four-year-old Hindu boy separated from his family during Partition and left behind as they migrate to India. Pali gets adopted by a Muslim family in Pakistan, where he is circumcised and becomes Altaf. His biological parents face numerous challenges to reclaim him, supported by a government eager to 'restore' him to his 'real parents'.

During Partition, religious identity took precedence over all other 'sub-identities,' intertwining religious and national identities in rigid, oppositional ways. Hindus and Muslims cast each other as the 'Other', not just as members of different religious communities but as existential threats to their survival. For Hindu males, Muslims were often depicted as aggressive invaders, harkening back to

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historical conflicts like the Mughal Empire's dominance. Muslims, on the other hand, viewed Hindus as an oppressive majority threatening their cultural and religious identity in post-colonial India. As violence escalated, the narrative of ethnic cleansing reinforced collective identities, heightening defensiveness against perceived threats and leading to the dehumanisation of individuals based on religious affiliations. This polarisation left a legacy of mistrust that continued shaping communal relations long after the violence subsided. When communities witnessed violence by opposing groups, blame shifted from individual perpetrators to the entire group. As Edward Said discusses in Orientalism, othering involves the construction of binary oppositions, positioning one group as superior and the other as inherently inferior and threatening. While Said's analysis centres on European colonial views of the Orient, his critique of externally imposed identities by dominant power structures offers a lens to understand the creation of rigid religious identities during Partition. This performance of othering, as Said frames it, reflects the imposition of monolithic identities in the Partition context.

This imposition of identity is vividly illustrated in Sahni's Pali, who at the tender age of four is labelled a 'son of a kafir'. The Maulvi of the village declares, "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?" (Sahni, 62). This harsh declaration erases Pali's individual identity, reducing him to nothing more than a symbol of the Hindu community. Rather than being seen as an innocent child, Pali becomes a vessel for the communal need to protect its identity. Reclaiming him is thus not only about familial reunion but also the reassertion of communal boundaries and Hindu cultural purity. This concern is highlighted in Chaudhary's taunt: "Those Muslas have planted the poison of fanaticism in his mind. And at such a tender age!", which underscores the lasting impact of such early impositions of identity. (Sahni, 72)

Othering during Partition was not only political but also deeply gendered, revolving around notions of honour and purity that commodified women's bodies. Both Hindu and Muslim men constructed women as bearers of communal honour, depicting men from the opposing community as violators of women's purity. As Veena Das notes, "My fear of the other is transformed into the notion that the other is fearsome" (134), illustrating how the imperative to lUprotect 'our women' served as a

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justification for violence against the Other, framing such acts as defensive measures. Although Das discusses this in the context of the 1984 Sikh violence, her observation effectively conveys the mechanics of othering. This perspective demonises the Other as tyrannical, justifying violence against them. Sunderlal's treatment of Lajwanti exemplifies this gendered violence. Despite being subjected to domestic abuse before her abduction, Lajwanti becomes an even more significant symbol of honour after her return. His questions, "Who was he?", "Did he treat you well?" and "He didn't beat you, did he?" (Bedi, 31), reflect a disregard for Lajwanti's trauma, reducing her experience to an inquiry about the actions of men. In addition, Sunderlal's reclaiming of Lajwanti symbolises his attempt to restore not only his personal honour but also the communal honour supposedly tarnished by her abduction. By elevating Lajwanti as a "Devi" (goddess), he further excludes her instead of honouring her. This idealisation creates an unattainable myth of women's moral and physical perfection, reinforcing their roles as 'Other' and suppressing any realistic agency or resistance. Her deification strips her of human emotion, poignantly captured by Bedi when he writes, "And so Lajwanti's sorrow remained locked up in her breast. Helplessly, she gazed at her body and realised that, since the Partition, it was no longer hers, but the body of a goddess." (Bedi, 31).

