

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

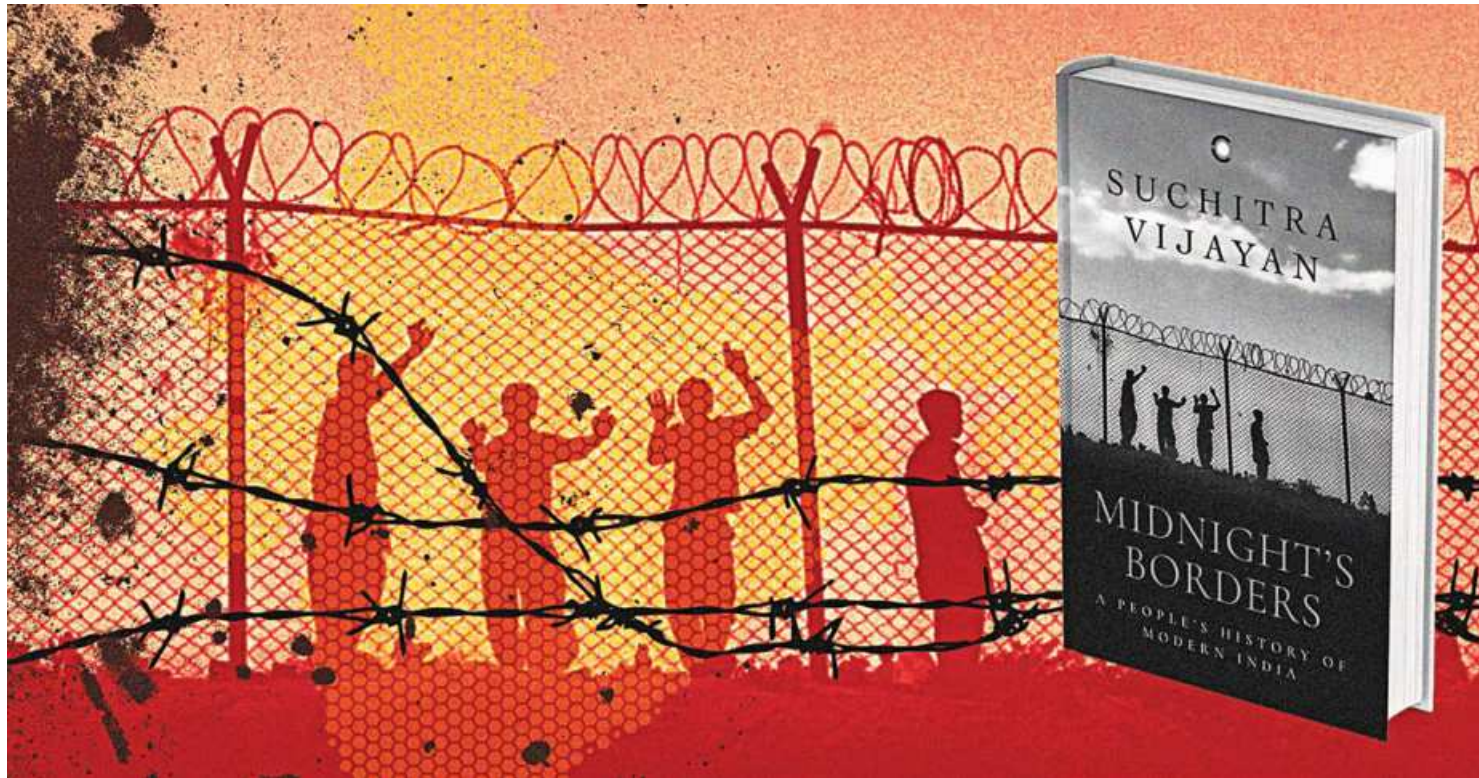
In Suchitra Vijayan's new book, borders are as arbitrary as history

SARAH ANJUM BARI

"What is the difference between a border and a frontier? Upon assuming control over India in 1858, for 190 years, the British Crown would segregate a syncretic subcontinent along the faultlines of religious differences, stoking unrest between its Hindu and Muslim communities. These 300 million 'colonial subjects' would never be given the right to self govern, or vote across the religious divide. Famines, failed mutinies, and conscription of civilians as pawns in the West's power plays would go on to colour this history. As the hour of freedom from colonial rule approached, frontiers are what the newly independent nation deserved and hoped for—frontiers in the sense of boundaries that promised security and potential.

