

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 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.

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 The first partition, which took place in 1905, and was repealed six years later, has mainly touched Calcutta-based writers.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 antagonism comprising 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 (*rafia*). Consequently, two kinds of Muslim political formations emerged, Fazlul Haq'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 re-plant on its own terms the Partition massacres that took place in 1947 in and around the Punjab. From 1947 to 1951 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 'too'-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.

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 railway train, the iconic symbol of the decimation caused by Partition, as he imagines the housewife who used to look after the plant travelling to another country. Through the mediation of the plant the dispossessed owners of the house and its illegal occupants come to realise their common fate. It unites them even though the squatters are voluble in castigating Hindus for the wrongs they have done to Muslims. Niaz Zaman in *The Divided Legacy*, the only book-length study of Partition literature by a Bangladeshi critic, aptly comments: 'Both the groups are homeless refugees, both forced to vacate their homes for an uncertain future in an unknown place...Despite religious and political differences, Waliullah suggests, the human bond remains somewhere underneath.' The story ends with officials evicting the squatters from the house, which has been requisitioned by the government. The tulsi plant, with none to water it, begins to wither again. The implication is clear, the suffering brought on by Partition is to be blamed on the impersonal decisions of officials.

The first Bangladeshi novel dealing with Partition is *Rango Prabhat* (1957) by Abul Fazl (1903-1983). Two novels, both Marxist in inspiration, focus on the anxieties and social tensions in the decades leading up to Partition. Alauddin Al Azad's *Kobalaha O Asha* (1964) Sardar Jaiuddin's *Anek Surger Asha* (1966). A much more ambitious novel is Shahidullah Kaiser's *Shangshaptak* (1965), which was also made into a highly successful television serial.

Shahidullah Kaiser (1927-1971) was not only Marxist-inspired; he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party at a time when it was an underground organisation. The Communist Party of undivided India, though opposed to the dismemberment of the subcontinent, advised members to accept it as an inescapable historical reality and to carry on party activities in whichever country they happened to have their domicile. Kaiser therefore views Partition as a historical accident within the broad dialectical play of social forces and classes. His protagonist Zahed starts off as a committed Muslim League activist but turns later into a communist. The conflicts that partition give way to other conflicts, between West and East Pakistan, while the inherent class conflicts continue to impact on people's lives.

Abu Rushd's *Nangor* (1967), is the work of a West Bengali Muslim who chose to move to (East) Pakistan. It may be described as bourgeois realist fiction depicting the existential choices of a protagonist, Kamal, who is in many ways the author's persona.

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).

Her protagonist Kalyani comes back to Mymensingh only to be dismayed at the changes that have overtaken the place and the society.

Akhteruzzaman Elias (1943-1995) has produced a novel of epic proportions in *Khoobnama* (1997). Supriya Chaudhuri in her essay, 'The Bengali Novel' describes it, with good reason, as 'possibly the greatest modern Bengali novel', a prose epic spanning a vast and diverse timeline and creating a distinctive kind of magic realism drawing on indigenous traditions of folk narrative, memory and legend, as on subaltern history. The narrative opens with the *fakir* rebellion of the late eighteenth century, and follows the lives of later generations steeped in legends derived from that hoary age. Villagers bring up questions of sectarian differences of which the urban middle classes are hardly aware. Some characters affirm their identity as Muhammadi (that is, adherents of the Tariqa-e-Muhammadi, a Wahhabi-inspired sect). The ideological effort of the pro-Pakistan activists to paper over such crucial local differences is exposed as a ploy to ensure that leadership of the Muslims stays with a certain class. The problems of the tenancy system led to the Communist-led *tebhaga* movement around the time of Partition; this unsuccessful venture aimed to obtain two-thirds of the produce for the tenant farmers instead of the customary half.

