

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# Letters across the silence

Review of ‘Thorns in My Quilt: Letters from a Daughter to Her Father’ (Rupa Publications India, 2024) by Mohua Chinappa

NAMRATA

In *Thorns in My Quilt*, Mohua Chinappa offers readers a searingly honest and emotionally resonant series of letters addressed to her late father. But before these letters unfold, we are led into a history that anchors the personal in the political—a story of displacement, privilege, and loss that stretches from Dhaka to Shillong.

Mohua’s father, one among 11 siblings, was raised in an educated East Bengal family. Her grandfather, Jamini Kumar Bhattacharjee, was a gold medallist from Dhaka, a principled man whose values were rooted in knowledge and integrity. Her grandmother, Thamma, came from an established household in Cumilla. The vivid image of her childhood home, complete with a temple, a large pond teeming with fish, and a bustling atmosphere of care, evokes the pre-Partition Bengali world that many in Bangladesh will recognise intimately.

But like countless Bengali families uprooted by Partition, theirs too became a life of fragments. The ancestral home was left behind, and the family rebuilt itself in Shillong, carrying with them the echoes of a lost homeland and the weight of survival in a new one. This layered legacy of privilege turned precarity, of memory strained by migration, forms a quiet yet persistent undercurrent through the book.

Against this backdrop, the letters from daughter to father feel even more poignant. Mohua writes not only to grieve her Baba, but to confront the complexity of their relationship. He was, she says, “as kind as he was cruel, as well-read as he was unworldly.” In this paradox lies the core of the memoir, an aching tenderness entwined with unresolved pain.

The cover, too, speaks volumes. A photograph of Mohua standing behind her aged father, both staring off into the distance, captures the emotional tenor of

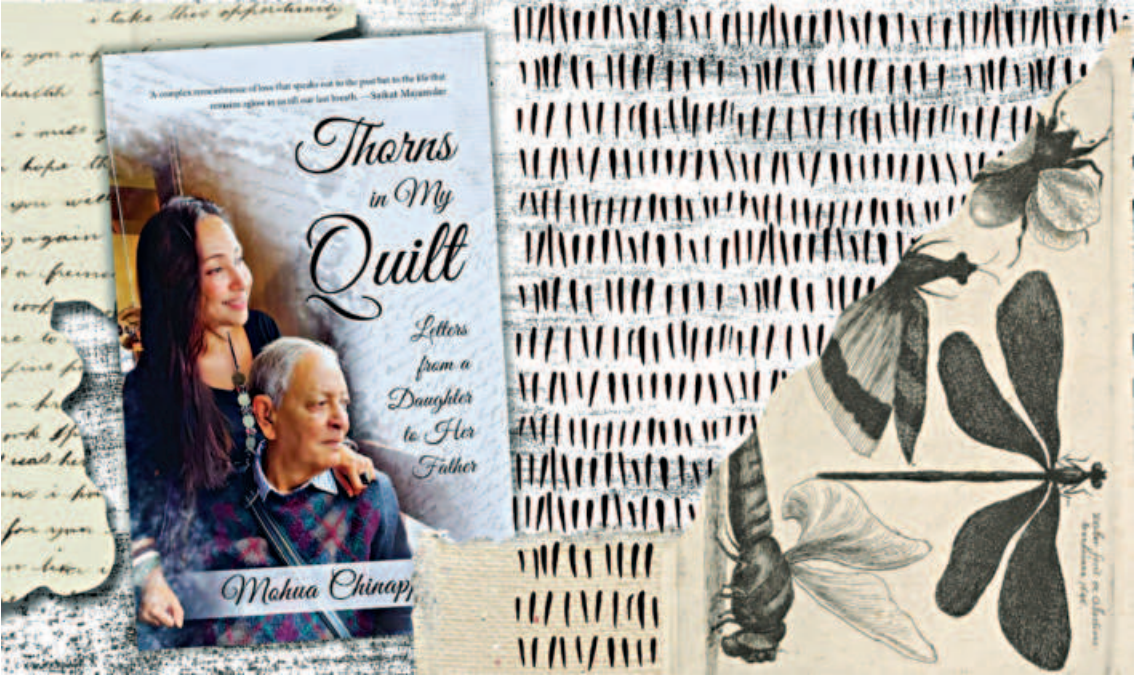


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

the book perfectly. There is space, both physical and emotional, between them. Yet there is also presence, loyalty, and longing. It is a powerful image of connection and distance, of a bond shaped by time, silence, and everything in between.

Her prose is direct and intimate, capturing not only the love and disappointment she felt, but also the solitude of dealing with his death. Childhood memories, like the scent of vanilla in the butter cookies he baked, or the image of her small hand in his as they walked the rainswept roads of Shillong, are recalled with sensory richness and emotional clarity. These memories are neither idealised nor embittered. They are held gently, examined with care.

What sets *Thorns in My Quilt* apart is its courage in acknowledging that love does not erase hurt. Mohua’s letters are at times raw and selfish, but never dishonest. They reveal a woman grieving not just her father, but the version of herself she lost in a

failed marriage, in abandonment, and in trying to measure up to an impossible ideal. In these confessions, there is a quiet resilience, a refusal to look away from emotional truth.

