

ESSAY

# Partition and Bangladeshi literature

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Their apartment was located on the ground floor of a three-storied building whose yellowish paint looked as if it was peeling off on its own. My friend's father's two-bedroom government quarter housed nine people—the patriarch and his wife, four sons, and three daughters. Three cots, one of which was placed near the passage between the kitchen and the bedroom, were not enough for the entire family. They were distributed according to seniority, which meant

verbalised in order to be understood. Their anorexic frames, frugality, withdrawal from everyday events, and uneasy silences left ample traces of their well-concealed agony. Sensing it is not difficult but understanding its nature requires investment of a different kind.

It is generally assumed by literary scholars that the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 did not cast as solid a projection on the surface of Bengali literature as it did on Urdu, Panjabi, Gujarati, or Hindi literature. Although the Partition has claimed

Ahmed's *Nirbashito Ekjon* (1978) or Atin Bandyopadhyay's epic *Nilkontho Pakhir Khonje* (2001). Likewise, while there are many who have read Hasan Azizul Huq's *Agunpakhi* (2006), not many have heard of Jibonanondo Das's posthumously published novels *Jalpai Hati* and *Bashmotir Upakkhyān*, both set in the context of the Partition. Additionally, when readers read Akhtaruzzaman Elias's *Khwabnama* (1996) or Selina Hossain's *Gayatri Shondha* (2003), they are more likely to pay attention to the entire canvas than just a few specific episodes dealing with violence, communal tension, and mass exodus. For us, *Khwabnama* is a Tevaga novel and *Gayatri Shondha* a broad take on Bangladesh's historical emergence. We seldom read these novels as explorations of partition induced trauma.

If there is, indeed, a Partition amnesia, primarily history is to be faulted for it. The constant convulsion of catastrophic events in Bengal in the three decades since the Second World War—the Bengal famine, the language movement, the communal riots in the 1950s, the uprising of 1969, the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, the Bhola cyclone in 1970, and, most importantly, the independence struggle which eventually led to the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971—all were momentous in their own ways. Unlike parts of India and Pakistan where people had time to pick up the broken shards of memories, in Bengal there was no rest, no respite. The Bengal famine that pummeled the rural and urban alike, claimed more lives than did all the communal riots combined. Similarly, 1971 produced as many refugees as did the splintering of Bengal in 1947. The literary imagination of West Bengal was acutely stirred by the Naxalbari movement, whereas much of the creative energy in Bangladesh was spent in giving expression to what 1971 signified.

Still, it is erroneous to think that Bengali writers somehow missed the opportunity to arrest the impact of Partition on people's livelihoods. Why? Simply because traumas seldom get lost in the vortex of amnesia. A genuine trauma stubbornly returns in speech

and memory, in ordinary habits, in ellipses, and in the debris of abandoned cultural practices. Far too many writers from this part of the world were exposed to the violence of Partition, to its sordid history of rape and pillage, and to the pain of detachment and exile. It is perhaps naïve to think that these memories have been obliterated because of more significant historical events.

I will bring this discussion to a close by drawing attention to the diminutive body of work of Kayes Ahmed, who was born in the Hooghly district of West Bengal in 1948, a year after the Partition, and who spent his entire adult life in Dhaka on his own, far away from his family. Almost forgotten, Ahmed's name is not likely to evoke any sense of familiarity among today's readers. His oeuvre consists of two novels, two collections of stories, and a few essays—most of which were written with utmost care. The author's earlier works, especially his first two books, are distinctive and his prose is economical, albeit his handling of subject matter is not entirely devoid of naïveté.

Ahmed's first book's most distinctive feature is its treatment of untimely, accidental death. Although redolent with violence and death, there is no overt engagement with Partition in this work. It is in his second book *Nirbashito Ekjon*, however, that one notices an exploration of the themes and tropes of the Partition. The first part of this two-part novel explores the poverty-stricken life of a Muslim boy who escapes the communal violence in Calcutta only to return to his rural abode to find that Hindu rioters have raped his sister and then set his house on fire with his mother and sister inside it. He escapes but not before plunging a knife into the chest of one of the assailants. Deeply disturbing because of its depiction of sordid violence which veers toward excess, Ahmed's first novel is a depiction of the morbid reality in which the body has attained heightened significance because of its entanglement with religious identity. The spectacular violence that has attained new meaning in this context is but a mirroring of the violence of the communal politics as such, whose articulation can only

take place through otherisation and patrilinear association and whose victims must always be summoned to account for their difference through their eviscerated bodies.