Khoobnama received the Ananda Prize, the most prestigious literary award given in Kolkata, as did *Agunpukhi* by Hasan Azizul Haq (2006). Unlike Elias, Haq hails from West Bengal. He migrated to Pakistan in a most lackadaisical manner, as a brief interview reveals. In Burdwan, where his family came from, 'the Muslims of that area did not experience any real trouble,' he says. His sister's husband was an English teacher in a college in what had become East Pakistan. They asked him to live with them and study, so he went. After completing an MA at Rajshahi University he returned to Burdwan and took a job as a schoolteacher. After three months a visiting school inspector questioned his bona fide as an Indian, even though he had an Indian passport, so he came back to Rajshahi and settled there. He persuaded his parents to join him and his brother there, but his uncles and cousins stayed on in India even though they had supported the Pakistan movement. *Agunpukhi* is a first person account in the dialect of Burdwan of the life of a middle class Muslim woman who sees the organic community into which she had been born shatter under the impact of communal politics. But in the end she takes a stand and refuses to accompany her family to Pakistan.

I will end with a cursory look at the presence of Partition in the work of writers born after the event. A short story in English, Khademul Islam's 'An Lish Story', published in the Bangladeshi journal *Six Seasons Review*, presents a scene in a middle class Bengali home in Dhaka in the aftermath of the independence war of 1971. The narrator has escaped with his family from Pakistan, where they would have been treated like prisoners. He watches his grandmother cut and dress a hilsa fish (fish in Bengali). As she does so she narrates what she has seen and heard during the war: "1971 was 1947 all over again," she says, as she holds both ends of the fish with her hands and vigorously saws it back and forth across the blade. "The description of the cutting becomes increasingly gory as she narrates how in her native district a mauvi led an attack on a Hindu family in the neighborhood.

Mahmud Rahman's short story collection, *'Killing the Water'* (2010), includes a few pieces that sketch in the Partition as an unavoidable backdrop. Tahmina Anam's debut novel, *A Golden Age* (2007), links up Partition with the 1971 war through the family of Rehana Ali of Calcutta.

It is an interesting facet of our current cultural climate that the younger generation is drawn to a critical examination of the trauma of Partition in order to see their historical situation in perspective. An anthology of graphic narratives issued in 2013, *This Side That Side: Restoring Partition*, curated by Vishvajyoti Ghosh, brings together the attempts of writers and artists from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh to deal with the existential spin-off of the event. When the book was launched at the Dhaka Hay Festival in November, 2013, all seventy copies brought over sold out in record time; and so would have three times that number. Six of the twenty-eight stories are by Bangladeshis. Mahmud Rahman's 'Profit and Loss' is an autobiographical sketch moving from the Partition and the problems that came in its train to the 1971 war. Khademul Islam's 'The Exit Plan' narrates the adventure of escaping from Pakistan where he would have been incarcerated as an undesirable alien. M. Hasan's 'Making of a Poet', Syeda Farhana's 'Little Women', and Sanjoy Chakraborty's 'An Afterlife', delve into facets of the identity crisis in our fractured subcontinent.

My own contribution, 'Border', is a poem that tries to expose the existential consequences of having a shadow line scoring the region's map. It is based on an overlaid trip I made to India years back. In the poem the journey is prompted by desire, for where there is a boundary there is fascination with the other side: 'Let us say you dream of a woman/ and because she isn't anywhere around, / imagine her across the border.' After a mildly nightmarish journey to the border, the speaker 'instead of crossing over' lies 'dreaming' of the woman, and the border: perfect knife that slices through the earth/ without the earth's knowing./ severs and joins at the same instant.' The speaker cannot cross over because his desire, being based on fantasy, cannot be fulfilled. The border 'runs inconspicuously through modest households,/ creating wry humour—whole families/ eat under one flag, shit under another,/ humming a different national tune.' Refusing to accept one side or another, the speaker lies down on the border.

Last year Lexington Books, USA, published his *Restoring India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Amritjit Singh, Naini Iyer, and Rahul K Gairola; it includes two essays by Bangladeshis, Md Rezaul Haque (on 'The Case of Hasan Azizul Haq') and myself ('Partition and the Bangladeshi Literary Response', from which the present piece is adapted.) The seventeenth anniversary of Partition will witness the publication of an anthology, *Looking Back: India's Partition Seventy Years On*, edited by Debjani Sengupta, Tanu K. Saini and Rakshanda Jali, and published by Orient Black Swan; it includes a story in translation by Selina Hossain and one of my poems, 'Grishma, Barsha'.