The internalisation of domestic violence further creates a troubling dynamic where the idea of a husband beating his wife is not only accepted by men but also ingrained in women's consciousness, leading them to view it as natural. This phenomenon aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, linking domestic violence to patriarchal ideologies that have been internalised and normalised. Bedi highlights these internal patriarchal structures through Lajwanti: "Like the other girls of the village, she knew that all husbands beat their wives."(Bedi, 22) This normalisation of abuse is further valorised in folk culture —"The fact that husbands were expected to beat their wives was also in their folk songs. Lajo herself used to sing, '1 shall never marry a city boy... He wears boots and my back is slender..." (Bedi, 22). This normalisation reflects how lower-class women come to view abuse as a natural part of life, perpetuating their own othering. Furthermore, the desecration of 'our women' by the 'Other' was equated with the violation of the nation, using the metaphor of women as the motherland to strip them of their agency and voice. The rhetoric of 'Bharat Mata'

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framed the nation as a woman who must be protected or avenged, reinforcing patriarchal ideas of honour and purity. This erasure of women's personal experiences and choices rendered them passive victims of men's wars and decisions. The resulting rhetoric of sacrifice justified forced marriages, abductions, killings, and suicides during Partition, with men determining their fates in the name of national honour.

Similarly, the decision to adopt Pali was likely influenced by his gender. In most cases, male children were more readily accepted, while female children often faced rejection due to societal concerns over purity and fears of sexual violence. Had Pali been a girl, the implications of his adoption could have been drastically different. As Urvashi Butalia notes, "Social workers said most of the children abandoned at camps were girl children, and the pressure of work made it difficult to screen potential adopters." (211). These abandoned girls frequently faced a grim fate, with many ultimately ending up in prostitution.

Gendered othering practices during Partition have had lasting effects in contemporary South Asian societies, where the politics of honour and purity remain central to women's identities. Positioned as bearers of collective honour, women are vulnerable to both symbolic and physical violence, such as honour killings and caste-based discrimination. The rise in honor killings in Punjab and Haryana, along with systemic sexual violence in conflict zones like Manipur and the experiences of women during Gujarat riots, reflect the enduring legacy of Partition. In the context of Kashmir, the ongoing conflict and militarization have exacerbated women's vulnerabilities, as they face sexual violence and exploitation, often viewed as symbols of communal identity. As Daiya writes, "Disenfranchised as sexual objects, communal commodities, and patriarchal property, by both the nation-state and their relations, hundreds of thousands of South Asian women experienced multiple forms of gendered and sexual violence during the Partition." (Daiya, 65). This underscores the cultural negotiation of violence in literature, film, and political discourse, revealing its profound impact on women's narratives of national belonging in postcolonial South Asia.

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Moreover, marginalised sections of society such as children, the disabled, the elderly, and transgender individuals were manipulated as pawns in the power game. Sahni writes, “a grandmother was having difficulty climbing into the moving lorry. She was pushed from all sides and struggled to keep her foot on the footboard.” (Sahni, 57). This instance highlights the vulnerability of elderly individuals who have spent their lives in one place, only to find themselves uprooted and treated as strangers in their own land. The narrative of the grandmother concludes abruptly with these two lines, offering no commentary, which profoundly suggests that such experiences were so common during Partition that they warranted no special attention.

Cultural othering was also rampant, driven by the perception of specific traditions and practices as incompatible with the dominant culture. This type of othering reduced individuals to simplistic representations and dehumanised those who fell outside the cultural majority. Cultural othering is vividly portrayed in Pali when, while crossing the border, the social worker flings Pali’s red cap out of the jeep. When Pali protests, she snaps, “You’re a Hindu boy; why should you wear a Muslim cap?” (Sahni, 70) Here, the red cap shifts from a simple garment to a powerful symbol of Muslim identity, casting an entire community as the ‘Other’. Later, when Pali instinctively performs namaz during a village celebration, a prominent villager angrily declares, "He must at once get rid of this nasty habit. We don’t want to have a Muslim among us.” (Sahni, 72). Sahni underscores how cultural practices can brand someone as an outsider, reinforcing cultural rejection. Similarly, in "Lajwanti”, the act of Lajwanti covering her head with a dupatta after returning to India becomes symbolic of her ‘pollution’ by Pakistani culture. No longer seen as a pure Hindu woman, her gesture deepens the sense of cultural contamination.Bedi writes, "She was in no state of mind to think about the basic differences between Hindu and Muslim culture or worry about whether her dupatta had to be thrown over her left shoulder or her right.” (Bedi, 30). Their time in Pakistan leaves them with habits that, upon returning to India, make them appear alien and even dirty in the eyes of their own people, reinforcing their exclusion. Caste-based othering was deeply embedded in cultural narratives that depicted lower-caste individuals as inherently flawed or impure, reinforcing the idea that their lives were of lesser worth and solidifying social hierarchies.