But the 15th of August, as we know, caused a different kind of unleashing in 1947, transforming some 17.9 million civilians into migrants scurrying across the Indian subcontinent, divided now into India and East and West Pakistan. In *Midnight's Borders* (Westland Publications, 2021), author and photographer Suchitra Vijayan travels the 9,000 miles of India's borders to understand what Partition did to individual lives and communities, and how it continues to incite violence, displacement, prejudice, and trauma among those who live in the border regions. Vijayan treats these regions as frontiers, using them as points from which to reach into each area's internal (and historical) conflicts as they were triggered by the Partition.

She interviews militants, soldiers, border guards, and civilians—children who play cricket along the Bangladesh-India border, families who have lost a child or a spouse. For this book, she groups the interviews into chapters demarcating each of India's borders with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, and Pakistan, the latter expectedly touching upon the most contested issues relating to Kashmir and Rajasthan. If the first chapter on Afghanistan begins from the initial stirrings of colonial ambition in the 18th century, when the geopolitical expanse of Russia threatened the British into



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

demarcating the Durand Line, her last chapter in Amritsar circles back to another epoch-making event of history when, on April 13, 1919 in Jallianwala Bagh, British brigadier general Reginald Dyer ordered the massacre of unarmed civilians who had gathered to celebrate Baishakh. Between these bookends, history churns in the form of trauma in this text, each killing, each misinformed policy begetting death, disappearances, orphanhood, emotional and physical abuse, enforced prostitution and cultures of smuggling, and deliberate amnesia among generations of those affected.

The most fundamental action of the Partition—the drawing of the lines—occurred under famously irresponsible circumstances. When British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe landed in the subcontinent on July 8, 1947, he

had seven weeks to complete the cartography of a region he had never before visited, whose mosaic of languages, cultures, and communities he was unfamiliar with; the maps and census data he consulted were out of date. Vijayan quotes an interview given by Radcliffe to Kuldip Nayar, in which he admits, "If I had two to three years, I might have improved on what I did". But, as she highlights, this was not the first time. The Durand Line drawn in 1893 sliced through the Pashtuns, Baloch, and other ethnic communities residing in the Pash-tun-Balochistan regions; the McMahon Line descends from an agreement between Britain and Tibet that continues to be contested by India and China today.

The history that Vijayan very cleanly, but briefly, recounts in her book would be more

insightful for an audience unfamiliar with the subcontinent's past. For those of us who have lived and descended from it, the individual stories she unearths can be more jarring.

Near the river of Mahananda which divides Bangladesh and India—600 yards away from the town of Tetulia and another 40 miles east—Vijayan talks to a man named Ali who lived near a pond through which Bangladesh-India's zero point runs. When India constructed a border fence 150 yards from the zero point in 2007, Ali was stuck in the accidental no man's land. A local leader convinced him to sign papers testifying that he would be okay with the floodlights being installed close to his home. Its orange beam blasted through his house. Ali could no longer sleep, fatigued and depressed, fainting at

work, slurring speech, facing panic attacks and mild paralysis in his left arm. Following a complete mental breakdown, he plastered up every surface of his home and took to living in complete darkness, sequestered from regular living.

In her mining of these stories, Vijayan reveals a thorough grounding in the ethics of retelling others' experiences. She addresses the questions asked and the refused answers. The images she was requested not to share. And the different versions to the same event narrated by each party, from a traumatised mother to the border guards and officials on either side. "The people in this book are eloquent advocates of their history and their struggles. My role, then, and this book's role, is to find in their articulations a critique of the nation state, its violence and the arbitrariness of territorial sovereignty", she writes.

At the beginning of the project, which spanned seven years, Vijayan was an attorney who had worked for the United Nations War Crimes Tribunals for Yugoslavia. Her interest in the testimonies of victims and survivors, even if driven by compassion, seemed purely intellectual. Over the course of the journey, however, the author lost her father and gave birth to her first child, and the heightened, urgent need for a safer world seeps through her writing as she uncovers each patch of India's borders for us. Her censure for the arbitrariness of its violences grows more pronounced.

