

Region, Religion and Riots: Exploring the Cartographies of Communal Violence in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*

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Abstract

Heightened interconnectivity and the negation of the social, political and cultural borders of the nation states have not diluted the evilness of colonial sponsored nationalism in India. In the introduction to *The Case of Colonialism* Gilley Bruce observes that colonialism can shapeshift into the governing style of post-colonial nations only if the colonized permit. (Gilley, 2017: 2) The rise of Hindu nationalism in India amidst the strong wave of transnationalism vouch for the long surviving evilness of colonialism. Salim states that religious imperialism is the base of governing style in India, which is anti-secular and brutal in nature. The growth of Hindutva forces and their agenda to create a national religion seems relentless ever since India's independence. Appeasement of majoritarian religion is a signature practice of colonialism; the Hindutva forces in India ultimately facilitated the rise of religious nationalism through the very same classic colonial method. This method helped them fund and win electoral battles by creating friction between majorities and minorities. Salim places *Vanity Bagh* at the epicenter of religious polarization that has plagued Indian minorities for decades, with their communities experiencing frequent rioting and sociopolitical turmoil. The paper categorically analyses religious nationalism, problematization of Indian Muslim identity and socio-economic milieu of small towns to investigate the proliferation and rapid normalization of communal riots in India.

Keywords: Riot, Religion, Region, Hindu nationalism, Differentiated citizenship, Indian Muslims, Spatial exclusion

Introduction

Communal riots in India have a long and complex history, tracing back to the Mughal period. Scholars such as Hasan (1982), Kausar (2006), and Rezavi (2011) identify the decline of the Mughal Empire, beginning with the death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, as a critical juncture in the emergence of Hindu-Muslim tensions in the subcontinent. Kausar (2006) in particular marks this moment as the starting point of sustained communal violence between the two religious groups (p.354). In the Indian context, these riots should also be understood as ethnic conflicts, where two or more communities are embroiled in violent confrontation. As Gupta (2001)

notes, Hindu-Muslim riots function as ethnic riots in the South Asian political landscape, often involving gruesome violence and widespread destruction that irreversibly alters both lives and landscapes (p.1450).

The antagonistic framing of "Islam" and "Hinduism" as binary, oppositional ideologies has been a persistent feature of South Asian socio-religious discourse since the arrival of Islam in the subcontinent. This narrative was further exacerbated by European Orientalists and British colonial administrators, who deliberately emphasized religious distinctions to fracture the existing social fabric and forestall unified resistance

(Gilmartin, 2015, p. 24). Far from inventing religious discord, colonial rule accelerated and institutionalized religious polarization, embedding it more deeply into India's cultural and political life well before the trauma of Partition.

The colonial period also witnessed the emergence of proto-Hindutva ideologies. Works such as *Hindus: A Dying Race* (1909) by U.N. Mukerji lamented what he perceived as Hindu passivity and decline, in contrast to a purportedly disciplined and morally superior Muslim population (Mukerji, 1909, p. 94). Such texts contributed to a growing discourse that sought to reframe Hindu identity in militant, racialized terms. Over time, these narratives fed into the consolidation of Hindutva ideology, promoting the stigmatization of Muslims as inherently fanatical and hostile, an image that has only intensified in postcolonial India.

Literature on communal violence

Since its emergence as an independent nation-state, India has witnessed fierce struggles over religion, culture, language, and territorial identity. Among its most enduring and politically fraught issues is communal violence, particularly the recurring conflict between Hindus and Muslims (Bayly, 1985). This sustained tension has given rise to a body of literature, especially in English, that seeks to document, interrogate, and reflect upon the sociopolitical fallout of such violence. The Partition novel emerged as a distinct genre within this tradition, chronicling the traumatic rupture of 1947 and the enduring legacies of the subcontinent's division. Notable examples include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), each depicting the communal discord that disrupted the lives of millions in both India and Pakistan.

In the decades following Partition, communal riots continued to erupt across the country—triggered by everything from *Holi* celebrations and interfaith relationships framed as “love jihad,” to cow slaughter and even India-Pakistan cricket matches. These flashpoints were rarely spontaneous; rather, they were often tethered

to entrenched political agendas and amplified by deep-seated prejudices. The suspicion surrounding the Indian Muslim community's patriotism became institutionalized over time, reinforcing their marginalization through both policy and discourse.

Simultaneously, right-wing political formations gained prominence by capitalizing on such fault lines. One of the most consequential episodes in this trajectory was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, an event that not only intensified communal polarisation but also marked a pivotal moment in the rise of Hindutva politics. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* (2001) directly engages with this moment, charting the emergence of a new political order shaped by cultural nationalism and religious reformation, at odds with India's secular ideals (Kumar, 2024, p.71).

Novels written in the early 21st century often centered their narratives on specific historical events, using these incidents as narrative anchors. For instance, Tharoor's *Riot* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) delve into the socio-political dimensions of the Ram Janmabhoomi controversy. Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2001), although set in the same temporal frame, touches only obliquely on the political unrest, focusing instead on intra-community tensions within the Parsi household. As McNamara (2017) observes, Mistry's novel foregrounds domestic Parsi anxieties rather than engaging directly with the rise of Hindu nationalism (p.4). Other authors explored alternate communal dynamics: Shiv Kumar's *Two Mirrors at the Ashram* (2006) highlights Hindu-Sikh tensions, while Kiran Nagarkar's *God's Little Soldier* (2006) examines the entanglement of religion with global terrorism.

