

# The wound and the blade

Farida Shaikh goes into deep psychological experience

THIS is Nasir Ali's novelistic treatise on personal identity. Theoretically it is the philosophical confrontation with the most ultimate question of man's existence. Who am I? The time changes between life and death, gives rise to a set of criteria that denote personal identity. Death is also a prominent theme in the novel.

During the 17th century Locke propounded his theory of personal identity for human beings, and introduced the concept of man, soul and person. The determinants that make the person the same are there, though there are physical and mental changes in him over time. In the quantum domain Leibniz's Law noted the identity of indiscernible factors which individuate qualitatively identical objects, though recent interpretation point to its short fall.

Nasir Ali, the protagonist, is diabetic. He is out on his morning walk when suddenly he spots a youth's dead body below the bridge on road 8 Dhanmondi. At once he begins to be tormented by a volley of ontological questions. Is a dead body meaningless?... Is it the name of the person that is important? A dead body bears no name. A name is borne by the living body. Does the name exist in the being or in the body or in the heart? And if Nasir Ali is the name then what does the body denote and who is the person?

The book is dedicated to Professor Anisuzzaman. The opening page has Charles Baudelaire's L'Heautantimouronemos (The Self Tormentor; translation in English by Wallace Fowlie), '... I am the wound and the blade!' The Bangla translation of the same is by Buddhadev Basu, '... Ami e chaka, deho amar doli!' This relates to the hounded protagonist.

The title of the book is a line from the mystic poet Lalou Shah's very popular lyrics translated by Carol Salomon. 'What can I say about my neighbor? / She has no hands, no feet? No shoulders, no head? Sometimes she floats high up in the sky / sometimes in the water / If my neighbor only touches me / she would send the pain of death away! / And Lalou are in the same place / Yet five hundred thousand miles apart.

Baahls hold women in high esteem. This song refers to Shadika or shahaj manus, natural person.

The protagonist, Nasir Ali, in this psychological novella, is addressed as a learned person and is asked to explain the following



Poroshi Jodi Amaye Chhuto  
Anisul Haque  
Kakoli Prokashoni

lines by the rikshawala from Kushtia: 'I have not seen her even once/my neighbor/who lives in the city of mirrors/near my house...' And the next line if modified and translated would be: 'if my neighbor would be mine/ all the pains and fears would be wiped away.' In response, Nasir Ali asks to be excused saying that he was not born in Kushtia, Lalou's birthplace, and so he does not know the meaning.

As the rikshawala sings, Nasir Ali says his Bangla accent is not typical of his place. To this the rikshawala says that commonality of plying rikshaws in Dhaka city wipes away every distinction in Bangla accent. The writer propounds the thought that human understanding and variation in semantics are not uniformly found, and the qualification of being learned does not necessarily lead to the most obvious rational conclusion. It is a subjective matter. Moreover, to be able to verbalize the analytical process is yet another dimension to human understanding.

The rikshawala sings the Lalou songs well. Nasir Ali asks him if he has taken lessons at Shilpokola Academy. This sounds ridiculous to the rikshawala, and only establishes the truth that innate talent for music is common

among the ordinary people of this country. According to Lalou, man's wisdom evolves from within, for Lalou in his judgment and erudition did not depend upon man-made institutions.

Without disclosing it to his wife, Nasir Ali makes an appointment with the psychiatrist. He is diagnosed as suffering from acute stress disorder with possible connections to childhood trauma, as mentioned in the narrative. A second visit labels his mental health condition as a special case of dual personality, a stretch of multiple personality disorder syndrome.

The up to date terminology speak of Dissociative Identity Disorder, a severe form of disassociation, which produces a lack of connection in a person's thought, memory, feeling, action and loss of sense of identity. It is characterized by two or more distinct or split identities as Nasir Ali was Hamid Ali on quite a few occasions. One personality has power over the other person's behavior. Nasir Ali holds a BCS cadre post at the Bangladesh Secretariat, is an employee of a buying house, then he is Hamid Ali, a computer engineer. Nasir Ali is mistaken for Hamid Ali by visitors and office persons. He receives parcels addressed to Hamid Ali. He matches his ID card and his face in the car mirror to confirm that he is none other than Nasir Ali.

