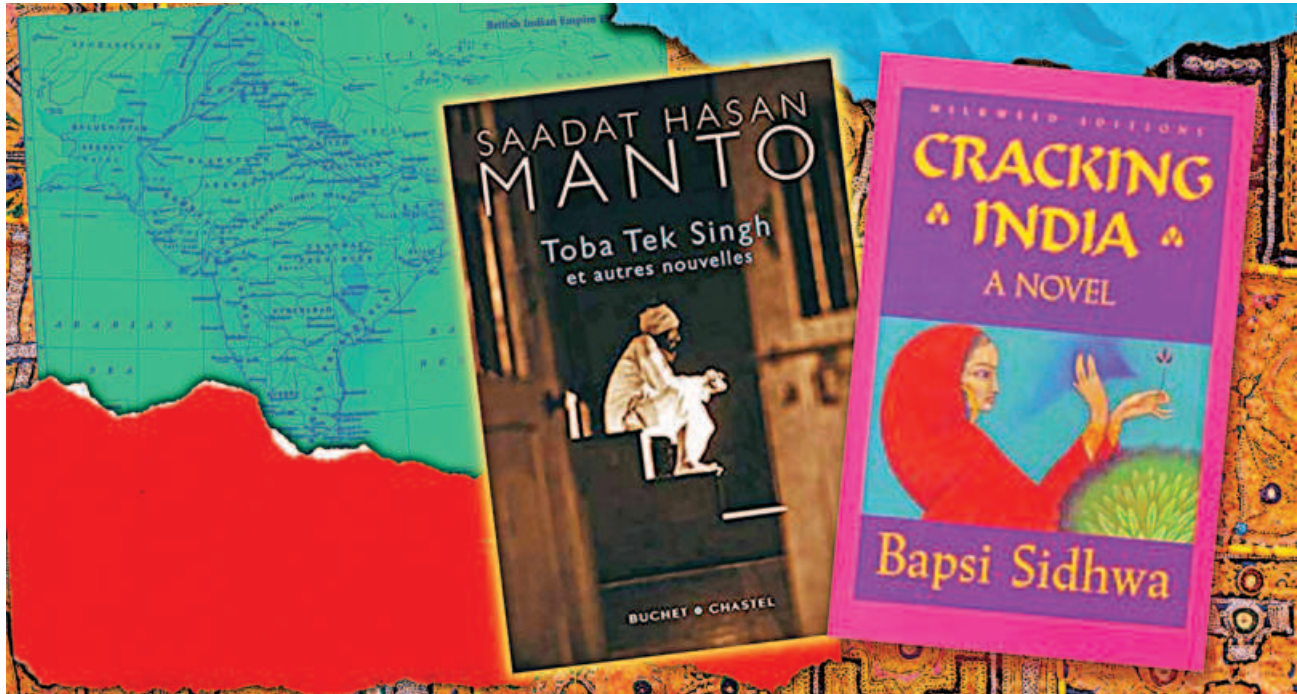


ESSAY

‘Bare life’ and Partition



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

“Never mind us...save the young girls! The children! Hai! Hai!” This is before Sikh mobs attack their village, and “rather than face the brutality of the mob” the women are to “pour kerosene around the house and burn themselves.”

SYEDA FATEMA RAHMAN

“Can one break a country...Will the earth bleed?” asks eight year-old Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* (1988)—a tale about Partition. “No one’s going to break India. It’s not made of glass!” Lenny’s cousin retorts. However, the irony is that such musings cannot be brushed aside as mere childish naïveté. Their bewildered remarks convey an absurdity that indeed had characterised Partition. A similar absurdity is highlighted in Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story, “Toba Tek Singh” (1955), which offers a satirical critique of the Partition.

This absurd historical event claimed one to two million lives—the earth did bleed. The Partition of 1947 was a “state of exception” in Giorgio Agamben’s formulation: suspended as it was in a space in time where the laws that normally govern a state ceased to be effective. Agamben also distinguishes between ‘zoë’ a bare, de-politicised form of life, and ‘bios’, the politicised form of life in a society with its right to justice and law. This distinction is useful in understanding the depiction of women in Partition themed literary works, such as Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, and Manto’s “Open it!” (1948) and “Cold Flesh” (1950). Although the female characters occupy the realm of de-politicised life in these texts and, thus, eventually become dead or living dead, they continue to induce powerful effects in the living world.