These works share a common narrative strategy: anchoring their explorations of communal violence to a singular, defining political event. The literature on communal violence in India is categorised as, writing prior to, during and following the tragic episode of partition (Banerjee, 2010, p.119), and Indian English novels on communal violence have always aimed at exploring the grand narratives which are directly modelled upon real historical events. Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*, however, breaks from this convention. Rather than focusing on one

incident, Salim sketches a broader historical canvas, subtly weaving together the cumulative weight of communal hostilities as they impact everyday Muslim life. The novel is set in a socio-political landscape already saturated with suspicion, where the very identity of a minority community becomes a mark of perpetual scrutiny. The residents of *Vanity Bagh*, by virtue of their religion and address, are treated as potential anti-nationals, their locality imagined as a breeding ground for dissent and unrest.

Salim's narrative highlights how particular populations, confined to particular spaces, are rendered vulnerable to manipulation by political forces. In this sense, *Vanity Bagh* reflects the lived reality of many Indian Muslims post-independence, where communal violence has not only been recurrent but has left deep scars in the form of economic exclusion, spatial ghettoization, and persistent political disenfranchisement. The novel also offers a commentary on the status of India's small towns—both as repositories of marginalised lives and as contested spaces where national anxieties are projected and performed. In doing so, it reframes communal violence not as a series of isolated incidents, but as an ongoing condition that continues to shape the destinies of those consigned to its margins.

Although Hindu-Muslim conflict has been a recurrent theme in Indian English literature, a striking proportion of the novels addressing this issue have been authored by non-Muslims. This raises important questions about authenticity and narrative voice. When a Muslim writer speaks of the systemic challenges faced by Indian Muslims, the narrative gains a degree of veracity rooted in lived experience. As Raina (2009) cautions, the superficial nature of studies conducted by those unfamiliar with the culture they represent, particularly when writing from the outside, can be deeply problematic (p.98). In this context, *Vanity Bagh* acquires particular significance: authored by Anees Salim, a Muslim writer residing in India, the novel reflects not only socio-political critique but also the affective contours of community life shaped by marginalization.

Salim's identity, alongside his intimate knowledge of the Muslim experience in India, lends the novel a rare

credibility. In his acceptance speech for *The Hindu* Prize for Best Fiction in 2013, Salim remarked: "The book is not about hope. It is about hopelessness. More than anything else, it is about distress and religious intolerance that can divide humanity and win elections" (Venugopal 2014). This sentiment captures the novel's central concern: how religious polarisation and systemic discrimination erode both personal and collective dignity. It is for this reason that *Vanity Bagh* warrants close examination as a significant literary intervention into the politics of Muslim representation in contemporary India—particularly in an era marked by religious imperialism and targeted surveillance of minorities.

Set in a fictional small town, *Vanity Bagh* becomes a microcosmic rendering of post-Partition India, scarred by historical trauma and deepening communal fault lines. The narrative contrasts two neighbourhoods, Mangobagh, predominantly Muslim, and *Mehandi*, predominantly Hindu. The residents of Mangobagh are viewed with suspicion, often equated with terrorists, a perception shaped by the dominant political discourse since Partition. Through this lens, the novel vividly illustrates the consequences of communal profiling, spatial segregation, and the ideological production of mistrust. These patterns mirror the realities of numerous small towns across India, where Muslim-majority areas are frequently marginalized both economically and symbolically.

Crucially, *Vanity Bagh* does not explicitly recount historical events such as the Partition, the Ayodhya dispute, the Gujarat pogrom, or the Mumbai attacks. Instead, it evokes the cumulative effect of these episodes as to how their shadows continue to loom over intercommunal relationships and national imaginaries. Unlike novels that anchor themselves to a singular political rupture, Salim's narrative resists being categorized strictly as a Partition novel or a riot novel. Rather, *Vanity Bagh* reflects the ongoing struggle of India to live up to its constitutional promises of multiculturalism, inclusion, and secularism. It draws attention to how the national project remains incomplete as long as entire communities are cast as suspect citizens.

In this sense, *Vanity Bagh* serves as a vital counter-narrative. It dismantles the episodic framing of communal

conflict and instead presents a sustained critique of the slow, everyday violence that conditions minority existence in India. Salim's approach is not to monumentalize trauma through singular events, but to reveal how decades of communal division and political betrayal have calcified into a condition of enduring hopelessness.

Conceptual framework

Traditional theories of secularism argue that a pluralistic democratic society must uphold a strict "wall of separation" between religion and the state to ensure neutrality and equal treatment (Elbasani, 2017, p. 6). However, this classical model has been widely contested, particularly in contexts where states actively politicize dominant or majoritarian religions for electoral and ideological gains. As Bader (2003) observes, the principle of strict religious impartiality becomes increasingly untenable in plural societies marked by asymmetrical power relations and uneven access to opportunities (p.272).

In the Indian context, Peter van der Veer (2021) underscores how colonial legacies shaped Indian nationalism along the lines of a Western Christendom-derived model of secularism, one marked by internal contradictions and selective application. This unevenness, he argues, is instrumental in the creation of minority and majority identities, and it often culminates in communal violence (p.45). Similarly, Partha Chatterjee's reading of B.R. Ambedkar's theory of minority rights highlights how institutional structures and cultural hierarchies impede the realization of equality in India's plural society (Chatterjee 2018).