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Political leaders and communal propaganda often portrayed lower-caste individuals as inferior or dangerous, legitimising their mistreatment. Refugee camps and resettlement areas often mirrored pre-Partition caste divisions, relegating lower-caste individuals to the most squalid conditions. This segregation perpetuated cycles of poverty and marginalisation, as administrative policies failed to address their specific needs, intensifying the suffering of already vulnerable populations. Furthermore, Bedi and Sahni highlight how belonging to a lower class intensified vulnerabilities during Partition. While upper-class individuals were also subjected to violence, they still had access to resources and networks that could facilitate their rehabilitation. Upper-class individuals could secure jobs through influential connections and travel by air or helicopters across borders. In contrast, lower-class individuals were left to endure harrowing journeys on foot, often for months, without adequate food or shelter. They carried only the bare necessities, forced to survive in dire conditions, making their plight nearly invisible in the larger narrative of Partition. Sahni poignantly illustrates this disparity through Manohar Lai's plight. He is shown making countless trips to government offices and frequently travelling to Pakistan in search of his son, Pali. However, his lower social standing made him "too unimportant for anyone to take much notice of him," forcing him to rely on "influential people" for help. (Sahni, 64). This starkly contrasts with the upper class, whose wealth and status offered faster and more reliable means of recovery. This highlights a systemic inequality that rendered the recovery process disproportionately difficult for lower-class individuals.

Manohar Lai's seven-year struggle to reunite with Pali illustrates how the border became more than a physical divide, rendering the other side unreachable for ordinary people. Similarly, Manto, a pathbreaking voice in Partition literature, critiques the absurdity of these borders in Toba Tek Singh. The story follows Bishan Singh, a man in a mental asylum, confused about whether he belongs to India or Pakistan. Manto uses this confusion to show how artificial borders fracture identity, uprooting individuals from their sense of belonging and emphasising the deep connection between self and place. Similarly, the delay in Lajwanti's return is attributed to her lower social status, intertwining her gendered othering with class dynamics. Standing at the border, feeling ashamed and treated like a commodity, reflects her susceptibility to exploitation. This interplay of gender and class

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not only reflects her plight but also highlights the broader societal structures that perpetuate inequality. Such structural inequalities are further evident in the theme of dislocation and disruption that manifests in transmigration, a central consequence of the Partition, as millions were forced to leave their homes, crossing newly drawn borders in search of safety and drastically reshaping the demographic, cultural, and social fabric. This migration was largely involuntary, driven by fear of religious persecution, communal violence, and political unrest. "There were many of those who had only half of their luggage on the lorry; the other half lay across the road;" (Sahni, 57). Just like their belongings lay scattered across two lands, their sense of self is split, creating an otherness to which they can never reconcile. This mirrors the incomplete and fractured nature of their existence as refugees.

Partition not only refers to the physical uprooting of individuals from their homes but also to a profound sense of psychological and cultural dislocation. This displacement shattered families, severed social ties, and disrupted cultural traditions, creating a split between the past and present sense of identity and home. Pali, as a victim of this fragmentation, embodies this duality; though a child, he remembers both his families, calling Shakur "Abbaji" while not forgetting his "pitaji", Manoharlal. The narrative of Partition imposed a binary choice on individuals where one could be either Hindu or Muslim but never both. However, for passive victims like Pali, this choice was often made for them. As Tarun K. Saint notes in his discussion of Suvir Kaul's essay, "various state agencies forced people to choose between national and religious identities or made those choices on their behalf." (9) Caught between two worlds, Pali cannot separate his Hinduness from his Muslimness, reflecting the hybrid reality of his life. His struggle to reconcile these identities highlights the emotional and psychological impact of Partition, where rigid categories of identity fail to capture his lived duality. Similarly, renowned poet Gulzar, in his short story "Dhuan" (Smoke), examines this lack of choice through a different lens. The protagonist in Dhuan faces the rigidity of religious division, but here, his passivity stems from his death. The metaphor of smoke represents society's inability to see beyond Hindu-Muslim binaries, as the protagonist's final wish for cremation is overshadowed by communal norms. Like Pali, the protagonist's life and death are shaped more by

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communal pressure than by individual desire, underscoring how deeply ingrained these divides remain. Both stories, though focusing on different contexts, reveal how Partition's forced binaries and choices continue to fracture identities and deny individuals autonomy over their fates.