Manto’s short story “Open it!” narrates the macabre tale of a father and a daughter, Sirajuddin and Sakina respectively, fleeing a violence-ridden Amritsar amidst Partition. Sirajuddin loses Sakina and is ultimately reunited with her supposedly dead body. However, upon the doctor’s nervous order to “open it [the window]” the lifeless hands of Sakina undoes the string of her shalwar and opens it. The reader is left to assume that the rescue team who found her, or perhaps the doctor, had repeatedly raped her so that the

muscular movement involved in opening her shalwar has become a conditioned response to that order. Sakina lives in the zone of indistinction, the realm of non-political dead life—not just after her dead body is found, but throughout the whole story. This is because she is part of a discardable population which the state has “let die”, as Michel Foucault might have put it: both as an exercise of its own sovereignty and for the greater good of the nation(s). After all, the nation was split into two partly to pacify the threatened sovereignty of two contending rulers.

That Sakina is a living dead who has belonged to the realm of zoë all along is hinted at several times through ambiguous language and an eerie tone. For instance, after the rescuers/volunteers find her trudging along a field she turns “deathly pale” when they ask if she is Sakina—like the blanched pallor as she lay dead. This imparts a sense that she could have been dead when they found her in the field, but she also could have been living when they later found her “unconscious” rather than dead body. Moreover, the volunteers’ words to Sirajuddin that “if his daughter was alive he would be reunited with her in a few days” is repeated, and even after the field scene the volunteers once again assure him that they will find her with no mention of having already met her—could she have been alive then when she would indeed be reunited with Sirajuddin? The reader cannot pinpoint where Sakina is alive and where dead and, in this manner, the line between the dead and the living is blurred to depict her in a perpetual state of zoë. However, even from the afterlife Sakina continues to create a range of changes in the living world through her conditioned response—it makes Sirajuddin ecstatic and, on the other hand, it makes the doctor break into “a cold sweat.” Equally important, the non-living string gives a powerful testimony to what happened to Sakina in the living world.

Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* narrates the horrors of Partition through the perspective

of a precocious child, Lenny. Hers is a unique perspective because she is neither Hindu, Muslim, nor Sikh—she is Parsi, like Sidhwa herself. As Lenny’s harmonious social world becomes rife with growing intra-communal tension that soon bursts into the bloodbath that accompanies Partition, a parallel change in her beloved, beautiful Ayah also occurs after she is abducted on account of her being Hindu. She is forcibly made a prostitute and raped. Consequently, the previously hypersexualised Ayah is portrayed with the mannerisms of a living dead post-Partition. Now, the “achingly lovely” Ayah who used to “inwardly glow” when she gazed at her lover, says “I’m not alive” to Lenny’s grandmother when they meet after his murder and her abduction. Again, the line between the dead and the living is blurred as Masseur’s (Ayah’s lover) dead body is portrayed with life-like characteristics—“there was too much vigour about him still” in contrast to the deathly aura about Ayah.

After the political situation spirals into an exceptional state, Ayah begins resembling the non-political dead life that characterises the realm of zoë. Yet, she engenders powerful effects in the living world as in this moving passage. It occurs after Ayah has been brought to the rehabilitation centre for rescued women:

“And I [Lenny] chant: ‘Ayah! Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!’ until my heart pounds with the chant and the children on the roof picking it up shout with all their heart: ‘Ayah! Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!’ and our chant flows into the pulse of the women below, and the women on the roof, and they beat their breasts and cry: ‘Hai! Hai! Hai! Hai!’ reflecting the history of their cumulative sorrows and the sorrows of their Muslim, Hindu, Shikh and Rajput great-grandmothers who burnt themselves alive rather than surrender their honor to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses.”

Although a brief, blank look at them out of “glazed and unfeeling eyes” is the only reaction that the living-dead Ayah can muster, the moment she initiated is a demonstration in its own right, a merging together of female identities to conduct an act of resistance against the conditions that have made death preferable over life for these women. It is evocative of a previous scene in the novel when “A woman with a child on her lap slaps her forehead and begins to wail: ‘Hai! Hai!’ The other women join her: ‘Hai! Hai!’ Older women, beating their breasts like hollow drums, cry, “Never mind us...save the young girls! The children! Hai! Hai!” This is before Sikh mobs attack their village, and “rather than face the brutality of the mob” the women are to “pour kerosene around the house and burn themselves.”