Empirical and ethnographic studies on communal violence support the claim that Hindu-Muslim riots in India are not exceptional but recurring and often politically orchestrated phenomena. Scholars such as Rahman (2017), Frøystad (2009), and Posen (1993) emphasize how such violence becomes routinised within the political landscape, serving strategic ends for dominant groups. In a similar vein, Homi K. Bhabha offers a provocative reflection in *The Location of Culture*, noting that nationalist violence is not a distant memory but an

ever-present tension underlying India's project of secular modernity. He asks, "How did we allow ourselves to forget that the nationalist violence between Hindus and Muslims lies just under the skin of India's secular modernity?" (Bhabha, 1998, p.59).

Building on these critiques of Indian secularism, religious majoritarianism, and structural inequality, this paper employs a cultural-sociological lens to examine how Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh* represents the marginalization of religious minorities and the persistent specter of communal violence. Rather than portraying a single historical rupture, Salim's narrative illustrates how lived experience of Indian Muslims is shaped by a continuum of political betrayal, religious profiling, and spatial exclusion. In doing so, the novel not only critiques the failures of India's secular promise but also exposes the subtle and everyday workings of religious imperialism and nationalist violence.

Religion: The problematic identity of Indian Muslims in *Vanity Bagh*

An individual is constituted through a combination of personal attributes, social relationships, and the communities to which they belong, dimensions collectively referred to as identities (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 69). In India, the identity of Muslims is a particularly contested domain, shaped by scrutiny, suspicion, and systemic surveillance. The social roles and civic interactions of Indian Muslims are not only regulated but often subjected to ideological interrogation. While they are routinely called upon to affirm their loyalty and patriotism, majoritarian political narratives continue to depict them as outsiders, even traitors (Das, 2004, p.385). Hindu nationalist discourse frequently mobilizes the idea of 'divided loyalty' as a justification for violence and exclusion (Vicziány, 2024, p. 462). Central to this antagonistic framing is the enduring association of Indian Muslims with Pakistan—a narrative that poses a persistent obstacle to their full and equal citizenship.

This tension is poignantly articulated in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*, where the protagonist states: "We, the *mohalla-wallahs*, are patriotic Indians. But please don't blame Pakistan for every blast..." (p. 90). Such

declarations reveal the exhaustion of a community forced to constantly perform its allegiance. Islamophobia, in this context, is not an incidental prejudice but a deeply embedded structure operating across India's social, cultural, and political spheres. Public discourse, educational institutions, media outlets, and state mechanisms all participate in reproducing anti-Muslim sentiment.

Salim illustrates this pervasive bias through micro-level incidents that expose the early conditioning of Muslim children into narratives of exclusion. One character recounts how a teacher mocks a child named Jinnah, prompting the advice: "Put him in another school, Bushra. The same teacher made fun of my son because his name is Jinnah" (Salim 121). Empirical studies corroborate these experiences. Erum (2017), in her study of 22 schools in the suburbs of Delhi, documents cases where Muslim students were labelled 'Paki' or 'Terrorist' by peers and teachers alike (p. 10-12). These early instances of exclusion cultivate a fractured self-perception among young Muslims, compelling them to internalize the identity of the 'other.'

As Oyserman et al. (2012) argue, identities are formed through the opportunities and constraints embedded in one's immediate environment (p. 70). In *Vanity Bagh*, Salim foregrounds the antagonism of India's socio-political climate toward minorities, articulating how this structural hostility impedes a genuine sense of belonging among Indian Muslims. The novel situates this antagonism within a longer historical arc. Baber (2004) contends that the dichotomy between the Hindu 'self' and the Muslim 'other' was firmly rooted in pre-colonial discourse, laying the foundation for what he terms "differentiated citizenship" (p. 704).

Salim (2013) also connects the localized marginalization of Muslims in India to global patterns of Islamophobia. Reflecting on the post-9/11 world order, the novel observes: "...after 9/11 Muslims are not welcome in America even if you are the best computer expert or the physiotherapist in town. If they could strip people like Abdul Kalam and Shah Rukh Khan at airports..." (p. 58). Here, Salim underscores the despair of ordinary Muslims through the symbolic humiliation of two of India's most

celebrated public figures. Their subjection to racial profiling highlights a sobering truth: if even the most accomplished Muslims are vulnerable to discrimination, what hope remains for the marginalized and voiceless?

Hopkins (2007) notes that the global narrative following 9/11 constructed Muslim masculinity as synonymous with violence, leading to the widespread legitimization of Islamophobia (p. 1126). Salim's invocation of Kalam and Khan is therefore not incidental but deeply strategic, capturing the helplessness of Muslim identity in both national and global contexts. In *Vanity Bagh*, the politics of identity is not just about cultural representation but about survival—about resisting the crushing weight of being forever cast as the 'other' in a nation still struggling to reconcile its pluralist ideals with its majoritarian impulses.