The book cover created by artist Dhruvo S. depicts a winged right hand of a man, holding an ordinary pen against white clouds, sailing in the golden glow of a full moon in the vastness of the night sky. Human knowledge is as open and vast as the sky. That man's wisdom flows from the natural elements. The pen and the human hand take into its fold only a small part of the enormous knowledge. Similar is Lalou's expositions through his various lyrics.

This novella, Aarshinagar 2007, was published in the anniversary edition of *Kali O Kolom*. A year later the book also went through a fourth printing. The over all impression about the book was that most readers were confused with the narration. The subject matter appeared conflicting. However, in the opinion of erudite readers the book covered some thought-provoking topics, and a second reading of the book was recommended.

Anisul Haque's narrative in black humor encompasses big and small corruption, like a person selling off his land allotment document; and frequent name change by borrowers of blue films at video shops. Nasir Ali is pounced upon by hijackers, who in colloquial lingo ask him the usefulness of an identity

card upon the death of the person. Upon seeing his own reflection in the mirror, Nasir Ali smiles and asks the reflection, whom is his wife calling? Nasir Ali is killed by the hijackers. His ID card is saved!

His computer savvy colleague downloads a cartoon, a man without his balls! The regular men are engaged in detailed discussions on the male organ during the first two working hours at the office. As the cartoon man has no organ to talk about, his working hour will start two hours later!

Companionship is close to being a misnomer in modern marriage. Within the fast track urban life extramarital relationships are becoming, more and more, an accepted and expected lifestyle. With a play on the vernacular words the act of copulation is transferred to an interpretation of power and politics.

Then there is the rhetorical dialogue with the psychiatrist, posing the problem of emotional mentality as a prerequisite of sexuality versus a monetized market commodity. The plausible explanation is the variation in the male mentality towards sex. There is but a hairline distinction between medical solution and religious ritual to establish parenthood. The solution to the social enigma of marriage, the biological act of birth and death are Allah's domain, for man at best can uphold his niyat.

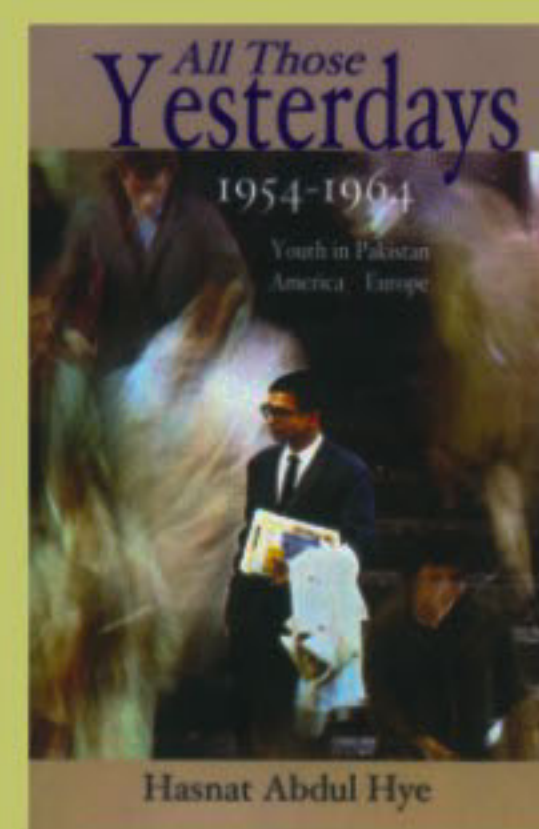
The narrative style is in dramatic monologue by the writer with himself, and controlled dialogue between two characters at a time; the protagonist and his colleague, his wife, the rikshawala on three occasions, telephone girl friend, hijackers, tokai, video shop owner, and some strangers. The prose is in poetry.