All in all, these texts delicately deal with the nature of bare, de-politicised life that characterises the state of exception into which Partition was plunged. The line between the dead and the living is constantly being blurred in Partition-themed literature and ultimately, the texts demonstrate that one *can* break a country; and that the earth also bleeds.

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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Sports journalism and Bangladesh

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

I
Textbooks in Bangladesh tend to be written by foreign authors. Those that are written by Bangladeshi authors, emphasise on examples in a non-Bangladesh context. This constrains learning. There has been a longstanding demand for textbooks that fill this void.

The sub-title, ‘Sports Journalism in Bangladesh Context’ puts into perspective under what genre, *Inside the Press Box* falls. And who the main audience could be.

The author, Azad Majumder, has been involved in journalism since 1997, while he was a student in the Department of Journalism at the University of Dhaka. Later, he took up journalism as a profession and specialised in sports journalism. Majumder’s entrance into the world of journalism came at a watershed. Journalism was going through a technological transition from print to online and audio-visual media.

Having seen and gone through this technological change, Majumder’s recent book is pragmatic. It combines old-school and new-school methods. It is relevant for those who want to take journalism and sports journalism as a profession. The book is also relevant for sports enthusiasts who want to spot a good report from the many that circulate in the social media that create more noise than sound.

II
Inside the Press Box: Sports Journalism in Bangladesh Context is an 85 page text that is divided into 12 chapters. A glance at the chapter titles gives an inkling that the book is a 101 course in the fundamentals of journalism.

Azad Majumder goes back to the basics. He asks time-tested questions that are still relevant today. Majumder starts the book by asking the question: what constitutes a good sports report?



He then goes on to ask, why does a reporter need to be careful about sources and references? How does a sports journalist conduct an interview and a press conference? Depending on which section of a news portal a piece of news will find itself, how does a journalist present the news?

In the next part, Majumder explores investigative journalism, and the use of data in reporting. He then goes on to explore objectivity, ethics, and nationalism in sports journalism.

In between these two parts, the author includes a chapter that addresses the challenges of new media in online and audio-visual journalism.

Majumder emphasises two time-tested methods. The first is a foundation of rhetoric, the Hermagoras of Tennes Principle of asking the five Ws: who, what, when, where and why, and then how? The second is John Reith’s foundation of the purpose of the BBC, to inform, educate and entertain. All journalism ultimately reaches wide and diverse audiences. Good journalism therefore needs to combine academic elements with non-academic finesse.

The reader gets a takeaway message that mastery of these old-school and new-school methods over the topics in the chapters covered will improve professionalism of sports journalism and journalism.

III
The book stands out for its lavish anecdotes. Here, Majumder does justice to sports in Bangladesh. It is refreshing to see that cricket does not overpower other sports.

Students of journalism will get an academic presentation of basic topics of a 101 journalism course. The reader (sports enthusiast) will be educated on the background stories related to these academic topics in the context of Bangladesh. On a side note, the book is also a short journey into different sports in Bangladesh.

Inside the Press Box will encourage sports journalists in Bangladesh to develop professionalism in a budding field. It will help sports enthusiasts navigate their way in social media where many posts are posted in irrelevant contexts to become viral. Explaining academic topics in sports in a Bangladesh context is a new initiative. The book has the prospect of encouraging people from journalism and other professions to stop and ask if they can do something similar.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

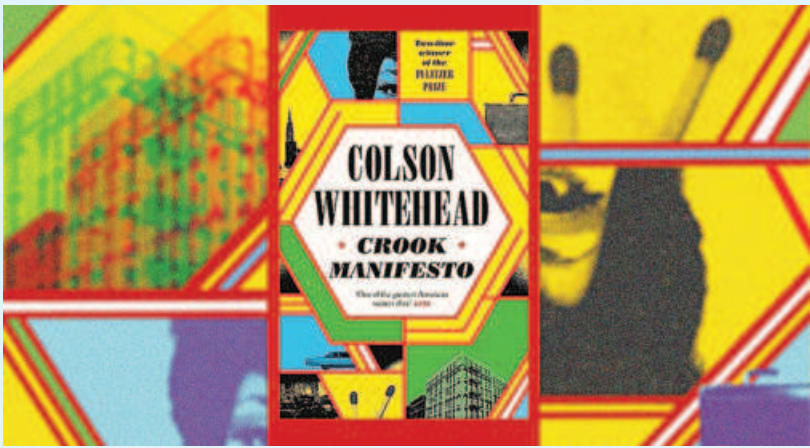
The straight and narrow vision of ‘CROOK MANIFESTO’