In Lajwanti, emotional othering unfolds as a consequence of societal expectations and the psychological trauma of Partition. Emotional othering occurs when individuals are excluded from emotional connections based on identity markers such as caste, class, or gender.This exclusion can create feelings of isolation, shame, and trauma. In the case of Lajwanti, emotional alienation manifests in her inability to share her feelings with her husband, who views her as a goddess. This idealisation creates a distance between them that Lajwanti cannot bridge. Whenever she attempts to recount her experiences of abduction, he interrupts her, refusing to engage with her narrative. This refusal not only silences her but also reinforces her isolation. Whereas, Pali is too young to decode the trauma of displacement, the absence of a concrete sense of belonging caused by his moving across borders creates a rupture in his identity, making him the other to his own parents and community. Manoharlal's inability to recognise his own child results not only from Time's visible touch but something beyond it. His adoption by a Muslim family and culture has moulded his identity to the extent that he no longer fits into the cultural and religious framework of his origins. He is no longer the child they once knew. Similarly, upon her return, Lajwanti discovers that while the state has facilitated her physical reintegration, her acceptance in society remains elusive. This change in demeanour feels superficial against the backdrop of the community's rejection. As Lajwanti navigates her return, she realises that her home no longer feels like home; things are not the same anymore, and she longs for the time before Partition when she "could quarrel with her husband over something trivial and then be caressed." (Bedi, 31)

As already established, witnessing violence, trauma, or injustice leads to an internalisation of one's own status as 'other.' For those who lived through the Partition, direct experiences of violence, displacement, or separation marked them as different within their communities. In "Lajwanti," for instance, Lajwanti becomes a witness to the violence of Partition through her abduction and subsequent return. Although she physically survives, the psychological impact of being treated as a

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commodity creates an internal sense of othering, distancing her from her former self, her husband, and her community. In contrast, Pali's life becomes his own 'other' through complex dynamics of identity displacement, cultural assimilation, and communal conflict. As Kavita Daiya argues, symbols like "Om" and the crescent moon do not signify conversion but rather represent the women's "otherness," marking their identities as Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims before the violence. (70) While Daiya focuses on the conversion of women and the feminine experience, I aim to extend her insights to explore the anxiety surrounding Pali's identity within the Maulvi's community. The act of avoiding and giving money to the postman who brought news about Manohar Lal's intention to reclaim Pali can be interpreted as an expression of love, but it also reflects the anxiety of Pali's otherness and his uncertain place within the community. The Maulvi's statement after Pali's circumcision, "Take him! He's your own child, not a kafir's. He belongs to the whole community," highlights this tension by suggesting that while Pali is accepted, his identity remains complicated by the stigma of otherness. (Sahni, 62)

The Partition not only divided communities but also erased the shared spaces where Hindus and Muslims had coexisted for centuries. There is a constant effort from individuals, religious authorities, and social leaders to maintain this binary between Muslims and Hindus, reinforcing the status of the 'Other'. This reflects a deliberate attempt to sustain communal divisions and uphold the notion of the 'Other.' This dynamic is reinforced not only by violence but by social, religious, and political institutions through ideology and hegemony, which shape perceptions and justify exclusion. Political institutions during the Partition of India played a pivotal role in exacerbating conflicts. The process leading up to Partition was marked by political maneuvering, colonial manipulation, and divisive policies that strengthened the notion of 'othering.' In both stories, the presence of social, religious, and political institutions is evident in justifying and reinforcing the oppression of women. In "Lajwanti," Narain Baba emerges as a figure who employs epics and religious beliefs to perpetuate the subjugation of women. Through his sermon on Ram and Sita, he invokes the ideals of Ram Rajya, asserting that even the opinions of a washerman were respected in that era. This rhetoric legitimises the narrative that women are tainted and reinforces their status as the Other, positioning them as