Procreation is a binding urge in all natural beings. In humans it is most conspicuous. Within the social sphere, the means of livelihood for the man in the city becomes a compelling need to work, do a job. The writer refers to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in this connection. A similar urge on the woman's side is met by a total immersion into household chores.p.40

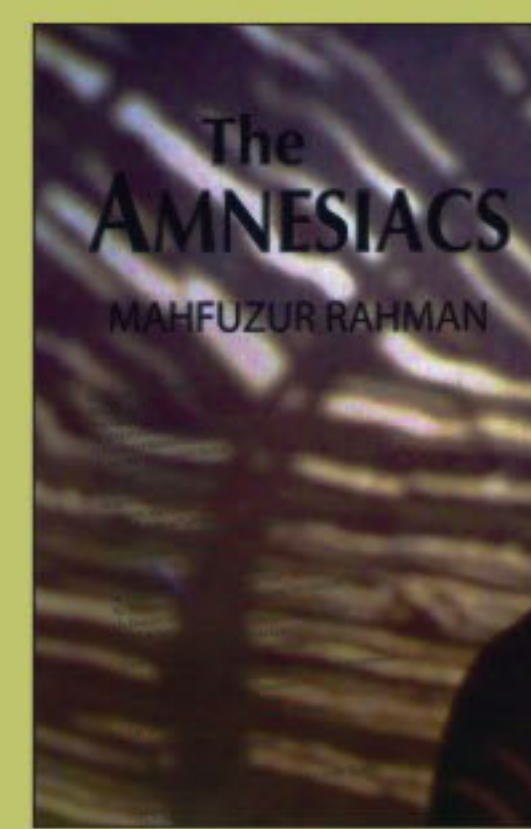
Reading *Poroshi Jodi Amaye Chhuto*, for me, has been an engrossing experience. Personal identity is very much a matter of individual intellect. Moral complexity surrounds modern lifestyle. I would highly recommend a film adaptation of the book like SYBIL 1973 that deals with the same subject, dissociative identity disorder.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and a leading voice in The Reading Circle (TRC).

## BOOK CHOICE



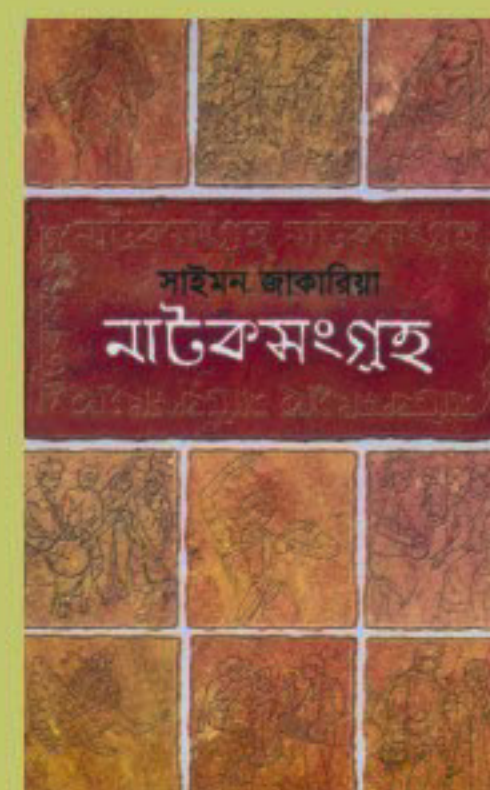
All Those Yesterdays  
1954-1964  
Hasnat Abdul Hye



