



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

To trace back a tapestry of trauma

Partition archives unpacked

YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

There is a 2018 episode of *Doctor Who* where the Doctor encounters a group of aliens who, following the decimation of their own species, have dedicated themselves to commemorating the lives and deaths of those who die unseen. Aanchal Malhotra's second book, *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* (HarperCollins India, 2022), is an attempt to do just that. Through a number of essays and interviews, Malhotra commemorates lives that were shattered during the Partition of India, and traces those cracks back through the generations to tell their stories. It is an archive of fading memories, of stories untold for generations, teased out by curious and gentle hands.

Those familiar with Malhotra's work, whether through her Museum of Material Memory, or her previous book, *Remnants of a Separation* (HarperCollins India, 2017), will already be acquainted with her style of interviewing and storytelling. Her project then was to retell the memories of Partition as stored in the physical objects that survivors have kept with them.

The difference, this time, is that the interviewees are mostly generations removed from Partition. To nearly all of them, Partition was something that happened in history books, or a fade-to-black in their forebears' memory that was only recently teased out through multiple conversations over chai. Malhotra acts as witness to these stories, gently giving them guidance; and interspersed between these stories are Malhotra's own thoughts—realisations she has made over years of research and archiving about the nature of memory, of generation trauma and reactions to Partition, and the larger human condition.

Some reviews have complained that *In the Language of Remembering* does not bring new analysis or insight to the field of oral history

and Partition research, but reading through the text, one senses that was not the primary goal of the project. This book's first and foremost goal is to preserve tales that are already fading from collective memories. It is a bonding experience—group therapy, between the interviewees and readers, moderated by Malhotra. The healing and academic analysis of the generational scars comes secondary. The chapters are named as such: Belonging, Identity, Discovery, and so on.

Perhaps better criticism could be levied about the demographics of those interviewed. In *Remnants*, her research skewed more towards survivors across the India-Pakistan border. This is a problem that has largely been rectified, with many stories now examining the toll of crossing the India-Bangladesh border, not only in 1947, but in 1971 too. The stories aren't all about the two Bengals either—Assam, Tripura, Bihar and other border states get to share too.

However, the tales still all lean towards

Perhaps the book's best aspect is how it allows space for the stories of those who perpetrated violence during Partition. Such stories are horrific, but very necessary.

families that strongly believed in education, are rather well educated, or even wealthy, land owning families. The book never makes a distinction between the love for land owned, and thereby wealth and status, and land lived in, an altogether more abstract, more emotional, and less class discriminating connection. Why does Pushpa Lata Dewanji, whose family is so influential that Chittagong has a ghaat and a lane named after them, have more of a right to immortalise her connection to land than the farmers who may have tilled the land under her?

The class disparity between who gets to tell their stories is one that is often discussed in historical circles, and seeing the lack of representation of more working class folk brings this discussion up once again.

There are a few strange editing choices too. For one, Malhotra sometimes refers to grandparents as "grandmother/grandfather" and sometimes as Nana, Nanu or Dada, Dadu, Dadi. We wish the terminology was kept consistent, especially favouring the latter given how many families and familial branches we follow throughout the book. On that note, given we do not stay with each family for too long, it would help to have an appendix of maps and family trees to help parse the many names and places they come from. Instead, the appendices are dedicated to Malhotra's footnotes, which leave many interesting tidbits hidden in a section of the book many readers may not flip to.

Perhaps the book's best aspect is how it allows space for the stories of those who perpetrated violence during Partition. The story of P, as named in the book to preserve anonymity, may have been the first time I have seen one mention their ancestor in such a terrible light. P spent Partition offering shelter to hapless women who were left by the wayside, only to sell them off later. Such stories are horrific, but very necessary, and if we were to nitpick, we would ask for less punches pulled in the depictions of their atrocities.

That is not to deter one from reading *In the Language of Remembering*. It never evokes the same emotional rawness of *Remnants*, but it does patch many of the holes, and brings in new insights compared to its predecessor. The book, along with *Remnants*, forms a truly beautiful duology archiving the minutia of Partition.

Yaameen Al-Muttaqi works with robots and writes stories of dragons, magic, friendship, and hope. Send him a raven at yaameen3112@gmail.com.

INTERVIEW

The books that made 'Kaiser'

SARAH ANJUM BARI

Hoichoi's *Kaiser*, released on July 8, 2022, is part tribute to the genre of detective novels and part beckoning call for viewers to return to the excitement of reading books. Everything from the premise—based heavily on Rakib Hasan's series of detective novels called *Teen Goyenda*—to the set design, character development and plot twists, rely on books as both objects and intellectual stimuli. Daily Star Books editor Sarah Anjum Bari speaks with *Kaiser*'s director Tanim Noor and script writer Ayman Asib Shadhin about the books that inspired the popular TV show.

Why do books play such a significant role in *Kaiser*?

Tanim Noor: I grew up in the '90s, in Dhaka, reading detective stories. At the time we used to read the *Teen Goyenda* series (Sheba Prokashoni), along with Anandabazar's puja specials that published stories by writers of West Bengal. Around 2013, I also reread Sherlock Holmes and I wondered, what if there were a detective



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

character like this in Bangladesh? That thought first sparked the name of Kaiser, and then the idea that he would have certain characteristics. In 2016, I shared the idea with my then-colleague, Abdul Quaiyum Leon, who also loves reading detective novels. He said, "Let me write a story about it first". Around 2019-20, we wrote a new draft of the story and sold the script to Hoichoi in 2021, at which point, Shadhin joined the project and added his own layers and ideas. This is how it started.