The book resonates on multiple levels. It is a daughter’s reckoning, but also a shared memory of displacement. The grandeur of the Cumilla household and the intellectual legacy of Dhaka are not just Mohua’s inheritance. They belong to a collective Bengali past fractured by borders. Her family’s migration to Shillong mirrors the stories of many East Bengalis who were forced to start anew, carrying only memories of what was left behind.

Despite all this, *Thorns in My Quilt* does not dwell in nostalgia. Instead, it becomes an act of reclamation. By writing these letters, Mohua not only confronts the silence between her and her father but also stitches together the fragments of a life shaped by exile, love, and endurance.

This is a memoir of grief,

but more importantly, it is a portrait of a woman finding voice in loss. Mohua’s emotional honesty, combined with her sharp eye for detail, makes this an unforgettable read. What truly elevates *Thorns in My Quilt* is her writing. It is measured, lucid, and deeply intimate. She writes not with the flourish of a performer but with the clarity of someone unburdening the heart. Her style is emotionally restrained yet piercing, allowing the reader to feel the unsaid as much as the spoken. Each letter reads like a quiet act of courage, stitched with vulnerability, sharp introspection, and a poetic sensitivity to both place and feeling.

*Thorns in My Quilt* is not just a memoir. It is an act of remembering, of reclaiming, and, finally, of release. It speaks quietly, but powerfully to all those who have loved and lost, and to those still carrying the ghosts of places once called home.

Namrata is a literary consultant, columnist, and podcast host.

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# Revisiting the hidden scars and echoes of Bengal Partition

Review of ‘Bengal and Its Partition: An Untold Story’ (Rupa Publication, 2025) by Bhaswati Mukherjee

REZAUL KARIM REZA

Bengal was partitioned twice. First in 1905 when the heightened protest against this reunited Bengal in 1911. Then, it was divided again in 1947 during the partition of India. But this time, it was unavoidable. Although the trauma of the Punjab Partition has been widely written about in English, the experiences of Bengal partitions have often remained underrepresented. This is where Bhaswati Mukherjee aims to fill the gap through her book *Bengal and Its Partition*. It offers a compelling, accessible narrative that situates Bengal’s Partition not as an isolated event, but as the result of long-term socio-political maneuver.

A retired Indian diplomat, Bhaswati Mukherjee

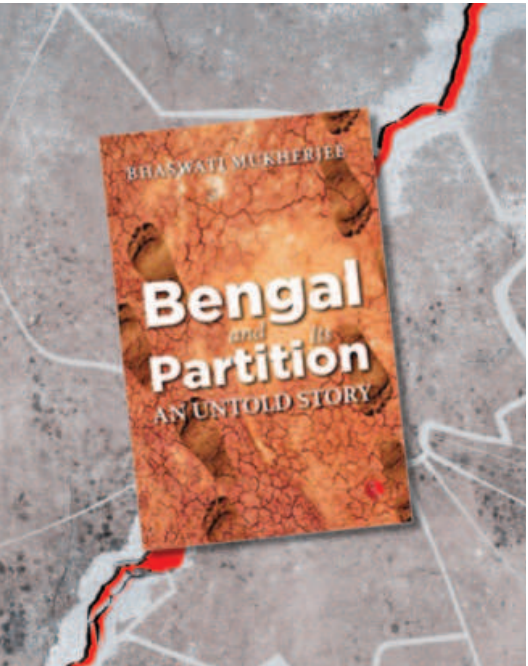


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

**The final chapters of the book delve deep into the hurried and chaotic process of demarcation. And thus was the result of the Bengal Partition in 1947. Sadly, it decided so quickly that the division was done without proper demarcation, consultation, or transition planning.**

is an acclaimed scholar. She has deep personal and ancestral ties to the Bengal region. Mukherjee served both as high-ranking roles in the Indian Foreign Service and as an international policy forum. Her diplomatic insight and lived family memory approaches the Partition of Bengal with a rare mix of analytical precision and emotional depth. Her works with this book reflect correcting historical omissions and reviving the erased Bengali narratives.

The book unfolds as a deeply researched yet highly readable history of the Bengal Partition. The research is grounded in archival data, oral histories, and literary references. It explores the roots of communal division in Bengal long before 1947. It exposes how the British colonial regime nurtured those divisions through policies of divide and rule. Through the book, the author critically examines the political negotiations between the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and colonial administrators.

It has the finest illustration of how Bengal’s fate was shaped by a mix of ideological rigidity, communal anxiety, and geopolitical expediency. Mukherjee’s narrative stands out for placing East Bengal (now Bangladesh) at the heart of the discussion. She has proved that it was a long overdue Bengali-centric lens on Partition. The book has also portrayed the cultural fragmentation, administrative chaos, and deep sense of betrayal. This was the pain felt by millions on both sides of the Bengal border.

*Bengal and Its Partition* is a nonfictional work, but the book is structured with the flow of a narrative history. Mukherjee begins with the 1905 Partition of Bengal which was created by Lord Curzon. She has clearly set the tone for how administrative manipulation laid the foundation for communal division. She then moves through the rise of Bengali nationalism, and outlines the failed Bengal Pact of 1923, as well as the roles of key figures like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee through various plots.

