

## Unveiling the Impact of Communalism in Anees Salim's Vanity Bagh

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### ABSTRACT

Communalism is a strong attachment to one's own religion that often leads to hatred toward people of other religions or ideologies. It creates violence and riots in society. It also harms a person's identity and affects the peace of families. In India, minorities are greatly affected by communalism. They often lose their sense of identity because some people use religion to gain power and influence. The gradual abandonment and stereotyping of a minority group can significantly increase the risk of that group becoming involved in criminal activities. When minorities react with anger or revenge, it further disturbs the peace of the country and their families. Anees Salim, a Keralite author from a minority community, writes about the effects of communalism on the lives of marginalised people. He explains how it damages a person's identity and destroys the peaceful atmosphere of families. In his novel *Vanity Bagh*, he presents the character Imran Jabbari to show how communalism affects a person's identity and place in society.

**Keywords:** Communalism, Religion, Identity, Minorities, Riots.

### INTRODUCTION

Unveiling the Impact of Communalism in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*

Communalism is a strong sense of loyalty or attachment toward a particular group, such as one based on religion, caste, or country. When this attachment becomes extreme, it can lead people to exclude themselves from the larger society. They begin to distrust or even hate people who follow different ideologies or belong to other communities. Such an attitude often encourages intolerance and push people towards extreme and violent behaviour against others. It harms the social harmony and weakens the unity of a nation. It also hinders the healthy development of a person's identity and status within society, as it limits their worldview and interactions. When people take communalism to an extreme level, they start to see other communities as enemies, it can create serious social problems. In some cases, this mindset may contribute to criminal activities or even terrorism. Therefore, promoting tolerance, mutual respect and unity in diversity is essential for peaceful and progressive societies. Bipan Chandra in his book *Communalism in Modern India* defines communalism as,

Communalism is the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests. It is the belief that in India Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs form different and distinct communities which are independently and separately structured or consolidated: that all the followers of a religion share not only a community of religious interests but also common secular interests . . . in fact, each religious 'community' constitutes a homogeneous entity and even a distinct 'society' in itself; that there is and can be such thing as an Indian nation - - India has been, is, and has to be, a mere 'confederation of religious communities'. (1, 2).

Communalism in India is an ideology in which religious identity influences social, political, and economic interests. It often leads to conflict and violence between different religious communities. It is rooted in the colonial “divide and rule” policy and has grown due to modern political polarization. Communalism poses a serious threat to national unity, secularism, democracy and pluralism. Initially, the British government deepened religious divisions through policies such as separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms. This policy institutionalized communal identities in politics. The All-India Muslim League formed in 1906, demanded a separate Muslim nation and later passed the Lahore Resolution in 1940. On the other hand, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh worked for Hindu consolidation. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 led to the death of more than one million people. Around 15 million people were displaced, making it one of the largest mass migrations in history. Later events such as the Shah Bano case, the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the Gujarat riots further increased communal tensions. These events influenced electoral politics and government policies in India.

Anees Salim is an Indian writer who often portrays the experiences of minority communities in India. In his novel *Vanity Bagh*, he depicts the struggles faced by marginalized groups in the context of religious disparities and communal tensions. Through the character of Imran Jabbari, Salim explores how communalism deeply affects both individuals and society. Communalism creates division within society and often leads to violence by disrupting social harmony. It not only threatens societal peace but also endangers personal identity. The people who become involved in communal conflicts are frequently stigmatized and labelled as criminals, losing the respect and dignity they once held within their communities. As a result, communalism damages not only public order but also the reputation and honour of families associated with such people. In *Vanity Bagh*, Salim illustrates how communalism becomes a serious threat to the self-identity of minority youth. The novel demonstrates that the identity a person builds from childhood can be shattered by social prejudice, violence and religious discrimination. Thus, this article examines how communalism hinders and ultimately destabilizes the self-identity of a minority youth within society.

A person’s identity is often closely linked to their family’s reputation. The wrongdoings of a single family member can damage the respect and honour of the entire family. In *Vanity Bagh*, Imran Jabbari is the son of the local mosque’s imam, a man who was highly respected in the community and whose words were never questioned or argued in the society. But, Imran is a rebellious and irresponsible boy who disobeys his parents and spends most of his time with his friends. He wishes to become the protector and don of *Vanity Bagh* so he starts to involve in criminal activities. After planting scooter bombs in a neighbouring village, he is labelled a terrorist and sentenced to fourteen years in prison. This not only destroys his personal identity but also tarnishes his family’s reputation. In a particular month, no one comes to visit Imran Jabbari in the jail, so he starts to imagine the probable reason left for his mother’s absence. One of the reasons, he imagines is, “Fatima’s Husband. Latif had broken a tower of crockery in his kitchen at the news of my arrest. He banned Fatima from calling on Ammi and the imam, and referred to us as a family of terrorists whenever it pleased him”(174). Thus, his family becomes associated with terrorism, facing blame and social stigma. A person’s identity is shaped by their actions and choices, which can either uplift them or lead to their downfall.

