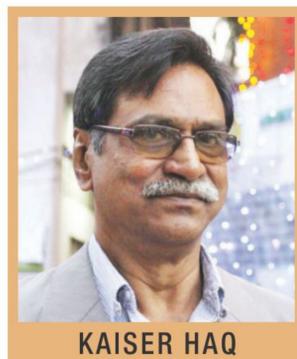


AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

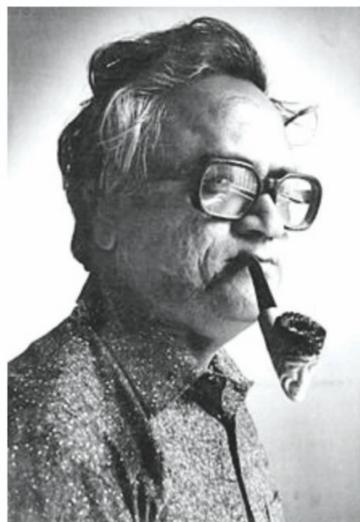
Partition and Bangladeshi literature



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The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 has become indissolubly linked to horrific, haunting images of armed gangs or mobs attacking helpless groups of men, women and children trying to cross a border that had just been scratched on the map. Literature registers the shock in works that make harrowing reading. Partition literature becomes a tragic sub-genre in the subcontinent. However, this image of

Bangladesh is unique in that it has undergone the experience of partition three times; and each time it has been different from the other two. The first partition, which took place in 1905, and was repealed six years later, has mainly touched Calcutta-based writers. In 1947, Bengali Muslims wanted an undivided province to go to Pakistan, while Hindus favoured partition. The Muslim peasantry identified a dual antagonist comprising



Akhteruzzaman Elias



Syed Waliullah



Abul Fazl

Partition literature does not apply uniformly throughout the region. The massacre was centred on the Punjab. South India, mercifully, was spared the horrors. In the east the pattern of violence was quite different, and had a different sort of demographic and literary fallout. The holocaust in the Punjab left no Hindus or Sikhs west of the border and no Muslims to its east. In Bengal, instead of such wholesale demographic changes, there has been migration in spurts and trickles prompted by episodes of communal conflict.

the Hindu zamindars and British colonisers. The opposition was further complicated by a class dichotomy among Bengali Muslims, with Muslim zamindars and their other upper-class coreligionists labelling themselves superior (*ashraf*) as opposed to the inferior Muslim common people (*atraf*). Consequently, two kinds of Muslim political formations emerged, Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party claiming to represent the peasantry; while the Muslim League was dominated by *ashraf* politicians, many from the

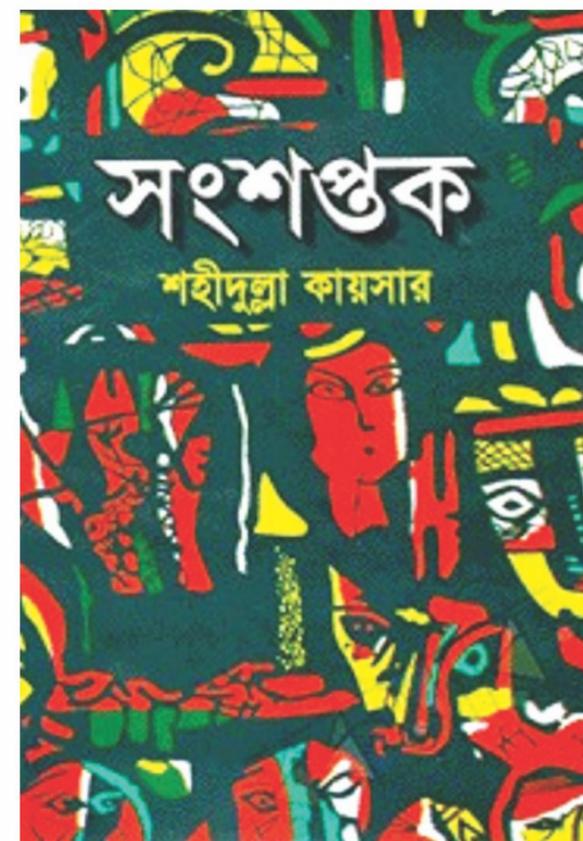
zamindar class. The internal dialectic of Muslim politics became a tussle between the two groups for the support of the Muslim masses, with the upper-class leaders happily falling back on the universalist message of Islam to paper over class differences. Similarly, there was a caste divide within the Hindu community, with some low-caste politicians demanding—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—a separate electorate.

Unsurprisingly, as soon as Pakistan was put together it began to show strain at the seams, first over the question of what would be the state language, then over economic disparity between the two wings. The demand for democracy and autonomy led to the six-point movement led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose popularity earned him the affectionate sobriquet of Bangabandhu, and eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh.

The price of independence was the most harrowing bloodshed ever seen in the country. A point often missed in accounts of the independence war is the attempt by the Pakistan Army to replay on its own terms the Partition massacres that took place in 1947 in and around the Punjab. From 1947 to 1971 West Pakistan's ruling elite blamed the disaffection in East Pakistan on the province's Hindu population and their influence on Muslim Bengalis, whom they considered insufficiently Islamised. What the latter had failed to do in 1947, because they were 'bad'—Hinduised—Muslims, the Pakistan Army was brainwashed into attempting in 1971. The Partition has cast a shadow from which the subcontinent has not emerged. Its effects are a part of the day to day lives of millions. Geopolitically, the militancy and civil unrest in many parts of the region are a direct consequence of Partition.

Perhaps the earliest fictional treatment of Partition by a Bangladeshi writer was the short story, 'The Escape', written in English by Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) and included in the Pakistan PEN *Miscellany* (1950). The locale is unspecified but can be taken to be North India, though it could be on either side of the newly drawn border, and the action takes place on a train, an iconic emblem of hope and horror in that region. Except for the detail of a skull cap on someone's head there is nothing to indicate the religious affiliation of the passengers, thus lending the story greater universality. The same effect is produced by an anonymous corpse lying on a station platform. A moving piece, it uses expressionistic devices to evoke the horror of what was happening: a character described as a madman by another, and who leaps off the running train; a story that the narrator's interlocutor is not interested in listening to and remains unfinished.

Nostalgia is a powerful theme in Partition-related fiction from West Bengal, but not in Bangladeshi works. And so, when Taslima Nasreen forays into this theme it is with a Hindu migrant to India who visits her old home in Fera (1993).



Another story of Waliullah's that subtly captures the inner turmoil wrought by Partition on those who had become uprooted is 'Ekti Tulsi Gachher Kahini'. It features a group of refugees from India who break into and occupy an abandoned Hindu home. One of them finds a *tulsi* plant in a bedraggled state on the grounds of the house and wants to pull it out as it is sacred to Hindus. Another refugee, who has caught a cold, points out its medicinal value in treating coughs and colds, and the plant is spared. Someone quietly tends the plant so that it begins to thrive again. One member of the group invokes the