Region: Socio-economic milieu in *Vanity Bagh*

Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh* presents a microcosmic vision of a religiously polarized India, a spatial and ideological representation of what Frantz Fanon termed a "Manichaean world," divided starkly into binary opposites of good and evil. (Ndayisenga, 2022, p. 470) Salim does not veil his critique; he exposes, with biting clarity, the socio-economic marginalization of Muslim minority settlements and offers an unflinching commentary on the fragile façade of Indian secularism. The novel's geography is deliberately bifurcated: The Muslim-majority enclave of Vanity Bagh and its adjacent Hindu neighbourhood, *Mehandi*, stand as symbolic opposites. *Mehandi*, with its saffron-coloured *Holi laddoos* and vigilant Hindu residents, views Vanity Bagh as a latent threat, a space of perpetual suspicion and projected violence.

This spatial antagonism echoes the real-world geography of communal riots in India. As scholars such as Thakur (2018), Bulutgil and Prasad (2023) observe, riots often erupt in zones already marked by socio-economic and political precarity. Paul Brass (2003) further notes that minority-populated towns are frequently targeted, as their marginalization makes it easier to conflate them with terrorism and unrest in public imagination and political discourse. These areas tend to be underdeveloped,

neglected by the state, and deprived of essential infrastructure. In *Vanity Bagh*, there is a conspicuous absence of hospitals, schools, or other signs of state investment. The novel highlights not only the infrastructural neglect but also the broader systemic underrepresentation of Muslims in spheres of governance, policymaking, and especially electoral politics, a concern articulated as early as 1953 by Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter to the Chief Ministers (Khalidi, 2004, p.184).

Following the Nehruvian era, the political climate only deteriorated for minorities. Successive regimes including those led by the Indian National Congress failed to safeguard Muslim interests, while the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism intensified the communalization of India's public sphere (Bhargava, 2007, p.85). Within this increasingly polarized milieu, *Vanity Bagh* serves as a literary cartography of Muslim resistance and resilience.

Salim constructs the social space of *Vanity Bagh* with deliberate precision. The region is populated by culturally marked institutions like Mogul Bakery, Masjid-e-Mosavi, Irani Café, Akbar Electricals, Haja Stores, Saddam Hussein Peace Foundation, Buhari's, and Karachi Meat Shops, all of which signal the assertion of a distinct religious and cultural identity. These institutions are not merely markers of presence but symbols of political defiance. In reclaiming space, the residents simultaneously assert both territorial belonging and communal solidarity. This dual assertion of place and faith functions as a counter-hegemonic force against majoritarian dominance. As Asghar Ali Engineer (1991) argues, the public affirmation of religious identity can act as a form of resistance for communities historically subjugated and excluded from the centres of power (p.1037).

The notion of *Vanity Bagh* as “pocket- sized Pakistan” encapsulates the discursive marginalization experienced by Indian Muslims. The phrase reflects both the imposed stereotype and the internalized alienation that many Muslims experience due to systematic exclusion (Subitha & Persis, 2024, p.2223). Salim weaves this theme into the very naming of his characters: members of Imran's gang bear names borrowed from prominent Pakistani leaders. As the narrator notes, “In our *mohalla*

it's quite normal, you can call it inevitable, to be named after someone rich and famous from Pakistan” (Salim, 2013, p 26). The irony is sharp: these names, while part of everyday life in *Vanity Bagh*, are simultaneously weaponized to cast the community as ‘the enemy of the nation’ (Salim, 2013, p.64).

In *Vanity Bagh*, Anees Salim records how the younger generation in the titular locality navigates the pressures of religious polarization and the limited choices available to them within a structurally precarious environment. The narrative adopts an unusually honest and objective stance, unflinchingly portraying the illegal activities of young Muslim men and their occasional violent encounters with residents of the adjacent Hindu neighbourhood. Rather than romanticizing the Muslim minority, Salim foregrounds the socio- economic desperation that drives much of their behavior.

Set in a small town reflective of countless others across India, the novel engages with the broader pattern of Muslim migration from rural areas to urban peripheries, a trend driven primarily by economic instability and social exclusion. Communal tensions in rural India have frequently rendered villages unsafe for Muslims, compelling them to seek refuge and opportunity in cities. Yet, this migration has rarely led to economic upliftment. Instead, many Muslims find themselves trapped in impoverished urban settlements, caught between the fear of returning to their villages and the harsh conditions of city life. As Shaban (2005) notes, “A distinctive feature of the Muslim community has been the level of urbanisation, which is higher than that of the total population. In 2001, 35.7% of the Muslim population was urban, compared to 27.8% of the overall population” (p.32).

These urban concentrations of Muslims, like *Vanity Bagh*, are marked by economic marginalization, limited mobility, and systemic neglect. Residents often rely on daily wage labour or engage in petty trades, which results in both individual and regional economic fragility. The structural barriers Muslims face in accessing housing loans, moving to developed areas, or escaping riot-prone zones exacerbate their economic vulnerability (Shaban, 2005, p.32). Mitra and Ray (2013) argue that the economic stagnation of riot- prone areas prevents

development and entrenches poverty, making such localities hotbeds of further unrest (p.5).

Salim is attuned to these economic fault lines. The narrative repeatedly highlights the desperation that underpins life in Vanity Bagh, especially among young men who aspire for a better life but are systematically excluded from it. With few formal opportunities, these youth are easily drawn toward the allure of quick wealth and local notoriety. Admiration for gangsters, racketeers, and mafia figures stems not from a glorification of violence, but from a yearning for visibility and success in a system that offers them neither. This desperation makes them susceptible to exploitation by a range of actors from religious fundamentalists to opportunistic political agents. Once entangled in illegal networks, they are often manipulated into participating in orchestrated riots or communal conflicts. Unaware of the full magnitude of the operations they are involved in, they become mere instruments in a broader machinery of state and non-state violence.