In India, minority are often abandoned socially and politically. Many minority youths are often pushed into situations of discrimination and oppression based on their religion. These struggles fuel their anger, sometimes lead them to engage in criminal or socially harmful activities. In some cases, they willingly involve themselves in such acts as a form of rebellion or protest. In *Vanity Bagh*, Imran Jabbari and his friends are driven by youthful fearlessness and a desire for power. This leads them to lead a bus protest using provocative slogans aimed at the Mehendi, a Hindu community. They view themselves as rowdies and dons by attempting to take control of events in their neighbourhood. But their pursuit of pride and dominance eventually leads them down to a destructive path. Eventhough their actions are intended to assert power, they are ultimately seen as acts of terrorism by showing how misguided rebellion can damage both personal identity and community reputation. The abandonment within the society leads the youngsters to take violence in their hands with pride. Imran Jabbari proudly states,

When the buses resumed their journey in the morning and rattled through the city, people frowned at the posters stuck on their sides and rear windows: BLOODBATH BEGINS NOW. Under the dark prophecy scribbled in the closest shade of blood was the impression of Yahya’s hand dipped in red enamel. Beneath the bleeding palm, sketched in green felt pen, the name of our gang made its first public appearance. (86)

Small mistakes often lead to larger criminal consequences. In *Vanity Bagh*, after observing the reckless behaviour of the “5½ men,” a flower seller named Qadir approaches them with a gold smuggling deal using scooters. Imran and his friends are excited by the offer and agrees to take part. Only after completing the mission, they realise it was not a gold deal, but a planned bomb blast. These young boys are manipulated by religious extremists to serve as their violent agents. Eventhough their involvement was unintentional, it drags them into terrorism. The label of “terrorist” is imposed upon them and change their identity in the eyes of society and even within their own

families. During the investigation, the police come to arrest Zulfikar for planting a bomb in the Mehandi bus bay. His own mother, Salma Auntie, refuses to defend him and instead sees him as an enemy of the nation. Salma Auntie states, "If my son is the enemy of the nation, hang him. And don't even show me his corpse" (199). This reflects how imposed identities can isolate people and destroy familial and social bonds.

Communalism in India arose due to internal political crises. The idea of a democratic system based on elections, even though the voting rights were limited, created conflict between the two major religious communities over sharing power. When the Local Self-Government Bill was introduced in 1883 in the Viceroy's Executive Council, it was opposed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a modern Muslim reformer. He opposed it because he believed there would be disputes between the two communities over the distribution of seats in municipalities. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan responded to the council as,

The system of representation by election means the representation of the views and interests of the majority of the population. . . in a country like India, where caste distinctions still flourish, where there is no fusion of the various races, where religious distinctions are still violent, where education in its moder sense has not made an equal or proportionate progress among all the sections of the population, . . . So long as differences of race and creed, and the distinctions of caste form an important element in the socio-political life of India, and influence her inhabitants in matters connected with the administration and welfare of the country at large, the system of elections pure and simple cannot safely be adopted. The larger community would totally override the interests of the smaller community, and the ignorant public would hold Government responsible for introducing measures which might make the differences of race and creed more violent than ever. (27, 28)

Communal labelling is one of the main factors in social abandonment, because it also severely damages a person's identity completely. When an entire community is often stereotyped and discriminated against in the name of terrorism and violence. It creates distress and alienation in them. Such communities are viewed as threats by others, which can provoke anger and pushes people toward destructive actions as a form of retaliation. For instance, whenever a bomb blast occurs in India, Muslims and Pakistan are often immediately blamed without any second thoughts. With heavy hearts Uncle Ummer Jabbari in Vanity Bagh states, "We, the mohalla- wallahs, are patriotic Indians. But please don't blame Pakistan for every blast"(90). These events also reinforcing false identities and harmful assumptions upon them. Despite Muslims and Hindus having fought together for India's independence, the benefits of that freedom are largely enjoyed by the majority community. Minorities are frequently denied equal access to opportunities and privileges. These persistent accusations and exclusions weaken national unity and threaten the secular fabric of society.

Self-identity is built when a person grows up in a secure environment and is given equal opportunities in society. For minorities, such opportunities are rare and often seem as unattainable apple to the poor. In childhood, people grow under the protection of their parents and inherit an identity through them. However, as they mature, they must shape their own identity to succeed in society. When minorities are constantly oppressed and denied opportunities, their frustration builds up, sometimes leading to violence. In Vanity Bagh, when Imran is imprisoned, he finds comfort in books even though he is confined in a storeroom. The jail conducts a "Best Cover Competition" for inmates, and Imran believes it should also include the jail guards. He sees no difference between the prisoners and the guards and believes that everyone should be given the chance to showcase their talents. Imran Jabbari states, "I have always believed in giving opportunities to people. People who are unfortunate enough to live in prison and government servants who are fortunate enough to work with the jail department. Equal opportunities to everyone. No discrimination" (209). For him, creating a self-identity is possible even within the limited space of a prison, as long as equal opportunity is provided for everyone.

Thus, today communalism is spreading in Indian society like a highly infectious disease. It is weakening democratic and secular politics at their roots. It began to grow during British rule in the early 20th century. Even after many decades, it continues to exist strongly in the society. Today, communalism remains powerful and influential. It does not allow people of different religions to live together peacefully. It weakens the idea of secularism and reduces respect for individuals regardless of their religion. There should be no place for such an idea in a country like India, which is a home to people from many diverse cultures and communities. It is hard to control the discrimination and violence towards the minorities. Thus, through this article Anees Salim examines how communalism hinders and ultimately destabilizes the self-identity of a minority youth within society.

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