The final chapters of the book delve deep into the hurried and chaotic process of demarcation. And thus was the result of the Bengal Partition in 1947. Sadly, it decided so quickly that the division was done without proper demarcation, consultation, or transition planning. Mukherjee has also brought stories of displacement, the collapse of culture, and the long-term implications for Indo Bangladeshi relations.

*Bengal and Its Partition* is not only a history of political events but also a tribute to a lost cultural unity and a call to remember the human cost of division. Mukherjee’s work clearly claims that remembering East is just as important as remembering West within Bengal.

Rezaul Karim Reza is an English teacher and an academic.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# No heroes in Shonagachhi

Review of ‘A Death in Shonagachhi’ (Pan Macmillan India, 2011) by Rijula Das

SEJAL RAHMAN

Don’t mistake *A Death in Shonagachhi* for a murder mystery, or you’ll be setting yourself up for disappointment. Some moments will remain unexplained, threads will refuse to tie neatly, and certain ends will stay frayed. Strictly speaking, Rijula Das’s explosive debut can be classified as literary noir. More poetically, it is a soul-baring depiction of a community built in the most unexpected of places—a testament to resilience in the face of crushing blows, and a promise that love can overcome the agony of circumstances beyond one’s control.

Tenderness is difficult to find in a neighbourhood like Shonagachhi, yet Das’s words evoke a softness you’d be thoughtless to ignore. Asia’s largest red-light district becomes unexpectedly homely—despite the gore and grit of the horrors that unfold. Her prose is both kind and unrestrained; it does not shy from pain, nor does it hide the agony waiting behind those walls. It is maddeningly honest and, at times, disastously funny.

So you trust her—and her characters—as they descend into hell. It’s bodies all the way down, with degradation and decay on every side. You might pray for the unfortunate, the wicked, or the dead, but it would do no good. God hides them far away. Das’s characters are shaped by the impediments placed before their dignity, hope, and spirit—a damning indictment of society’s careless treatment of its outcasts. This is ostracisation for ostracisation’s sake.

The first person we meet is Tilu, though all eyes are on Lalee—the woman of Tilu’s dreams and the source of his addiction. Lalee is the river in Tilu’s bloodstream: thoughts of her ebb and flow without cease. Barely clinging to the lowest rungs of the caste system, Tilu is without charm and desperate for some. He is Lalee’s most dependable customer, and lust’s most dependable sinner. Lalee, meanwhile, seldom spares him a glance outside of business; she is the archetypal cynical, practical prostitute familiar from



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

brothel portrayals in fiction. Other stock figures populate the novel: the cruel madam Shefali, the comically villainous zealot Maharaj, the greedy upstart pimp Rambo Maity, corrupt policemen who exploit the women they disdain, and frustrated social workers chasing leads that go nowhere.

Yet, despite these archetypes, moments of originality shine through—like when macho cop Samsher Singh shyly tells his terrified wife he would love to have a daughter, despite his mother’s protests. Or when the number one fan of Tilu’s explicit works joins him in a high-stakes chase to rescue the woman he loves, knowing nothing about her. Or when the indifferent Sonia, prized for her exotic looks, comes to Lalee’s aid in her darkest hour. These small moments coalesce into a portrait of community, starkly contrasted by the “small deaths” that slowly erode it.

The first major shock is the brutal, graphic murder of Lalee’s neighbour, Mohamaya—known as Maya—an “A-lister” in The Blue Lotus hierarchy.

What is less shocking is the response: the police do not visit the scene until ten days later. Singh, the examining officer, arrives to find the room scrubbed clean and already occupied by another sex worker. Maya’s death propels the plot, driving Lalee to take her place, and leading the reader into what will become her own grave. The story meanders through Tilu’s plans for a novel, Singh’s domestic life, and everyone’s rage at demonetisation. These tangents can frustrate, especially as the most compelling figure—Lalee—is often sidelined.

None of the events in the novel would occur without the underlying degradation of safety for women and girls, particularly in rural areas. In forgotten corners of the Indian subcontinent live countless innocents, sold to settle debts, to feed fewer mouths, or to quench a father’s drunken thirst. They are thrust into the hands of unforgiving madams, chained to bedposts, forced into the arms of violent men, and trapped in a system

that refuses to acknowledge them. As Samsher Singh observes: “It’s not for nothing that they put them in one corner, in these floating towns where they can remain among their own folk and not be a part of ‘normal’ life.”

*A Death in Shonagachhi* builds to an excruciating crescendo that ultimately rings hollow. There is no resolution, no solution to the world’s oldest problem: how do you protect the innocent? Whether that emptiness is deliberate or not, it forces the reader to confront the blindness with which society treats sex workers. More enduring, however, is the lesson tucked within its winding paragraphs: friendship among the forgotten, the camaraderie of laughing at one’s woes, the comfort of knowing that “once loved is always loved.” Even in a world that tries to swallow you whole, you can carve out your own place—and, if you dare, swallow the world right back.

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