The Amnesiacs  
Mahfuzur Rahman



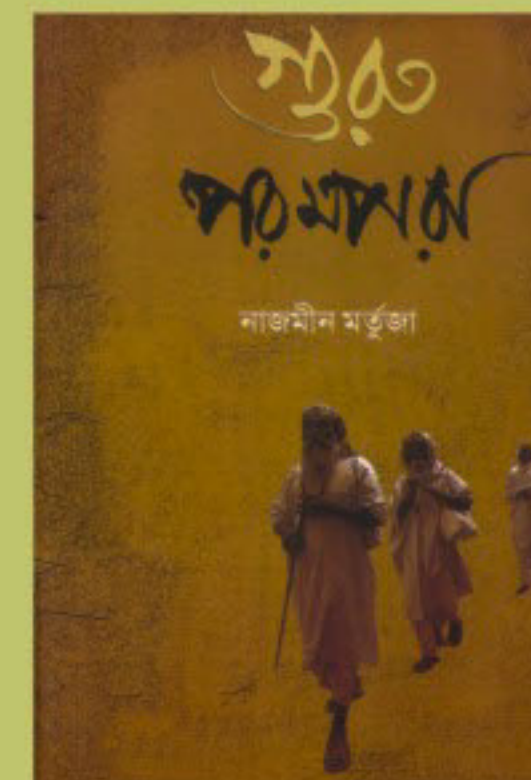
Bangla Shahityer  
Olikhito Itishash  
Simon Zakaria, Nazmin  
Mortuza



