Review

A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal

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In his foreword to Bashabi Fraser's edited book *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, Mushirul Hasan pertinently remarks that literature has emerged as an 'alternative archive' in comprehending the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent. In other words, literary texts unveil the 'little' narratives against the grand history of the Partition; they help articulate the 'unofficial' histories against the official.[1] Inspired perhaps by Hasan's observations, Suranjana Choudhury explores, in his *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, pp. 157) the Partition[2] of Bengal in 1947 through a close, critical examination of diverse texts, comprising mostly novels and short stories.

In doing so, she interrogates the oft-repeated argument[3] that creative writers from Bengal have barely recorded the pain and pathos, the trauma and tragedy of the bifurcation. More importantly, Choudhury employs the theoretical framework of violence and offers a nuanced understanding of how violence is not just limited to acts of rape, abduction, and murder> Rather, she theorises violence as a force that influences the inner world of lived values, shaping the moral constitution of the society at large. There is merit in her argument. In contrast to Punjab, the Bengal Partition was an agonisingly prolonged affair as individuals and families crossed the Radcliffe Line for almost two decades after the historical event in 1947.[4] Evidently, the nature of the violence was different in Bengal. It demands a distinct analytical approach because of the intermittency of migration and the relentless struggle for survival.

In her bid to conceptualise the multiple forms of violence, Choudhury has divided her book into four chapters. Each chapter is concerned not with facts as such but with the mode and manner through which creative writers narrated specific experiences. For instance, the first chapter squarely deals with the politics and poetics of victimisation. Instead of viewing the riots as a spontaneous outflow of retaliatory violence, she opines that a language of violence existed that operated on the basis of caste and class. She introduces Nabendu Ghosh's *Trankarta* (The Saviour) to show the forms of negotiation that took place between the upper-caste Hindus and the Dalits during the Partition. Choudhury highlights selected excerpts from the text and depicts how the educated and propertied lot, who disowned the Dalits, tactfully welcomed them within the fold of Hinduism when riots broke out. With the marginalised sections sacrificing their lives for their upper-caste brethren, the story underscored a form of disturbingly violent appropriation. Similarly, Choudhury's reading of Atin Bandyopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khonje* (In Search of the Bird Neelkontho) critiques the popular rhetoric of 'divide and rule' as used by the colonial masters to distinguish between Hindus and Muslims. She discusses the way Bandyopadhyay conjured up the setting of the novel by delineating the generational change in the attitude of Muslims. Unlike their fathers, who pay obeisance to the Hindu landlords – the Thakur family – of the village, Samsuddin, Felu, and Jabbar aspire for social mobility and support the Muslim League. Her interpretation of the novel allows an alternative understanding of how hierarchical differences aggravated the situational crisis between the two communities.

The second chapter is about the predicaments faced by women in the wake of the Partition. Here, Choudhury does not focus on the literary texts in their entirety. She looks at the presentation of certain characters and attempts to reconfigure the gendered rituals of purity and sanctity. She studies Sutara in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (The River Churning), Malati in *Neelkontho Pakhir Khonje*, Kusum in *Bakultala P.L.Camp*, Arundhuti in *Karunkanya* (The Stricken Daughter), and Sudatta in *Jaibo* (Biological). By presenting the varied ideas of victimisation embodied by these characters, she accounts for the myriad sites where

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women negotiated with institutions like family, society, and nation. Another intriguing aspect of the refugee women in Bengal is their role as the breadwinners of the family. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta have argued that the historic assertion of the refugee women, who voluntarily relinquished the domesticated spaces of the home to financially support the family, irrevocably altered the societal dynamics of Bengal.[5] Though Choudhury acknowledges the resilience of the refugee women, she also dwells on the subtle forms of violence that the working women encountered, through her reading of stories like *Machch* (Fish) and *Posharini* (The Woman Who Sold Wares).

Choudhury maps out the various trajectories of violence by dividing the third chapter into two segments. The first section inspects the violence experienced during migration primarily by analysing Shanta Sen's novella *Pitamohi* (Grandmother). She takes up Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* to comment on the violence in squatter colonies built by the refugees. By interspersing the literary texts with relevant readings on refugee issues, she explains how unpredictable forms of violence governed the lives of those expropriated by the Partition. In chapter four, she moves beyond the overarching theme of violence to foreground an 'assimilative space' where care, compassion and empathy exist between Hindus and Muslims. She examines stories like Pratibha Basu's *Somudro Hridoy* (The Oceanic Heart), Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Khatian* (The Ledger), Achintya Kumar Sengupta's *Shwakkhor* (Treaty), Dibyendu Palit's *Hindu* and Gour Kishore Ghosh's *Jaha Jae* (Loss). She finds traces of humanity in texts that overtly deal with violent incidents of communal strife. Herein lies the novelty of her work.

Since Choudhury points to the humane dimension of the Partition, it would have been quite enriching had she incorporated oral narratives of the refugees to substantiate some of her observations. More often than not, the individuated accounts of refugees tend to complement or contradict the way creative writers have portrayed the Partition. It could have opened up new areas of inquiry in discussions related to narrative and narration. It must also be borne in mind that readers, who are not acquainted with the literary texts, may find it challenging to understand the complexities of her arguments. After all, the author herself admits that most of these texts are written in Bengali. They are not available to readers who are unfamiliar with the Bengali language. Nonetheless, Choudhury's is an important work as it advances the scholarship by bringing to light multiple, often obscure, sources that deal with a relatively under-researched area in Partition Studies.

Notes

1. Hasan, M. (2008). Foreword. In *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unfinished Chapter* (pp. xiii-xvii). Anthem Press
2. Hereafter referred to as the Partition
3. Semanti Ghosh, "Silence: A Deliberate Choice?" in Seminar 645 (May 2013), https://www.india-seminar.com/2013/645/645_semanti_ghosh.htm. For more on this, see Mookerjea-Leonard, D. (2017). Introduction. In *Literature, Gender, and the Trauma of Partition: The Paradox of Independence* (pp. 1-23). Routledge
4. Mukhopadhyay, S. (2021). Memories of the 1947 Bengal Partition and Its Aftermath: Tanveer Mokammel's *Seemantorekha*. *Studies in People's History*, 8(1), 135-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/2348448921999039
5. Bagchi, J., & Dasgupta, S. (2003). Introduction. In *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-14). Stree.