

BOOK REVIEW

To stitch a tapestry of trauma

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI AND SARAH ANJUM BARI

A good book stays with a reader long after they’ve read the last word and placed it back on the shelf. It leaves an impression on the mind, whether because the action was exhilarating, the characters raw and real, or because reading it felt like coming back to a home you never knew you had. This last type of book is rare—we have maybe encountered a handful in our lifetimes, and they were all fiction—all, that is, except for Aanchal Malhotra’s *Remnants of a Separation* (HarperCollins India, 2018).

*Remnants* is a compilation of ethnographic research into the Partition of India, conducted by Aanchal Malhotra as part of her MFA thesis for Montreal’s Concordia University. It is, in a way, a museum presented as a book. Malhotra’s research is in “material memory”, which constitutes a piecing together of the near past, not through supposedly impartial journals or ledgers, but through heirlooms and trinkets that collectively form a tapestry of the climactic events of 1947.

The book is structured as an anthology of stories, each centring an object—a pashmina shawl, a sword, cutlery—all of which the Partition survivors kept with them when they were forced to migrate or remain in the tumult.

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One could read the chapters at random and follow them perfectly, but those who read them as they are given will feel a curator’s touch in the layout. It is subtle, but Malhotra ensures that we seldom read the same kind of story twice in a row. One might read of an upper class Muslim woman displaced to Pakistan, before moving onto a Hindu man of similar stature, sent the opposite way, and then to the scarring recollections of a military officer and the atrocities he witnessed. While reading their stories serially under Malhotra’s curation, the transformation of the personal to the collective reveals meaningful similarities: how most of these families believed that the Partition was a distant political turmoil, and how they never expected their neighbours and friends of differing faiths to turn violent on each other overnight.

Malhotra’s focus on heirlooms serves to ground every narrative to a single universal question: what possession would you save if your life burned to the ground? These choices in themselves were loaded—author Gurcharan Das’ grandmother, Shib Dai Verma, believed that the migration would be temporary, and so she left every single room and *almirah* in their erstwhile Lyallpur home locked up, bringing 51 keys with her for each keyhole that lay in waiting. They never returned. But Azra Haq knew that their departure was permanent, and so the pearls they took with them remains an altogether different kind of remnant of a life left behind.

Being an ethnographic research, these



PHOTO COLLAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

memories are all presented in the form of conversations, and Malhotra’s ability to translate interview notes into cohesive stories is masterful. Each narrator is allowed utterly to be themselves—if poet Prabhjot Kaur’s pronunciation is described to be “an amalgamated accent that had once been Punjabi,” then Lt Gen S N Sharma’s speech is said to be “refined, with the slightest tinge of a lingering British accent.” Malhotra’s research is extensive, and more can be found online, but her published book contains stories from a diverse selection of people in terms of gender, religion, social status, occupation, and whether they were forced to cross the border or not, and when. A somewhat common characteristic appears to be their levels of literacy, so that most of the interviewees are either highly educated, or believed strongly in educating their future generations because they were deprived of it themselves.

As author and researcher, Malhotra is constantly present in the prose—and what gorgeous, heartfelt prose! With her words, blissful childhood days give way to the very real trauma and tragedy of leaving one’s home and boarding train compartments filled with murdered strangers, and building life anew in a place where the language, culture, and locality are all unfamiliar. Reading these memories imprint you with the dawning realisation of just what it means to be born of this subcontinent.

Yet as an interviewer and curator, she limits her role only insofar as to unlock the necessary information. She knows when to ask questions, when to prod for details, and when to meet a recollection with silence. She uses the latter, graver intervals to question her authority and her implicit biases over these stories that will eventually be published in a book bearing her own name, bringing an integrity and uncommon conscientiousness to the handling of the historical material at her disposal.

If one is left wanting for anything, it is the analysis of the objects themselves. The amnesia, trauma, and even indifference of each

interviewee regarding Partition are all drawn out wonderfully in each chapter because of the space that Malhotra gives them to speak freely. Their recollections take us far and deep back in time. But in the process, the “remnant” in question grows absent. While the objects are primarily meant to serve as catalysts for memory, mining them for data based on their shape, design, material used, and present condition using a degree of expertise would have lent the book another fascinating angle. Equally interesting would have been the inclusion of individuals from more explicitly working class backgrounds, as well as people who moved or belong to erstwhile East Bengal—Malhotra carried out her research mainly across present day Pakistan, India, and UK.