Natok Shongroho  
Simon Zakaria



Badur O Brandy  
Shahnaz Munni



Guruparompura  
Nazmin Mortuza

Publisher:  
Adorn Publication  
Tel: 9347577, 8314629

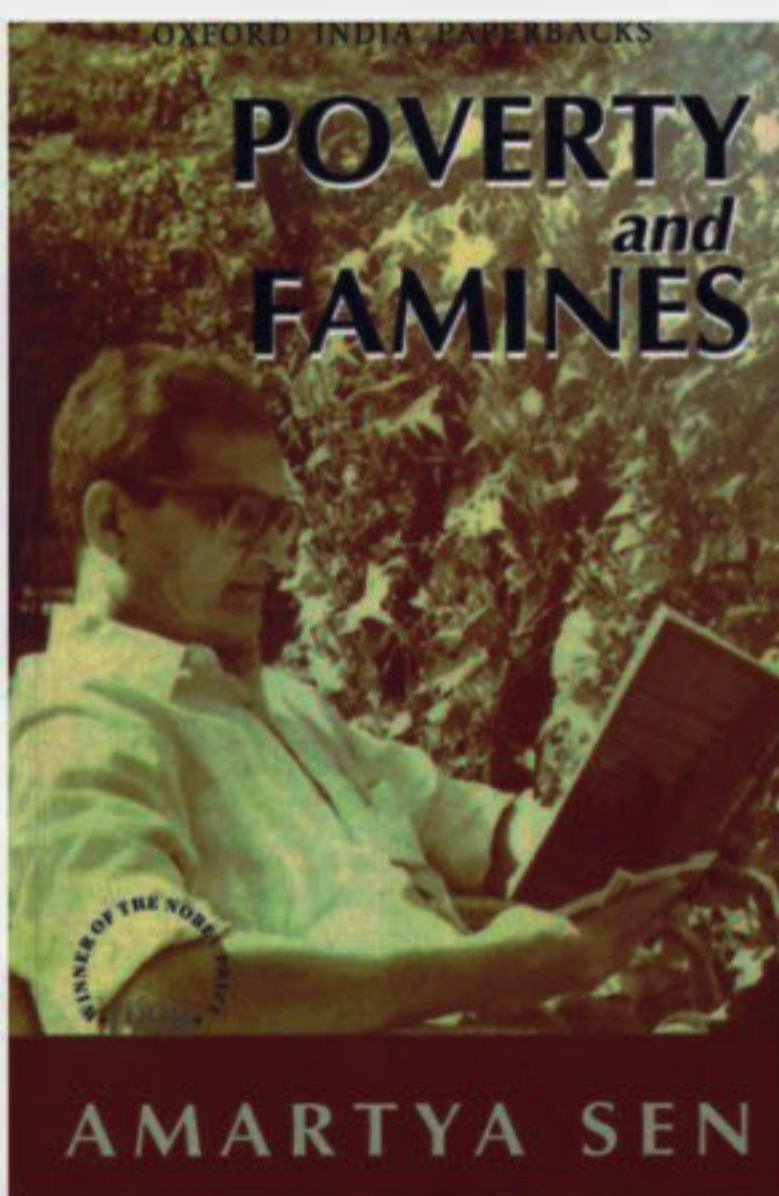
# Of the poor and the hungry

Audity Falguni examines a history of misfortunes

THE history of famines as well as of regular hunger is full of blood-boiling tales of callousness and malevolence. It isn't just regular starvation that one sees in 436 B.C., when thousands of starving Romans 'threw themselves into the Tiber'; or in Kashmir in AD 918, when 'one could scarcely see the water of Vitasta (Jhelum) entirely covered as the river was with corpses'; or in 1333-7 in China when we are told- four million people died in one region only; or in 1770 in India, when the best estimates point to ten million deaths; or in 1845-51 in Ireland, when the potato famine killed about one-fifth of the total Irish population and led to the emigration of a comparable number.

How severe is poverty? What causes famines? Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate from the Indian subcontinent, examines the problems of conceptualizing and measuring poverty, and discusses the specific problem of starvation in general terms in his widely acclaimed book 'Poverty and Famines' (Oxford India Paperbacks 1989; Twelfth Impression 2008). Sen undertook this study for the World Employment Programme launched by the International Labour Organization in 1969. It is concerned with the causation of starvation in general and of famines in particular. The method of analysis adopted is the 'entitlement approach', which concentrates on ownership and exchange. Later the author analyses the 'entitlement approach' in detail and applies it to four case studies of famines from different parts of the world. These four major case studies of famine are the Great Bengal Famine of 1941-43, the Ethiopian Famines, Drought and Famine in the Sahel and Famine in Bangladesh 1974.

The official Famine Inquiry Commission reporting on the Bengal famine of 1943 put its death toll 'at about 1.5 million,' thus Amartya



Poverty and Famines  
Amartya Sen  
Oxford India

begins the sixth chapter of the book on the Great Bengal Famine. The economist then splits the economic experience of Bengal leading to and during famine into three phases, namely phase I (from the beginning of 1942 to March 1943), phase II (from March 1943 to November 1943) and phase III (from November 1943 through most of 1944). 'In 1942-43 cyclones and floods reduced the Bengal rice crop by about a third; this coupled with the absence of exports from Japanese-controlled Burma, and inadequate relief, led

to famines, epidemics (malaria, cholera and smallpox), aggravated by widespread starvation,' Amartya cites from Census of India (1951) as well as also from the Census of Pakistan (1951) on behalf of his argument. We can further learn from accounts of Sen that the Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon. Urban areas, especially Calcutta, substantially insulated from rising food prices by subsidized distribution schemes, saw it mainly in the form of an influx of rural destitutes. In the words of Sen, 'Calcutta saw the famine mainly in the form of masses of rural destitutes, who trekked from the districts into the city; by July 1943 the streets were full...unattended dead bodies could be found everywhere in the city-3,363 had to be disposed of by relief organizations in October alone. The number of starving and sick destitutes in Calcutta estimated to be 'at least 100,000' in October 1943 (page 57).' Fishermen and agricultural labourers were among the hardest hit by the famine. Other hard-hit groups were 'other productive occupations,' 'non-agricultural labour' and 'craft.'