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Colson Whitehead’s sequel to his novel *Harlem Shuffle* (Doubleday, 2021) is a continuation of the exact same order. From its structure (three loosely connected novellas encompassing a decade in New York City) to its pastiches of crime, noir, and heist fiction, Whitehead’s *Harlem* saga reads as if one came after the other through a conveyor belt. That if there is to be a third one, it would be of exactly similar dimensions. There would be little cause for complaints, though, as Whitehead’s delicious prose is worth a view in abundance.

Colson Whitehead came to prominence with *The Underground Railroad* (Doubleday, 2016), a riveting piece of speculative fiction, ingenious and movingly narrated, where the secret network through which slaves escaped to freedom in Antebellum America was re-imagined as a literal underground train network. He followed it up with *The Nickel Boys* (Doubleday, 2019), a fictional account of the Dozier School, a highly abusive reform school. Both novels won the Pulitzer, ushering Whitehead into a much deserved superstardom. A gifted writer of genre fiction, he set himself apart from the 2000s era tendency of literary writers to co-opt the field for themselves with sub-par detective fiction and soft sci-fi.

In *Crook Manifesto* and its predecessor *Harlem Shuffle*, Whitehead tells the story of Ray Carney, owner of a furniture business, who occasionally partakes in fencing. He comes from a



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

family who dabbled in crime, but wants to live a life now in the “straight and narrow,” which he fails time and time again. *Crook Manifesto* finds him in the 1970s of The Jackson Five, The Black Panthers, and Blaxploitation films, a time Whitehead describes with intimate specificity. His New York City is, the reader realises, the real villain here. A city that breathes and spreads criminal activity, a city colourfully perfect for the movies.

And the screen really is the true influence here. *Crook Manifesto* and *Harlem Shuffle* are both products of the best of crime and noir that TV offered us in the new millennium. It is not American counterculture of the 60s and 70s, nor the seedy underbellies of crime capitals that truly seemed to motivate the book, though it copiously uses these material as plot, but rather, it is the exhausting golden generation of

TV that Whitehead’s series of novels most resemble. Whitehead provides a succinct comparison himself: “Filmmaking was a heist, same animal... Everybody’s got their special role, following the script. One guy to punch out the safe, another at the wheel...”

His evenly sectioned, anthological tributes to the genre operate the exact same way high-budget streaming shows on crime and race aired at the tail end of the 2010s. And like these shows, some episodes end up uneven while others try the patience of their audience. In the first section of *Crook Manifesto*, we find Ray Carney trying to procure tickets to a Jackson Five concert for his daughter, a seemingly innocent endeavour that throws him back deep into the world of crime. By the end of the episode, we see him deeply mired in the treachery and violence of police corruption.

The abrasive story is skillfully

handled. Colson Whitehead’s comedy is a constant hit throughout the book and makes up for much of the bloat present in the latter two sections. (As Ray wonders about the excuse he would have to give to his family for getting socked by a cop, he thinks of his mother-in-law, Alma: “He was going with *mugged*, given the state of the city these days. If Alma were still alive, he’d have picked a mugging location to irritate her—in front of her church, in broad daylight...” In the second section, too, which sees Ray’s furniture store being used for a film, we are treated to hilarious set-pieces such as “A black crime fighter named the Red Conk, who gains superpowers after applying radioactive hair straightener. He has various adventures until he gets lynched by Super Cracker for using his X-ray vision on a white lady.”)

It is true that *Crook Manifesto* is too dense for its own good. In sampling and satirising the hard-boiled genre, it stops short from being clean-cut itself. Yet, at the same time, Whitehead’s book is not experimental. It is a straight-up meditation on crime fiction. Ray Carney may fault himself for slipping. “Crooked stays crooked,” he says, “and bent hates straight.” But Colson Whitehead achieves in novelistic style what Carney can’t in his life. He stays out of trouble.

Shahriar Shaams has written for Third Lane, Singapore Unbound, Six Seasons Review, Arts & Letters, and Jamini. He is nonfiction editor at Clinch, a martial-arts themed literary journal. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.