In one of the later chapters, Vijayan stands atop the "air tight" fences separating India and Pakistan, but the cadences of an *azaan* waft across both regions. A border, not a frontier, is a cage. The project of this book—and of remembering the legacy of Partition—is at least partly about "realising its porousness.

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WORTH A RE-READ: FICTION

A portrait of a time and a man

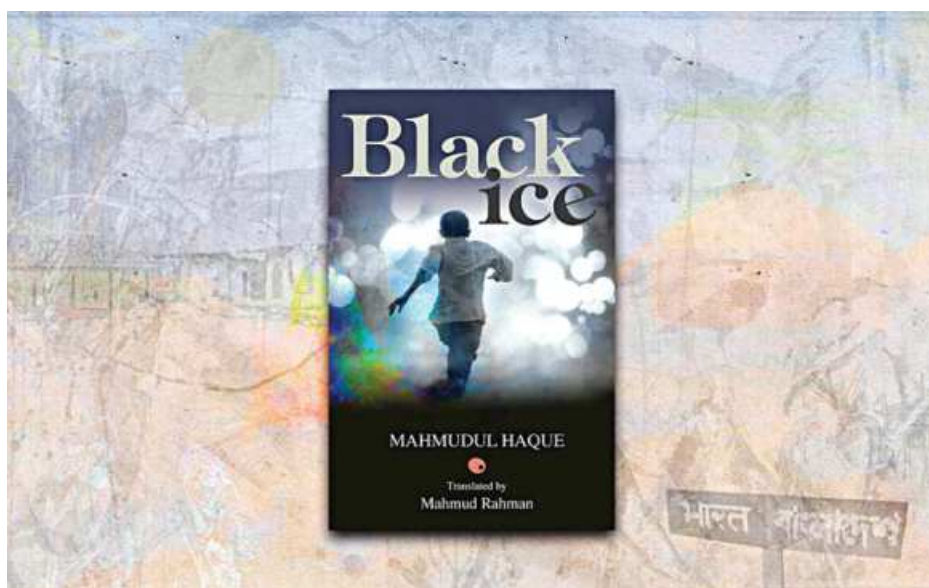
MEHRUL BARI

Born in 1940 to a Muslim family in West Bengal, Mahmudul Haque saw his childhood punctuated and perforated by the 1947 Partition of India. His father was the first to make the move to what would soon be East Pakistan. "After Baba left, our position there became fragile, everyone began to look at us with suspicion. It reached a point where they stopped mingling with us, and communal tensions became so intense that we were compelled to leave. Now tell me, can there be love for a birthplace that forces a child to flee?" Haque later recalled in a 2006 interview with Ahmad Mostofa Kamal—three decades removed from his retirement from a writing career that took root in the early 1950s.

The interview is reprinted in the back pages of *Black Ice* (Harper Perennial), a 2012 translation of Haque's 1977 novel *Kalo Borof* by Mahmud Rahman, as is a short biography quickly detailing the singular life of the late author. What these accompaniments do is enrich the novel, peeling back the layers of fiction affixed to the text, and in the process revealing the autobiography submerged deep in its heart. "That's not based on my life. I am not there in it", Haque asserts, though soon the interview is to come to a pause, prompted by a tide of emotions that besets the author to a point of momentary despondency. The protagonist of *Black Ice*, teacher Abdul Khaleq, was hit by the same wave.

The novel tracks the childhood of Abdul Khaleq, which comes back to the man every sleepless, teary-eyed night. His wife, Rekha, is awake next to him, but he doesn't notice and she doesn't force him to. As his tears dry, he makes for the pen and paper, and he jots down whatever he can of a past he barely seems to speak of in the present.

The chapters alternate between these recollections—taking residence in rural 1940s Kolkata—and the now, where schoolteacher Khaleq repeats a daily Sisyphean routine in newly christened-



DESIGN: ZAREEN TASNIM BUSHRA

Bangladesh. From the very start, the former takes up more and more pages and the latter less and less until the two coincide in a breathtaking final chapter, which is among the finest top-to-bottom chapters to come out of the subcontinent.

Haque's prose here is bare and lightning-sharp. Throughout the novel, he creates an air of both peace and unease, which no doubt defined his boyhood looking back. Mahmud Rahman's translation does well to preserve the flow, and his approach to speech conversion, near-directly replacing Bangla words for English, is an interesting, often endearing choice. Bangla speakers can hear in their minds the words that originally might have been in several different occasions. In one instance, a doctor growls, "Do I know magic that I can cure him overnight?"