There exists a growing body of research that affirms the connection between economic insecurity and communal violence. Studies suggest that communities with higher levels of education and economic stability are far less likely to engage in such violence. Anjali and Ernest (2019) argue that social harmony is fostered by economic equity and cultural inclusivity, as such conditions leave little room for competition, fear, or inter-group antagonism (p.595).

Vanity Bagh also foregrounds spatial segregation as a defining feature of communalized urban life. The novel demonstrates how the symbolic and physical division of space between Muslim and Hindu neighbourhoods produces and reproduces conflict. These antithetical geographies serve not just as metaphors for religious difference but as literal battlegrounds where dominance is asserted and resisted. As Khattab et al. (2011) observe, spatial segregation in plural societies often reflects and reinforces the discrimination faced by religious and ethnic minorities, shaping not only their identity and opportunities but also the patterns of inter-community tension (p.3-4).

Communal violence in *Vanity Bagh*

Since Independence and the traumatic Partition of India and Pakistan, successive governments, regardless of political affiliation, have played varying roles in sustaining the undercurrent of Hindu-Muslim communal tension. Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*, spanning the years 1956 to 2012, traces the enduring presence of communal violence in a small-town Muslim locality, portraying how riots become embedded within the socio-political rhythms of everyday life. The novel offers a trenchant critique of authoritarian populism by framing its narrative around the persistent binary of belonging and alienation, where religious identity becomes the primary site of exclusion.

Salim's narrative highlights the unchecked ascent of Hindutva forces and their relentless pursuit of a monolithic national identity defined through religion. This ideological project bears striking resemblance to colonial governance strategies, which often appeased majoritarian religious sentiments to consolidate control. The replication of this strategy in postcolonial India where Hindu majoritarianism is politically endorsed and systematically institutionalized has further entrenched religious nationalism. As Peker observes, right-wing populists in Europe have similarly instrumentalized Christianity in their push for a homogenous national identity, advancing an exclusionary "us vs. them" discourse (Peker, 2019, p. 260). Salim situated *Vanity Bagh* at the epicentre of such religious imperialism in India, rendering it a space of frequent riots and unrest directly linked to the community's Muslim identity.

The nature of communal riots in India underwent a notable shift after Partition. Frøystad (2009) contends that most post-1947 communal riots in India follow a discernible pattern: they are typically brutal, short-lived episodes of violence, rapidly followed by a return to 'normalcy' (p. 442). This framework is central to understanding the paradoxical combination of severity and routine that characterizes communal conflict in India. The ease with which everyday disputes escalate into religious riots, often sparked by trivial disagreements, reflects the combustible nature of inter-religious relations in a politically polarized landscape.

Through *Vanity Bagh*, Salim excavates the structural and ideological underpinnings of religious populism in India. Drawing on Marzouki's model, the novel reflects the tripartite logic of religious populism: the righteous "people," the corrupt "elite," and the demonized "other." (Peker, 2019 p.14). In India, Muslims are consistently cast as the "other," shaped by colonial-era myths of invasion and foreignness, while Hinduism is appropriated by right-wing parties to legitimize this exclusion. Within this framework, communal riots are not aberrations but integral to a larger political strategy.

The novel also aligns with research linking communal violence to electoral gains. Richard Nixon's observation "Riots are spontaneous, wars require planning"—quoted by Sharma (2020, p.81), becomes a grim allegory for the Indian context, where riots are often orchestrated under the guise of spontaneity. Political parties have routinely incited or abetted communal violence to consolidate their vote banks, relying on the rapid normalization of such events under the guise of religious fervor and public emotion. *Vanity Bagh* engages with this cycle of violence and amnesia, portraying how bureaucracy, media, and political actors collude in manufacturing and perpetuating communal divides.

Salim incorporates several identifiable features of communal violence recognized by scholars: The premeditated targeting of specific communities, the use of inflammatory rhetoric, the mobilization of unemployed or disenfranchised youth, and the swift suppression of inquiry post-conflict. By weaving these elements into the narrative, *Vanity Bagh* offers a chillingly faithful representation of how riots function as tools of political engineering.

Religious nationalism

Religious nationalism in India is not a recent emergence; its roots extend into the colonial past specifically in nineteenth century, evolving alongside the country's socio-political transformations (King, 2013, p.100). Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Émile Durkheim and Anthony D. Smith, Rogers Brubaker (2012) argues that nationalism is not antithetical to religion but rather mirrors its key structural and affective

dimensions. Both systems offer sacred symbols, communal rituals, and an overarching narrative of belonging. In this sense, nationalism functions as a kind of "secular religion" mobilizing emotions, symbols, and collective identity in ways that closely resemble religious faith.

Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh* taps into this layered confluence of nationalism and religion. While the novel refrains from direct political commentary, it carefully weaves in subtle signifiers that allude to the ideological undercurrents of majoritarian politics in India. The rise of Hindu nationalism is portrayed with measured irony, allowing the novel to expose its dangers while avoiding overt polemic. A notable example of this restrained critique occurs when a character is described as "*the alien [who] wore a pair of khaki shorts and a white shirt*" a veiled reference to the uniform of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) volunteers (Salim, 2013, p.51). By omitting the explicit mention of the organization, Salim gestures toward the embedded presence of Hindu nationalist ideology in everyday Indian life, particularly in shaping intercommunal conflict (Richard & Jockim, 2022, p.419).