Bangladesh's Partition literature deserves to be considered alongside similar works from other parts of the subcontinent. But more important than literary criticism is the task of transcending the conflicts that have given rise to the literature. Perhaps the most deleterious outcome of Partition has been the partitioning of the subcontinental mind. We have not only become an extended family of squabbling nations, we have grown to deny our civilisational unity. It is imperative that we make efforts to rediscover our commonality. This is true in every realm of experience, the cultural as well as the socio-economic and political. We cannot go back to the status quo ante, we cannot undo a tragedy, but we can try to go beyond towards a better order of things. Dealing critically with the cultural fallout of Partition is a necessary first step in that endeavour.

Kaiser Haq is a poet, translator, essayist, critic and academic.

RESTORING PARTITION



Sabuha Khan

Currently Residing: Unknown

Age in 1947: Not available

Location in 1947: Unknown (did not migrate)

When Partition occurred Sabuha Khan's parents were divided on whether to leave Delhi and Rohtak permanently. "My mother wanted to migrate to Pakistan and leave everything in India behind. My father, on the other hand, was not in favor of leaving his ancestral heritage and properties behind. They eventually decided to migrate when my mother's properties in Delhi were set on fire. Someone had written on the wall in blood that we were the next targets."

Mrs Khan was born in 1945 to an Urdu-speaking family in Delhi. Her father was a landlord with landholdings in Rohtak, as well as an officer with the British Indian police. Her father's family were settlers from Afghanistan. After her parents' marriage, the couple moved to

Delhi. Before Partition, Mrs Khan, the youngest of the family, was raised in their residence in Pul Bangash under a joint-family system.

From her very brief childhood in Delhi, Mrs Khan remembers that the family owned a cow, and she was quite attached to it. Mrs Khan says: "There was a large road across our house, and there used to be a series of shops [ground floor] and apartments [first floor]. My mother's family used to own seven of them and had rented them out to people. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh families used to live together in the mohallah, and there was no incident of communal discords before Partition.

Mrs Khan's maternal uncle was in the army, and he had been posted in Rawalpindi during Partition. Her family relocated to Rawalpindi in two trips. "In the first trip my sister, who was 15 at the time, and brother, who was 12, left Delhi with my maternal uncle. My parents, paternal grandmother and myself followed them two months later," she says. "My siblings lived at the Walton Refugee Camp in Lahore for a few days before leaving for Rawalpindi, and they were too traumatised to talk for several months about their journey."

Two months later, Mrs Khan, her parents, and paternal grandmother were escorted to the Old Fort Refugee Camp in Delhi in an army truck arranged by her maternal uncle. They lived at the refugee camp for 20 days. "It was a living nightmare for my family. My father, who was 50 at the time, could no longer stand on his feet, and my paternal grandmother had become terminally ill. She was admitted into the Red Cross hospital not too far from the camp," Mrs Khan shares. Mrs Khan was separated from her grandmother, as they left for the railway station without her. "To this day I don't know whether she survived or died in that hospital. No one in our family had

the means to find out," she says.

During their journey to Lahore, their train had stopped in the middle of dense forest at night. "A pregnant woman in the train went into labour and her screams were echoing in the train all of a sudden. Her husband was helpless as no passenger would help. My mother stood up to help deliver the baby, even though she had never done that before. While trying to take her off the train, the guards refused to take any responsibility for them if the train came under attack or starts to move. She handed me to the woman's husband, and wrote down my maternal uncle's address in Rawalpindi for him, saying in case she doesn't return to the train, take her child and husband at the given address." Mrs Khan's mother helped the woman deliver a baby boy in the forest, and managed to return to the train safely. "When she got back on the train with the woman and her newborn, everyone started chanting slogans. It infuriated my mother because none of these people came off of their seats to help this woman when she was in pain. It's an important memory, which enabled me to believe how strong she was."

Their train came into Lahore via the Wagah Station and went straight to Rawalpindi, where they were reunited with her uncle uncle. He was allotted a portion of Malik Dogar Singh's house at Abdal Garh on Nehru Road. "That house had been divided into three portions, each portion was allotted to an army officer stationed in Rawalpindi. My uncle was one of them. We lived in that house for nearly two decades." Twenty days after her family's arrival in Rawalpindi, Mrs Khan's father passed away. Mrs Khan and her siblings were raised by her mother and maternal uncle Mrs Khan vividly remembers the sound of bells emanating from the Gurudwara next to their new home. "I used to play hide and seek, with my siblings, and remember hiding in the