Yet, it is not *Nirbashito Ekjon* that communicates the loss, despair, and loneliness of partitioned life the most effectively, but rather *Dinjapon* (1986), the author's last novel, that does so more successfully. *Dinjapon* is Ahmed's most mature work, one of the finest in the tradition. Its real protagonist is the house that shelters a Hindu family, which, while others in the area have moved to India, has so far stubbornly declined to do the same. The two-storied dilapidated house and the decaying family, both conspicuous because of their anachronistic presence, are perhaps more chilling reminders of post-Partition inconsequentiality than are sudden paroxysms of anger and violence. There is not a single event described in the novel that allows it to connect it to the partition, for what is thematised in it is the changing socio-political landscape in which the different generations of the same family—both men and women—must do their best to survive their daily lives. Yet, the changing fortune of the family, the constant threat to their lives and property, and the putrid and suffocating condition in which they continue to navigate their relationships are but reminders of the communal segregation that partition has imposed on the religious minorities of South Asia. It is not in what is manifestly present but rather in what is absent that we locate the more effective critique of the communal values that the partition has instilled in people.

Partition has been a remarkably complex phenomenon. The founding of new nations has been jubilantly celebrated in our part of the world, but the communal riots that produced scores of traumatised and displaced humans have been appropriately mourned too. It is naïve to expect that writers who bore witness to such trauma can easily forget about them. They are stored somewhere. We need to learn how to dig them out.

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FICTION

# Ameena goes to America

RAHAD ABIR

A young white officer asks her in heavily accented Bangla, "What's the purpose of your visit?"

"Cancer," Ameena replies in English, standing in front of a glass window. "My husband cancer."

The officer at the American embassy, Dhaka, gives her a sharp look, checks her papers, then abruptly disappears through the side door. When he returns, he types on his computer, and says her visa application has been approved.

Ameena thanks Allah that the man didn't ask her any complicated questions about her husband. 20 years ago, when Selim left for America, she was 31, her son was five, and her daughter three.

Selim never returned.

The first few years he called every week and sent enough money that she was contemplating buying a small apartment. Then came the attack on the Twin Towers, and he lost his job at the store in Manhattan. That was when all the trouble began.

Outside the embassy, Ameena catches her son smoking on the street. He drops the cigarette and crushes it underfoot. "Did you get the visa?" he asks.

Ameena nods.

Beside her son in an autorickshaw, her mind wanders back to the early days of her marriage. Selim smoked a pack of Benson & Hedges every day. He loved spending time with friends and talking politics in the neighbourhood cafés. For work, he bought stock from garment factories and sold them to local clothing stores.

She thinks of the day Selim took her to a char island. He had heard about this newly deposited expanse of land in the River Meghna. One Friday, they had an early breakfast and took a bus to Narayanganj. From there they had a long but refreshing rickshaw ride on dirt roads through farmlands—mile after mile of mustard fields. The scent of mustard flowers in the spring breeze was intense, intoxicating.

It was a beautiful day. After the boat dropped them off on the island, they wandered about for a few minutes and spotted no sign of human presence anywhere—only a vast, sandy land surrounded by water. Selim pulled her hand and they ran like children. He stopped and gave a Tarzan's jungle call, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Ameena," he shouted, "how about we never go back, and just live here? We'll be the king and queen of this island."

"Yeah, that'd be fantastic!"

They walked side by side, his arm draped over her shoulder. They dipped their feet

into the water of the Meghna. Then without warning he picked her up in his arms. She found herself dangling above the water. He rocked her body, saying, "I'm dropping you."

"No!" she screamed.

He laughed and kissed her.

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After Selim lost his job in Manhattan, Ameena heard from him less and less. Whenever he phoned, he talked about uncertainties. Illegal immigrants were being detained. He didn't go out much fearing deportation. The other day, he said, a fat white man spat on him in the street, calling him a terrorist, telling him to go back where he came from. That same day, after getting home, Selim shaved off his short black beard.

When he had said this, Ameena had trembled and tears raced down her cheeks. She didn't mention she was having bad dreams about him. Just the night before, she had screamed for help as Selim was dragged into the street and beaten. She woke up panting, soaked in perspiration. When she came to her senses, she clasped her shaking hands together hard and asked Allah to keep her husband safe. Later, in her dawn prayer, she also prayed for the recovery of the Bangladeshi man she'd heard on the news had been shot in the face at a Dallas gas station.

"Please, come back home", she implored Selim. "We don't need American dollars. We will be happy here together."

Selim said he was moving to another state soon. "You know, Ameena, it's a great country to live in, but you need the 'legal' status."

Months after he settled in New Jersey, his friend in New York called to tell her that Selim was living with a Mexican woman.

In April, when Ameena finally received a call from Selim, she exploded. He tried to explain that he had just rented a room in her apartment in preparation for entering into a contract marriage. "Ameena, don't be mad. Some people do it here to get papers. It's not real."

She cried and begged him to return home immediately. "You have to choose either me or your America."

"Ameena, listen—"

"She wouldn't listen. She yelled and cursed him. She asked him not to contact her anymore. "Many wives become widows at a young age", she said. "I'll consider my husband dead."

Ameena moved in with her mother. She loved to sew. She became a seamstress for neighbours, friends, and relatives. They paid her well, but she could only cover half of her expenses. Her twin brother, who had a thriving import business, started giving her a monthly allowance.