Chapter 7 of the book, titled 'The Ethiopian Famine (1972-74)', informs readers that the first recorded famine in Ethiopia goes back to the ninth century. Between 1540 and 1742 there were, apparently, more than ten major famines. The so-called 'great Ethiopian famine' hit the country during 1888-92, killing of possibly a third of the total population. In comparison with the great Ethiopian famine, the famine that Ethiopia experienced in 1972-4 might appear to be a moderate affair, in a population of about 27 million. The hard hit victims of this famine were the pastoralists, particularly from the Afar community, evicted farm servants and rural laborers, tenant cultivators, small land-owning cultivators, daily male laborers in urban areas, women in service occupations,

weavers and other craftsmen and occupational beggars.

'Drought and Famine in the Sahel' (chapter 8) first offers readers the politico-ecological definition saying 'the Sahel is defined as the semi-arid vegetation belt in six West African countries, viz, Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta, Niger and Chad. 'The peak year of the famine in the Sahelian countries was 1973, the starvation having by then gathered momentum in a cumulative process of destitution and deprivation. The number of famine deaths during that year was estimated to be 100,000,' the author tells us.

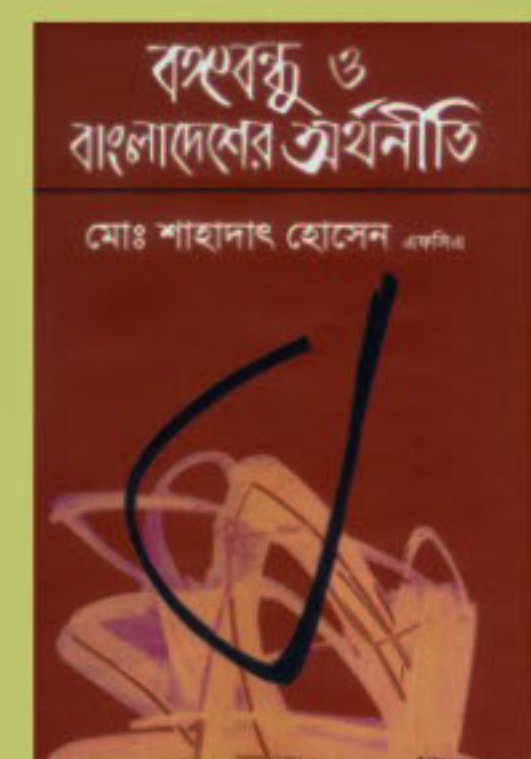
Chapter 9 analyses the famine in Bangladesh of 1974: '...The official figure of death due to the famine is 26,000. Other estimates indicate much higher mortality, including the estimation that in Rangpur district alone 80 to 100 thousand persons died of starvation and malnutrition in 2-3 months.' Sen here also elaborates on how imperialist US policy helped largely in causing the famine of 1974, '...the US food aid came under severe threat precisely at this point of time, since the United States decided to seek stoppage of Bangladesh's trade with Cuba. Only after Bangladesh gave in and sacrificed its trade with Cuba was the flow of American food resumed. By then the autumn famine was largely over.'

Written in very lucid language, 'Poverty and Famines' offers its readers a complete anecdote of poverty and famines in the countries of Asia and Africa as well analyses the fundamental role of colonialism (in the Bengal Famine 1943) or neo-colonialism (in famines of Ethiopia, Sahel of Africa or Bangladesh during 1972-1974) in causing these great epidemics.

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### BOOK LAUNCH

Adorn Publication will launch Mahfuzur Rahman's *The Amnesiacs and Other Essays and Miscellanies today, Saturday, 17 July, at Bengal Shilpalaya, Road 27 (Old), Dhanmondi, at 5 pm.*

Among those expected to be present on the occasion are Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Professor Emeritus Anisuzzaman, writer Hasnat Abdul Hye, Professor Monsur Musa, UPL Managing Director Mohiuddin Ahmad, poet Muhammad Nurul Huda and journalist Syed Badrul Ahsan.