One of the central mechanisms through which religious nationalism asserts itself in plural societies is the performative and public display of religious rituals. In *Vanity Bagh*, the Hindu neighbourhood of *Mehandi* is characterized by saffron flags and yolk-coloured *laddoos*, symbols that resonate with the visual and gustatory palette of Hindu nationalism (Salim, 2023, p.60). These cultural markers are not benign; they operate as tools of assertion and differentiation, signifying territorial dominance and communal exclusivity. In contemporary India, such symbols are prominently featured during Hindu festivals and other public events, often amplifying the presence of majoritarian identity in contested or mixed spaces.

This process commonly referred to as 'saffronisation' represents the ideological strategy of the Hindu right to transform the public sphere into a terrain of symbolic power. These religious symbols, while seemingly innocuous, are imbued with political meaning. When challenged, they frequently become flashpoints for conflict, provoking defensive assertions of identity and, in many cases, triggering communal violence. As Salim's

novel illustrates, the tension lies not only in the symbols themselves but in their instrumentalization: they serve as everyday reminders of exclusion and surveillance, deepening the sense of alienation among minority communities.

In foregrounding these subtle yet loaded references, *Vanity Bagh* offers a critique of religious nationalism and its insidious normalization in postcolonial India. By situating religious symbolism within the textures of everyday life, the novel exposes how nationalist ideologies are not only declared in manifestos but lived through festivals, food, clothing, and space. It is precisely this everydayness that renders religious nationalism both pervasive and dangerous.

Worsened neighbourhood relationship

Hindu- Muslim antagonism has persisted as a consistent variable in the recurrence of riots in post-Partition India. Over time, the ascendancy of Hindutva movements has contributed to the structural relegation of Indian Muslims to the status of second-class citizens. In *Vanity Bagh*, Anees Salim uses phrases such as “pocket-sized Pakistan” and “little Pakistan” to describe the titular locality phrases that reflect the stigmatising discourse frequently attached to Muslim- majority areas. These designations are not neutral; they function as ideological labels that prefigure such communities as inherently violent, disloyal, or anti-national.

This narrative is not confined to fiction. In her ethnographic study of Juhupura, a Muslim-majority settlement in Gujarat that came under public scrutiny after the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Kabir notes that the locality is routinely referred to as a “Muslim ghetto” or “Little Pakistan” (2020, p.6). These tags serve to symbolically detach Muslim settlements from the Indian national imagination, casting them as internal threats. There is a deliberate logic at work here: projecting these areas as potential sites of unrest ensures that when violence does erupt, it appears spontaneous, reactive, and inevitable rather than orchestrated.

The proximity of Hindu and Muslim neighbourhoods plays a crucial role in the spatialization of communal violence. Frøystad (2009) emphasizes that the

contiguity of religiously segregated spaces is pivotal in understanding how riots unfold in Indian small towns (p.444). *Vanity Bagh* captures this proximity through its depiction of the bordering Hindu neighbourhood of *Mehandi*, which views its Muslim counterpart with suspicion and hostility. *Mehandi*’s perception of *Vanity Bagh* is emblematic of the breakdown in intercommunal civic life, an issue that Ashutosh Varshney identifies as a key predictor of communal violence. The absence of “intercommunal civic engagement,” Varshney argues, often leads to “endemic and ghastly violence” in towns like those portrayed in the novel (2001, p.375).

Salim accentuates this spatial and emotional divide by evoking the metaphor of the “line of control” between *Mehandi* and *Vanity Bagh*—a direct reference to the militarised India-Pakistan border. This metaphor not only suggests the volatility of the local setting but also invokes the historical framing of Muslims as a foreign threat within the Indian nation- state. Eckert (2009) notes that the constructed narrative of Muslim aggressiveness is used to legitimize violence and to bolster the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism (p.185). In this light, the boundary separating *Mehandi* from *Vanity Bagh* becomes a synecdoche for the larger ideological boundaries imposed by religious nationalism.

Salim deftly exposes how religious bigotry corrodes the possibility of national unity, allowing religion to eclipse shared citizenship and patriotism. *Mehandi* is depicted as a space perpetually at war with *Vanity Bagh*, its hostilities symbolically dating back to the Partition. In one striking scene, Salim references India’s Oscar nomination and imagines how such national achievements are interpreted through the fractured lens of communal rivalry. The narration wryly invokes a “religious scorecard”—“Muslims: 1. Hindus: 0”—to illustrate how deeply religion has infected the symbolic currency of national pride (Salim, 2013, p. 148). Eventually, the scorecard metaphor devolves, its celebratory tone replaced by grim tallies of the dead measuring the body count of communal brutality instead of cultural triumphs.

The novel records how even seemingly minor provocations such as a misinterpreted gesture, a festival decoration, or a heated cricket match can escalate into

savage violence. These depictions underscore Arjun Appadurai's theoretical framework of riots as macro-phenomena with micro-triggers. Appadurai argues that the catalysts for communal violence often originate at a macro-political or ideological level and then cascade downward, activating individuals and communities into conflict (1996, p.50). Salim's narrative affirms this: despite the day-to-day struggles and the deteriorating quality of life endured by both communities, the seductive power of religious polarization prevents collective resistance against systemic failures.