When anyone asked Ameena about her

husband, she faked a smile and said, "He lives in America." Selim phoned occasionally to speak with the children and wired money prior to festivals. Then news reached Ameena that her husband had moved out of the home of the Mexican woman; his plan didn't work out, and now he was sleeping with a white woman. Five years later, she heard from someone that his asylum application had been granted. But his new status wouldn't allow him to travel back to Bangladesh. She didn't understand.

Not long after, her son made her tea in the evening and said, "Daddy wants me to study in the US."

For half a minute, without a word, Ameena observed her 19-year-old son. Her face slowly tightened. "Never," she said. "You want to be like your father?" She pushed the cup away, spilling tea on the table.

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In September 2016, Ameena learned from Selim's sister that he had lung cancer. At the

journey from Dhaka to New York, with a four-hour layover in Dubai. A bus is hired to carry her relatives, who insisted on coming to the airport to give her a send-off. They all hug her, and some cry at the immigration checkpoint.

She starts sweating when boarding begins. It's her first time flying. She is given a window seat, and a flight attendant helps her fasten the seatbelt. She stiffens and holds her breath as the plane takes off. She says a prayer, and for a moment thinks she will never see her husband or her children again. But before long she realises that the aircraft is in midair, and she gazes in wonder at the glittering skyline of Dhaka.

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In the arrivals lounge at JFK, Ameena catches a stranger waving his hand at her. She does not recognise him until she hears her name. Selim is shockingly thin, his face so red, Adam's apple sticking out. His head is shaved. Back home on her bedroom wall there is a family picture in which their children are



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

end of the year his health deteriorated, and he had surgery. Could she fly to America to take care of her husband, his sister had asked. Ameena said no, and again she was asked in December. Then, in January, Selim called. She heard a forgotten yet familiar voice, now scratchy and strained. She pursed her lips but couldn't form any words. After a moment she managed to speak. Her words and his words were punctuated by long pauses. He told her that he would send the necessary papers. She would need to get a passport.

Her interview at the embassy was scheduled in early April.

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Ameena has never felt so distinguished in her life. For the last three months, no matter who she meets, she has heard the same question: When are you going to America?

Her flight is at one in the morning. A day's

standing on either side of Selim and her. 20 years later, he matches so little of his earlier self, scarcely resembling that image of him anchored deep in her memory. It must be the cancer, she decides.

"You haven't changed much", Selim says in the car. He peppers her with questions. How was the flight? Did she face any problems anywhere? In Dubai? At immigration? He breathes heavily between sentences.

From the driver's seat his friend, Rafiq Bhai, glances at her in the rearview mirror. He says it was his idea to get her assistance at Dubai Airport, so she wouldn't have to struggle with her limited English.

"You've come at the right time", he says to her, stopping the car before a condo. "It's almost summer here."

When Selim reaches for the luggage, Rafiq Bhai says, "You're not supposed to lift

anything heavy."

In the elevator, Selim stands close to Ameena, his body brushing against hers. His breathing is laboured and rapid.

Selim opens an apartment door numbered 17 and guides her into a sizable living room. His friend leaves, saying to call him whenever they need him.

"You can freshen up", Selim says, pointing to another room. "I'll warm up some food."

Ameena takes one of her suitcases into the bedroom and shuts the door. She hears laughing and loud conversation emanating from outside. Through the window she peers down at the balcony of the apartment opposite. Wine glasses in hand, a couple of men with women in skimpy outfits are sitting in the late afternoon sun. She checks the window, but it has no curtains like back home. She moves into the corner of the room and changes into a salwar kameez.

At the kitchen table, there is rice, mashed eggplant, chicken curry and dal.

"Eggplant?" She eyes him. "You don't eat eggplant."

"But you like it", he says, serving her rice.

"You cooked these yourself?"

He nods, asks how the kids are doing.

"Oh, I need to call them!" she says.

"I messaged them already."

She looks at his plate. He has taken a small portion of rice. He meets her eyes and says, "I can't eat much."

A small sigh escapes her lips.

He coughs. "It's the chemo. It kills the appetite."

She eats in silence. He eats in small bites.

"You're a good cook", she says.

After dinner, while Ameena does the dishes, Selim makes her milk tea.

"Do you still take two spoons in your tea?" he asks.

She smiles. "No, one spoon now."

He hands her the tea mug. Her fingers touch his for a second.

An hour later, as she yawns, Selim tells her to get some sleep. Ameena goes to the bedroom. When she wakes up, everything is quiet and dark. She peers out the half open window; the night sky is clear, with a crescent moon. She slips out of the bedroom to use the bathroom and finds Selim asleep on the living room sofa.

This is an excerpt from the short story, "Ameena goes to America". It originally appeared in the Marguerite McGlinn Prize awarders' website. Read the rest on The Daily Star and Star Literature's websites.

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