# Divided countries, countless victims

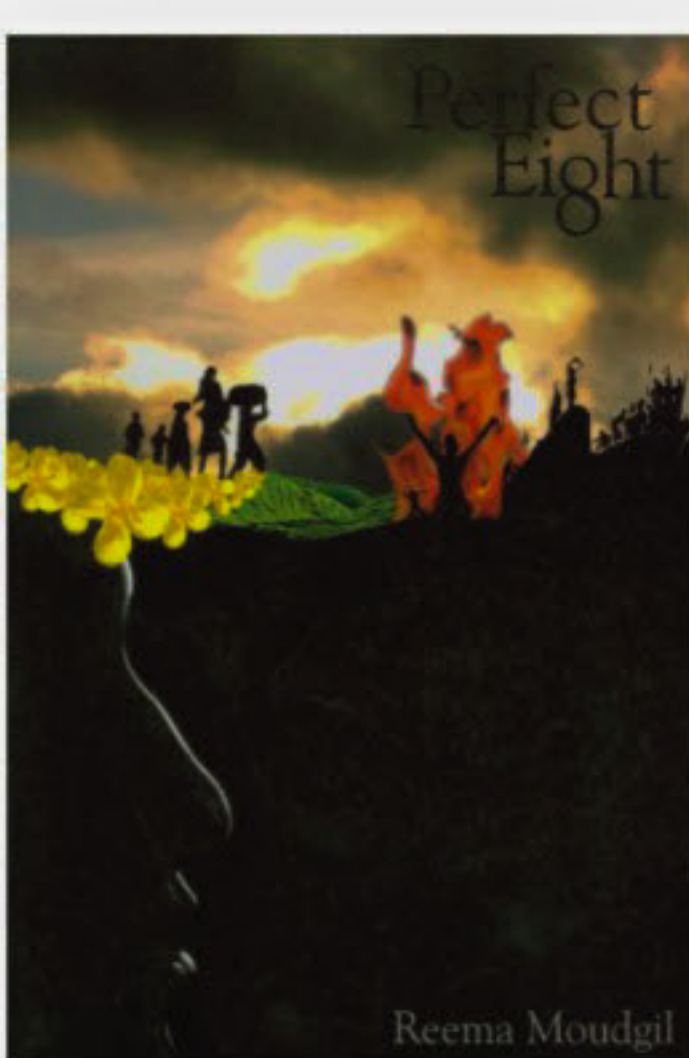
Nausheen Rahman finds a tale on partition rather gripping

A medley of characters plays out their predestined roles in this attention-grabbing book. It is a candid, first person narration of people's lives and attitudes by a young woman, Ira, whose name we get to know just a few pages before the ending (finally revealed to us in a dramatic way). The backdrop is the partition of India and the communal riots that erupt over the years.

Ira is the offspring of two people who are very different in nature, but who are devoted to each other. The mother had 'taken too little from life', and the father had 'always taken too much'. As Ira grows up, her temperament is moulded by the traits of both parents. Hence, on the one hand, she is convinced that happiness can be very evasive and deceptive with some people (like her mother and herself), and, on the other, cannot deny that she has her father's ability to 'laugh and sing through deprivations'.

Perfect Eight is the name given to a road in Ambrosa, Kangra, a road that can testify to many significant events and the changes brought about by these events.

Ira's mother comes to Kanpur from Lahore as a child, leaving behind much comfort and many good things. The partition of the Indo-Pak subcontinent makes her a refugee and turns her life topsy-turvy. As things become harder, she begins to 'fear nothing but happiness'.



Perfect Eight  
Reema Moudgil  
Tranquebar

She believes that happiness is a 'thorny, tricky animal, wiggling in your arms, threatening to wound you and get away'. Good times, however, come with her marriage to Veeren, with whom she tentatively builds a life, in an Assamese cantonment and in Patiala, which, of course, has

its rough days. Veeren, a lover of ghazals, has 'no respect for tears', and a 'spirit that did not welcome intrusion'. Ira has inherited these qualities.