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objects of scrutiny and control within a patriarchal framework. In contrast, the Maulvi in "Pali" takes a far more aggressive stance, actively circumcising Pali in the name of religion, fully aware that he is a Hindu child. This act of circumcision serves as a means of marking territory, akin to hoisting a flag. Maulvi is unconcerned with Pali's well-being; his primary intention is to assert his religious dominance by stamping Pali as a Muslim. Whereas, the social worker in Pali becomes the literal as well as metaphorical agent of the state and government, who reinforces the state's dominant ideology as she throws Pali's cap. She is also a catalyst in giving back Pali to his real family. Similarly, Chaudhari, an influential figure in Manohar Lai's village, represents broader social institutions as he retorts Manohar Lai "You must know those people have foisted a Muslim convert on you and yet you have nothing but praise for them.'' (Sahni, 72). This statement showcases not just personal prejudice but also a deeply ingrained suspicion towards religious 'others.' By labelling Pali a "Muslim convert," Chaudhari negates his Hindu origins, reducing his complex identity to a communal label, reinforcing the rigid religious divisions upheld during and after Partition.

Sahni's analysis adds another layer to this understanding: "Within displaced families, a taboo regarding sharing Partition experiences persisted, even as salacious stories continued to circulate. While the shock of being at the receiving end of atrocities led to psychological numbing for many survivors, a kind of excess marked the outpouring of accounts of violence in the public domain" (3). This tension between personal silence and public sensationalism illustrates how trauma narratives are often shaped by external perceptions rather than individual experiences. Consequently, the true impact of Partition remains obscured, emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of its human cost. In "Lajwanti," this struggle to share trauma is reflected in Lajwanti's desire to express her pain: "At that moment, she had wanted to tell him everything." However, Sunderlal's response, "Let us forget the past!" (Bedi, 31), underscores societal pressures to silence personal suffering. In contrast, Pali is too young to decode the complex dynamics of identity, religious, and caste-based othering; his obliviousness highlights how individuals can be marginalised without being aware of their exclusion, emphasising the invisible nature of their oppression. This theme of silence is further enhanced by the third-person omniscient narrative technique employed by both authors, which

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establishes a distance between the characters and their inner worlds. While Lajwanti's voice is absent from the narrative, with the narrator articulating her inner conflict, Pali's limited comprehension conveys only his confusion and bewilderment. This silence persists even when their stories are told, reinforcing the characters' marginalisation.

Expanding on this idea of marginalisation, Gyanendra Pandey articulation further illuminates the issue: "minorities are constituted along with the nation—for they are the means of constituting national majorities or mainstreams" (608). However, the question remains whether these Partition-created minorities have been integrated into society or continue to exist as the 'other'. The enduring label of 'refugees' symbolises this persistent alienation, raising the question: Can these communities ever truly belong? This ongoing exclusion reflects the deep-seated trauma of Partition, manifesting in their marginalised status. This trauma is further compounded by the historical context that Tarun K. Saint highlights, noting that "the emergence of a culture of impunity and complicity with respect to later instances of massacres of minority groups in India...can in part be traced back to the failure to come to terms with the ghosts of 1947" (4). The communal divisions entrenched by Partition still shape contemporary conflicts, such as the anti-Sikh pogrom in 1984, the Bombay riots of 1992-93, the Gujarat violence of 2002, and the Delhi riots of 2020. These violent episodes underscore how unresolved tensions of identity, community, and belonging continue to resurface in India's social and political landscape. Thus, the binaries created during Partition remain embedded in the country's discourse, periodically manifesting in violence and discrimination against minority groups.

Both "Pali" and "Lajwanti" reveal how the trauma of Partition continues to shape perceptions of the 'other.' The division of communities along religious lines has left a lasting legacy of suspicion, fear, and alienation. Both characters navigate multiple layers of marginalisation, resisting simplistic categorization. Whether it's Pali being treated as an outsider by his own family or Lajwanti being seen through the lens of dishonour, the violence and distrust of Partition perpetuate the marginalisation of those deemed 'other.' By focusing on the often-omitted perspectives of the marginalised, these stories highlight the profound physical and emotional displacement experienced by individuals and the lasting scars that follow. The nuanced portrayals of Lajwanti and Pali serve as

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poignant reminders of the complexities of identity formation in the face of historical trauma, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of Partition's human cost. Through narrative techniques and character portrayals, Bedi and Sahni challenge dominant narratives, encouraging a more empathetic and comprehensive engagement with the lingering scars of Partition.

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