Vanity Bagh maps the intimate geographies of communal violence and its ideological scaffolding. It reveals how spatial segregation, symbolic alienation, and political manipulation converge to create an enduring culture of suspicion and hostility. By layering these insights within a fictional landscape, Salim critiques the normalized rhythms of religious nationalism and the tragic ease with which communities internalize and reproduce the divisions imposed upon them.

Rapid and normal nature of riots

Vanity Bagh offers a compelling literary lens through which to examine the mechanics of populist politics and the spatialization of violence in contemporary India. Salim's novel foregrounds how specific regions, particularly Muslim-majority small towns are branded as "riot-prone," a label that becomes self-reinforcing over time. This socio-political scripting of violence, combined with the power of rumours and hearsay, creates a dangerous but normalized reality where communal unrest is woven into the fabric of everyday life.

In articulating this phenomenon, the novel echoes Paul Brass's assertion that communal riots have become endemic to the Indian polity, amounting to a "permanent state of affairs" (Brass, 2003, p. 6). Salim powerfully dramatizes this claim by introducing the character of a "riot manager" in *Vanity Bagh*, an individual whose very existence and life narrative are emblematic of institutionalized, cyclical violence. The riot manager, whose tenure spans from 1935 to 1992, is treated with dark satire. Upon his death, the town pauses its ongoing riot for only two hours to attend his funeral, after which, Salim

writes, "*the riot resumed with renewed vengeance, wielding freshly stropped weaponry*" (Salim, 2013, p.52). This biting portrayal underscores how deeply the logic of communal violence is ingrained into the region's cultural psyche.

The year 1992 is particularly significant in both national history and the narrative arc of the novel. It marks the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent Bombay riots events that catalyzed one of the most violent episodes of communal unrest in post-Independence India (Subramaniam 1999). In this context, Salim's depiction of a riot sparked by Pakistan's cricket World Cup victory operates as a sardonic commentary on the absurd trivialities that can ignite catastrophic violence. A "minor fight" over the match escalates into a full-blown riot by the next morning, spreading into neighbouring towns. The line "belligerence never stays minor or moderate in *Vanity Bagh*" (Salim, 2013, p.50) captures the explosive potential of rumour, suspicion, and socio-political vulnerability in minority-dominated towns.

Salim's use of satire is particularly evident in the depiction of the "aloo bomb," a seemingly comic reference to a local potato cart mistaken for an explosive. While the absurdity may elicit laughter, it simultaneously evokes a deeper sense of tragedy: in a town so primed for violence, even the most mundane objects can be reimagined as threats. This speaks volumes about the level of paranoia and desperation that shapes life in such contested spaces. Everyday life in *Vanity Bagh* is choked by "unacceptable occurrences" that are simultaneously resisted and endured, oscillating between passive resignation and violent retaliation.

These observations align with Radhika Subramaniam's study of the 1992 Bombay riots, which she describes as spontaneous, rumour-driven, economically destabilizing, and culminating in a state of "uneasy normalcy" (1999, p.108). Salim's fictional account mirrors these real-world dynamics, revealing how communal violence, especially in economically precarious, spatially segregated areas, becomes routinized and ritualized, an event not of exception but of recurrence.

Through *Vanity Bagh*, Salim critiques not only the events of communal violence but also the structural and

psychological normalisation that allows such violence to persist. The novel resists the framing of riots as spontaneous or apolitical, exposing instead the deep-rooted political complicity, ideological scripting, and institutional neglect that sustain them. In doing so, it offers a sobering commentary on the ways in which riot-prone localities are created, maintained, and mythologized within the larger project of religious nationalism.

Role of media narratives

In the contemporary era shaped by digital platforms and corporate media conglomerates, the nexus between governments and the infotainment industry has become both financially strategic and politically expedient. The media no longer functions merely as an institution of information dissemination; it is intricately entangled with the operations of power. This interplay becomes especially potent in contexts of communal violence, where the line between news, narrative, and propaganda often blurs.

Media literacy, the ability to critically evaluate and distinguish between fake news, rumor, political spin, and ideologically motivated reporting, remains a crucial skill. Yet, as Rahman et al. note, media literacy remains limited in India's rural and suburban regions, making populations in these areas particularly vulnerable to misinformation (2024, p.9). Numerous studies have demonstrated that false information and rumors frequently serve as triggers for communal violence in India (Arun 2019; Bepari 2020; Das 1998). These manufactured narratives spread rapidly, catalyzed by social media and mass communication, often escalating into physical acts of violence.

Vanity Bagh is acutely aware of this dynamic. Salim presents the media as complicit in the project of communal polarization, showing how news outlets not only report on but actively participate in the dramatization and amplification of conflict. Rather than offering critical engagement or investigative reporting, media houses function as echo chambers for state-sponsored ideology. This is reflected in the novel through several key moments where the transformation of rumors into riots is aided, rather than restrained, by the press and television.