This creative choice does, however, on a few instances misfire. On some lines, I found the syntaxes clashed, forcing re-readings on my part and slight confusion. I must stress, though, the negligibility of these errors, which are more than balanced out by the numerous joys of

reading everyday Bangali life captured so intimately.

As for *Black Ice*'s premise, it may sound familiar to readers, and indeed it keeps to a tradition as old as the novel of "bored professor abandons his family for an obsessive search for identity", à la midlife crisis. Mahmudul Haque nonetheless circumvents the tired mould with his sensitive treatment of characters, animals, nature, and a time. In a pivotal moment of the story, Abdul Khaleq stands before a huge ashwath tree which has died and decayed several ages ago but has stood in place "as a matter of habit". The scene is a touch heavy-handed but the author's limning of it is so careful, so serene, that the moment is nothing short of beautiful. That is what *Black Ice* is when you put the book down. A beautiful work that has earned its status as a cult novel.

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FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Love in the time of Partition

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

Partition holds a strange place in our memories. For Bangladeshis, it may be far overshadowed by the more recent memory of the Liberation War, but across the Radcliffe line, it is recalled in families as a scar to forget, and in film as a reason to remember and to hate. And outside of the subcontinent, it is overshadowed by the precipitation of WWII, the start of the Cold War, and the behemoth propaganda machine of England. As a diasporic Bangladeshi, I constantly search for books that help explain my conflicting identities and the intergenerational trauma we carry in our blood. So when I find a book that talks specifically about Partition, how it can shape our identity as *desis*, and how the scars are carried across oceans and generations, it automatically gets fast tracked to the top of my To Read pile. Anjali Enjeti's *The Parted Earth* (Hub City Press, 2021) was the latest of these tales.

The debut novel begins with Deepa, a 16-year-old, well-to-do Hindu girl living in Delhi in 1947, whose romance with the Muslim boy Amir is tragically ripped apart by the growing hatred of their communities. Decades later, a different family tragedy launches her granddaughter Shan, who has all but scrubbed the brown out of herself, into a quest for answers. She picks up the pieces of her shattered family history and seeks to reconcile her identity and story. From this summary, it promised to be a story in the vein of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* or *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, but for a South Asian demographic.

Stories surrounding Partition do not lend themselves to a young adult demographic—to truly capture the horror of the time requires the room to evoke visceral emotions. To her credit, Enjeti makes a strong attempt at doing so within the limited medium, though I am unsure if the young adult tone was intended. Seeing Partition through Deepa's eyes is truly harrowing—as the anxiety and confusion builds around her, we too feel the walls close in. We understand her denial, her grief, and when her world goes up in flames, so do our hearts. All the while, Enjeti juggles this with the giddy rush of being a 16-year-old in love,

the all-consuming nature of such romances, and how in such dark times, we will cling to any hope we can.

But these moments are only so vivid because they are situations that are near universally relatable, or deeply traumatic, and the rest of the book does not keep pace with the emotionally poignant beginning. Indeed, upon closer inspection, the beginning unravels too. The epicentre of it all is the rather amateur prose. It is beautiful, mind you, but often to its own detriment. Enjeti weaves descriptions with great care and detail, but without regard for their need in the moment or plot. It draws the reader in once, twice, but by the third time, one's eyes glaze over as they skip ahead in desperation for some development.

The cost of such overabundant descriptions are the characters themselves. Amidst all the flowery prose, their relationships are rushed and the characters are never allowed to stew and develop. When Enjeti is not describing, there is plot happening, exposition is being thrown into dialogue, emotions are dialled up to an 11, and characters are left as hollow shells carrying out tasks for the plot to progress. And with such a short book, it is a wonder as to why a few hundred more pages weren't allotted to letting the characters flesh themselves into more organic beings.

The role of Partition stories in literature cannot be overstated. While this novel can be very accessible to a wide audience, that is both to its strength and detriment: for fans of young adult romances, *The Parted Earth* may be a compelling foray into the time period, but for those seeking deeper characters, development, and understanding of intergenerational trauma, it might not deliver.

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