The story of Ira's mother's life is the story of countless victims of the division and cruel separation of countries. The appealing thing about this story is that it is narrated very realistically, yet emotionally. This woman who can 'smell grief before it strikes', finds snatches of happiness because of her loving husband and daughter. They all see hard days, as well as, good ones, as they go through what seems like a tentative existence.

Then we have Ira's story. As a child, she is insecure and often unreasonable, as she suffers from a genetic dependency. She finds peace and joy in Annville, a tea-estate in Ambrosa, which she visits occasionally. To her, this place is a symbol of beauty, love and hope; it is here she first meets Samir, the handsome, confident, pampered son of her mother's friend, Anna, and her doting husband, Inder. Ira's childish infatuation for Samir gradually develops into an overpowering, consuming passion. This feeling is apparently unreciprocated, though there seems to be an inexplicable chemistry between them. Theirs is a very strange love story, if it can be called that. Samir never wanted anything that was given to him and Ira turns away from everything

that she wants and doesn't take what is hers. Her father taught her to want everything from life, and if she was offered less, she didn't want it. She wanted it all or nothing. She discovers how hard it is to 'disown love that runs like poison in her blood'. She knows she can never get Samir and that is 'the deepest wound of all'.

In places, the narration is hard-hitting, with very vivid descriptions and incisive observations. Moudgil personifies everything in her unique, gripping style. Perhaps that is what makes the book a breathing, palpable entity. In addition to enjoying the story, one can get pleasure from just reading this writer's chosen words and the way she strings them together.

The parallel plot is about communal riots. Everyone knew that 'Punjabis are not Hindus or Sikhs, They are Punjabis'. Sadly, the two communities start mistrusting and hating each other, tragic incidents like the killing of Mahatma Gandhi, the storming of the Golden Temple, the knocking down of the Babri Mosque, the assassination of the country's Prime Minister, spark off mindless, unbridled violence. Terrorism spreads like wildfire, and comes to be known as 'militancy'.

The horrifying incidents which are a culmination of religious intolerance are

blown up to produce a black, blind hatred. The seeds of suspicion and disunity have been sown and continue to be felt; surprisingly, so does the recognition and acknowledgement of kindred souls, regardless of which faith they profess.

Ira's father's sudden death hurls her into her sphere of despair again, but because she wants to be like him, she bounces back. When her mother wonders what they will do without Veeren, Ira confidently says 'Live'. Then the two of them proceed to do just that live against the odds. Caught in the web of an innate pessimism (a legacy from her mother), and an indomitable will to live (inherited from her father), she struggles to make the latter win. This struggle is not new to the mother and daughter, for even in the midst of their happiest moments, 'bound by their common fear of happiness, they had felt something lurking at their heels'.

Accounts of how people cope with their losses and lacks, tug at our heartstrings: 'Her mother found ways to trap joy in little crevices of her life'; 'be-friended her house, a monument to wistfulness'; Sunny was my twin scar and we smelt each other's lacks and bonded'.

A turning point in the story is when the floods come. It appears to 'wash away the remaining dregs of mistrust' as

Hindus and Sikhs become one again in the face of this natural disaster. Unfortunately, this is a temporary phase.

Ira has an arranged marriage with Gautam and moves to Bangalore. She has a fairly good life for a while; then the two start growing apart. Another riot breaks out. Ira feels haunted by the happenings related to this riot, and feeling at the end of her tether, tries to kill herself. She survives, but her marriage does not. Her father's soul comes to her and they have a conversation which helps Ira to think clearly and courageously again. Among other poignant things, he tells her that one cannot escape from life, that pain, sorrows, deprivations come and go, and that it is unwise to keep remembering the sad things, for that eventually wrecks one. He says the only thing that does not change or perish is the fact that one had loved and been loved.

Ira goes to Ambrosa and what ensues there may seem like an unexpected outcome, but it is in keeping with the characters and the story so far. Ira finally comes to terms with what is fated and feels liberated.

The conclusions of both plots seem to leave a question suspended: 'What next?'

Nausheen Rahman is a literary critic and freelance writer.