Ayman Asib Shadhin: We wanted to see the characters of *Teen Goyenda* come to life in a setting that is centred around Dhaka city as it did not exist before this—the closest is perhaps Humayun Ahmed's Misir Ali. We also wanted to explore the character's personal life on screen along with his work as a detective.

I started to think about how to naturally incorporate the books into the show, and I came up with the idea of making the characters self aware of the fact that they are in a detective story. It was the easiest way to add a spin to the tropes of the detective novel.

Read the full interview and watch our conversation with Tanim Noor and Ayman Asib Shadhin on The Daily Star website. Find both on Daily Star Books' Facebook and Instagram pages.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Reminiscing Ekushey, 70 years on

GM SHAHIDUL ALAM

Twenty-five literary pieces, consisting of nine poems, 15 stories, and a play, make up *An Ekushey Anthology 1952-2022* (writers.ink, 2022), a noble endeavour undertaken by Niaz Zaman, a noted educationist, prolific writer, publisher, and an indefatigable literary figure. The eventual birth of Bangladesh may be traced back to the debasement of its key cultural make-up, its language, Bangla, and Zaman has thoughtfully striven to bring out the anthology on the 70th anniversary of Ekushey February, the date that marks the beginning of the end of the Pakistan on August 15, 1947, and the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation-state on March 26, 1971.

The 25 pieces are made up of four in the original English, and the rest 21 in English translated from the original Bangla. The translators, with the odd exceptions, have done a commendable job in presenting the works of some accomplished writers like Anisuzzaman, Asad Chowdhury, Jahanara Arzoo, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Zahir Raihan,



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Selina Hossain, Shaikat Osman, Bimal Guha, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Jharna Das Purkayastha, et al. Niaz Zaman herself has translated five pieces, besides writing the preface and signing off on the book with the story "My Friend, My Enemy". Noora Shamsi Bahar has translated a couple, Kabir Chowdhury three, and Hasan Ameen Salahuddin, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, Junaidul Haque, Bashabi Fraser have done one apiece.

Zaman has provided an informative preface to her

endeavour, including this sharp observation on generational change: "While the observances at the Shaheed Minar have become stultified—and the day even become an occasion for lovers to meet—the significance of the Language Movement can never be forgotten."

Another of Zaman's observations is intriguing in its broad implications: "Ekushey February today is no longer just a national observance but, as International Mother Language Day, a worldwide celebration of the

diversity of human languages and the need to preserve endangered languages." This point may well play the squirrel in some minds: How many political leaders in various official, or unofficial, capacities, let alone the general citizenry, across the globe have even the knowledge of the existence of International Mother Language Day, much less what it signifies? Ekushey February will remain in the hearts and minds of Bangladeshis and Bangalis from generation to generation, and the 25 writings in the book depict, in various degrees of competence, that particular point.

Interestingly, though, one poem in the anthology, Mohammad Nurul Huda's "Suddenly Ma", looks to embrace other languages along with his own:

"Holding my mother language within my bosom,

I embrace the language of every mother

With all my heart."

Similarly, Saleha Chowdhury's interesting piece contains this cryptic observation pregnant with multiple indications: "It is amazing that 21 consonants and five vowels

make the world go round. What would we do without the English language?"

Zaman has classified the pieces in two groups: "the early stories focus on the events that took place on 21 February—the processions, the police action and the deaths—while the later ones show how the attitude to Bangla has changed in these 70 years." This last point, to reiterate, is something to track down the years.

The offerings in the book, to repeat, are generally of good quality, with some going down the lane of hyper-emotion, a not uncommon Bangali trait. Anisuzzaman's "Eyesight" is a poignant tale of a martyr told through his blind father. Jahanara Arzoo's poem, "This Smouldering Fire", is emotive as it speaks of "The lands of Kanupa, Chandidas, Rabindra, Nazrul, Of Mahua and Madhumalati."

Saleha Chowdhury's "Talking Their Hearts Out" is an interesting piece that encompasses a protagonist from Poshchimbongo, the other region that speaks Bangla. Mozaffar Hossain's "An Ad Seeking the Identity of a Hand" is an unusual treatment of a matter related to

Ekushey, and is dedicated by the author to a veteran of the Bangla Language Movement, Rawshan Ara Bachchu.

All of their writings, and the unusual approach they adopt, enrich the overall quality of *An Ekushey Anthology*. Jharna Das Purkayastha, in "The Journey of Shamim Akhtar", dwells on the conflict that different generations, including of the same family, experience, precisely because of the dynamics of the inevitabilities of generational change. The editor of the book, Niaz Zaman, rounds off her editing effort by presenting her story "My Friend, My Enemy", which she has dedicated to Halima Khatun, who was in the forefront of the procession that defied Section 144 on February 21, 1952. Zaman, through her protagonist, posits: "And Urdu—is not the mother tongue of most West Pakistanis. If anything, it is an Indian language. It used to be called Hindustani at one time."

An Ekushey Anthology should be an enjoyable, and informative, read.

GM Shahidul Alam is an Adjunct Professor in the Media and Communication department, IUB.