Salim highlights how the media turns communal conflict into spectacle. For instance, the riot in *Vanity*

Bagh is codenamed “11/11” by newspapers—a chilling allusion to the global imagery of 9/11 terrorism, thus implicitly associating local Muslim populations with international terror networks (Salim, 2013, p.188,193). This naming tactic signals how language becomes a tool of demonization, as even the most localized violence is inflated to fit into a broader narrative of Muslim aggression. Similarly, a line from the fictional *City Journal* (1898)—“*This case will be remembered not for the people convicted. But for the number of people who could have been*”—underscores the media's shift from factual reporting to speculative emotional manipulation (Salim, 2013, p. 218).

Contemporary prime-time media content including televised debates featuring politicians, academics, and even human rights activists is often shaped by vested interests (Danso, 2025). These ideologically aligned discussions frequently substitute spectacle for substance, prioritizing emotional affect over informed critique. As Salim illustrates, the media's fixation on emotive language (“The newsreader kept repeating the word terror”) serves not to educate but to inflame, entrenching narratives of fear and suspicion (Salim, 2013, p.188). Consequently, Salim subtly traces the evolution of credible journalism from 1898 to the ‘sensational’ journalism of late 1980s and early 2000s (Salim, 2013, p. 193,194, 218). The text also observes the boom of satellite channels banking on phrases like ‘first and exclusive visual’ and ‘Breaking News’ that deliver theatrics over facts (Salim, 2013, p.188).

It is worth noting, however, that while *Vanity Bagh* spans a period shaped primarily by print journalism and broadcast media rather than the networked architectures of digital platforms, Salim's critique of media's complicity in communal polarization assumes even greater urgency in the present moment. In the contemporary information landscape, social media has emerged as the dominant vehicle through which rumors, misinformation, and inflammatory content circulate and precipitate communal violence. The viral spread of unverified material such as doctored images, incendiary videos, and targeted campaigns, has dramatically compressed the interval between rumor and riot, effectively bypassing whatever

editorial filters, however compromised, traditional media once maintained. The mechanisms of hatred that Salim maps within the novel, sensationalism, the weaponization of language, and the structural collusion between information and power, have not dissolved with the transition to digital platforms, but migrated into new and more diffuse architectures of influence, rendering them simultaneously harder to identify and more consequential in their reach. Future scholarship would benefit from examining how the evolving mediascapes of the digital era transform and amplify the dynamics of communal hatred that *Vanity Bagh* incisively charts for its historical moment, tracing a continuity of violence from the print and broadcast cultures of the mid-twentieth century to the algorithmically driven information ecosystems of the twenty-first, and clarifying how the instruments of hatred adapt and persist across changing modes of communication.

By exposing how media narratives sensationalize riots and convert them into “events” packaged for consumption, Salim critiques the commodification of violence. The news cycle, far from being a platform for democratic dialogue, becomes a site of discursive warfare, where terms like “riot,” “terror,” and “threat” are repeatedly circulated to solidify public opinion along communal lines.

Conclusion

The deepening religious divide in India has posed a profound threat to the foundational principles of its secular democracy. This fragmentation, long evident in the country’s political landscape, has increasingly infiltrated everyday life, particularly for religious minorities. In response, contemporary authors, filmmakers, artists, and thinkers have sought to capture this volatile zeitgeist through diverse artistic expressions. Anees Salim’s *Vanity Bagh* stands out as a poignant literary intervention in this broader cultural discourse, portraying with subtle irony and sharp observation the fraught existence of economically marginalized Muslim minorities in India’s suburban spaces.

Salim constructs a world that is intimately familiar and disturbingly real, one where Muslim-majority small

towns are systematically othered, surveilled, and scapegoated. These localities, positioned adjacent to Hindu-majority neighborhoods, become crucibles of suspicion and communal tension. The narrative captures how a seemingly mundane social interaction can rapidly spiral into large-scale violence, fed by a volatile mix of political manipulation, state neglect, and inherited mistrust.

By focusing on the prejudices endured and the survival strategies adopted by Muslim communities, *Vanity Bagh* transcends conventional narratives of secularism and offers a stark reimagining of India’s political modernity. It dismantles the hollow rhetoric of coexistence and exposes, instead, the institutional complicity in manufacturing communal antagonism. The novel lays bare the mechanisms of state-sponsored polarization: the media’s sensationalism, the judiciary’s passivity, the police’s bias, the educational system’s alienation, and the political class’s transactional use of religious identity for electoral gain.

Through biting satire and characterization, Salim indicates the very institutions that should protect pluralism but instead perpetuate fear and exclusion. His portrayal of shanty towns as “riot-prone” spaces is not just a reflection of social reality but a critique of the national imagination that normalizes such divisions. In doing so, *Vanity Bagh* reveals how deeply the architecture of communal hatred has penetrated the structures of Indian democracy.

In an overtly secularized canon of Indian English Fiction, “novels by Muslim writers are a potential site for engaging with the lives of a marginalized community that is often misunderstood because of a lack of engagement with their ways of life” (Khan, 2022, p. 6). Anees Salim’s *Vanity Bagh* initiates a discussion that reflects on the subaltern existence of minorities without villainizing the Hindus, while deeply observing the manipulation of Hindutva forces. Thus, the novel ensures that the fragmented societies comprehend the cause of their wounds, subsequently aiding them to heal social fractures and restore the lost harmony.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

No generative AI tools were used to produce the content of this manuscript. Automated language-support tools were used solely for limited proofreading and correction of grammar and language. All suggested changes were independently reviewed and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

CRedit author statement

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