These absences are seldom felt while reading the interviews, however, because they accomplish what they set out to do. In each and every story in this book, one is reacquainted with the intergenerational trauma of Partition, told through different perspectives. Partition is a memory that still runs fresh in many of our blood, and it is a trauma that we, as a people, must acknowledge, confront, and process, because it runs prevalent in our society, in the policies we make, and the way we treat one another. Seventy three years later, we find ourselves on the cusp of the same religious tensions that caused the bloodbath of 1947 in the first place, and it is not until we make peace with the past that we can stop repeating these mistakes. The stories and messages within this book are now more poignant than ever.

Aanchal Malhotra’s full archives can be accessed at @museumofmaterialmemory on Instagram.

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WORTH A RE-READ

The fires of Partition in East Bengal

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Three years before Maloy Krishna Dhar’s death, his memoir, *Train to India: Memories of Another Bengal* (Penguin India, 2009), came out. Born in a sleepy village of Kamalpur in the Bhairab-Mymensingh region next to Meghna and Brahmaputra, Dhar had an illustrious career as a teacher, journalist, intelligence officer, and writer.

The memoir was inspired by his first visit to an independent Bangladesh in 1997, 47 years after he left East Bengal with his family for Agartala. Nazar Kaka, his “father’s artistic companion”, ignited the desire in him to weave the memories of his childhood against the backdrop of a seething landscape. Since he was less than ten of age during the years—which constituted some key events and developments—leading to the Partition, Dhar resorted to his father’s notebook and the memories of Commodore Abdur Rauf (Retd) of the Bangladesh Navy, a former freedom fighter hailing from Bhairab, to stitch an accurate narrative.

One of Dhar’s earliest encounters with the implications of religious divides came on August 14, 1947, when his country was “packaged in a wrapper of fundamentalism, sealed and waxed with rotten human flesh and blood,” and East Pakistan was created. One of his neighbours, a Christian

manifestation of hatred along religious lines was now suddenly simmering with it. Encroaching Bihari settlers claimed that “dark-skinned Bengal Muslims” were “half-Hindus” and inferior. Sexual assault, robbery, property-grabbing, and other varying degrees of conflicts continued among the natives and settlers. An invidious affront to language and culture was widely felt by the imposition of an alien tongue. “How could a Mymensighia Bengali dialect speaker imagine forgetting his uniquely flavoured language? Could anyone compose Mymensighia Geetika and Bhatiali songs in Urdu or English?” Festivals everyone partook in unanimously were now suddenly policed by religion. Hate politics seeped into traditional myths. At the Bhairab railway station, outrageous, graphic pamphlets stoking the fire of communal violence were being disseminated.

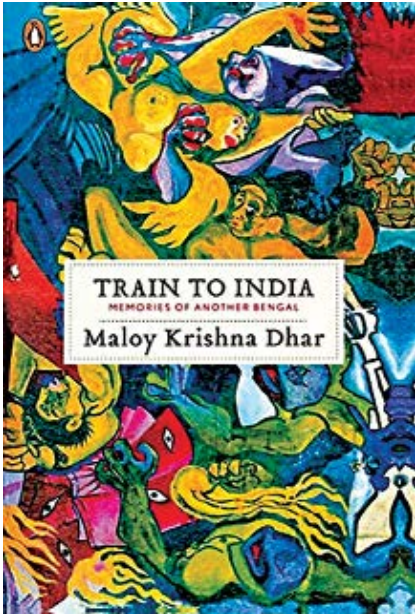
The infamous Direct Action Day in 1946 that had resulted in widespread violence in Calcutta and Noakhali is portrayed in a grim light in *Train to India*. Dhar recalls how he witnessed The Chittagong Mail arrive at the Bhairab station with bloodied and mutilated corpses. On their departure to India from the same station, he fended off marauding attackers with his pocketknife in a bid to save his mother.

This memoir is not meant to chronicle the “great human exodus” from East Bengal, but to illuminate Dhar’s personal accounts and all that he learned from his parents and their contemporaries in the face of mounting uncertainties. In doing so, he paints a vivid picture of a Bengal convulsing in the throes of communal hatred. The graphic, violent scenes evoke the spirit of Saadat Hasan Manto’s writing, except here, they are first-hand accounts, as seen by the eyes of a young child.

*Train to India* deftly contextualises the cultural, linguistic, traditional, and emotional ties of the people in Bengal. The ushering of a hostile season, the carnages of liberation from the British, and the politics of division pulsate in the memoir in a “non-academic” and up-close-and-personal form.

Remarkably, the book is entirely East Bengal-centric, unlike popular Partition literature centred in present-day India and Pakistan. Bangladeshis interested in learning about Partition should give this hauntingly beautiful memoir a chance, instead of looking towards predominantly Indian and Pakistani literature first.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a contributor to Daily Star Books.



woman named Manorama, was being sexually assaulted by “Razakars”. Dhar, ten years old then, rushed to her aid and was thrashed to unconsciousness by the attackers. In early November that year, a group of “frenzied Bihari Muslim mob” attacked a fishermen’s colony, abducting two young girls. These incidents left Dhar dazed by how quickly people could change due to religious solidarity.

A village that had seen no

THE BOOK REPORT

The road not taken, in books

Did you love reading Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) books as a child? If yes, jump on down to the next paragraph! If no, your adventure ends here. There’s no treasure at the end of this nostalgic rainbow.

SELIMA KABIR

One day many years ago, discovering my cousin’s tattered copy of a *Give Yourself Goosebumps* book completely changed my ideas about what books could be. The books provided a rare opportunity for children to make big decisions in a fictional world. Even the death of a character meant little in these books—we could rewrite the fate of the character we’re representing or alter the entire plot as a whole! *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels were genre-defining in the world of children’s books, and addictive for a child.

In 1969, American author Edward Packard realised this—he found that his children loved bedtime stories where they got to choose the endings. This inspired him to write a book in which the reader could dictate how the story transpired. When Packard finally secured R A Montgomery’s publishing house, the project didn’t quite take off. Montgomery persisted and found a new champion in literary agent Joëlle Delbourgo at Bantam Books. The books were printed and

handed out at book fairs and the success was explosive! All the way from USA, *Choose Your Own Adventure* books even reached the hidden corners of Nilkhet, Boi Bichitra, and all of my book shopping lists.

The burgeoning new trend in print media would be adopted by several popular series of the time including *Sweet Valley*, *The Babysitter’s Club*, Disney and *Star Wars*. Although the market was soon oversaturated with different versions of CYOA, it left a new spark in storytellers. As technology evolved, it allowed sounds and graphics to amplify the experience of interactive fiction. Platforms like Twine—an open-source tool for telling interactive, non-linear stories—allowed young and aspiring writers to create a story map and publish their work online.

As you click through *Arboretum* by Matthew Seiji Burns—one of my personal favourites—or any other text adventure on Twine, you are greeted by the twittering of birds if you’re in an actual bird sanctuary.

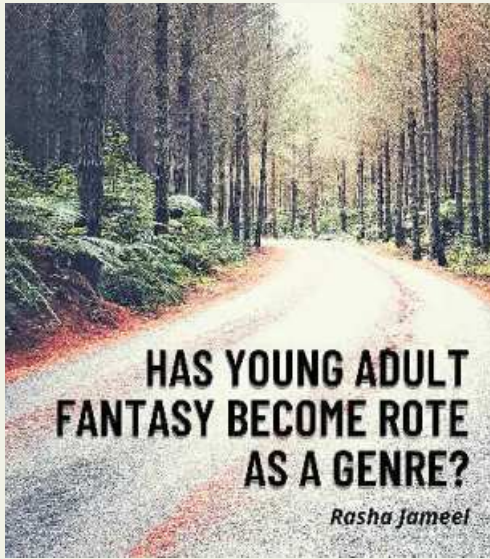
Small “shuffling” animations indicate changes in the story’s tone or timeline. These atmospheric features allow the text, and the plot, to be the main-driving force, but help create a stronger emotional impact by engaging the audience’s different senses. Other stories even have moving characters, animated backgrounds, and voiced dialogue—they solidify the author’s imagined world more clearly for the reader, but can admittedly leave little to the imagination.

Around 2013, Android apps began creating their own litany of CYOA games—those garish ‘Chapters/Episodes’ ads that keep popping up between Instagram stories, or more substantive ones like ‘Choice of the Deathless’. Titles such as *Depression Quest* (2013) or *Her Story* started taking players on thrilling journeys where the monsters are entirely psychological. As the format adapted to cater to an adult audience, it called for deeply personal stories and allowed readers to make brave choices for characters that they might not

in their own life. It is for this audience that the web series *Black Mirror* created the interactive film *Bandersnatch* (2018) on Netflix, and raised a brief resurgence of CYOA in popular media.

While digital media kept innovating, traditional books also continued to produce a steady stream of CYOA books and novels. Ryan North reinvented Shakespeare with *Romeo and/or Juliet* (2016), in which one can read the play as its titular, or more obscure, characters. In 2018, Dana Schwartz wrote *Choose Your Own Disaster*—the world’s first long-form Buzzfeed quiz disguised as a memoir. The list continues, with many hilarious, riveting, and hair-raising tales that are being produced even now, in different and innovative media.

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