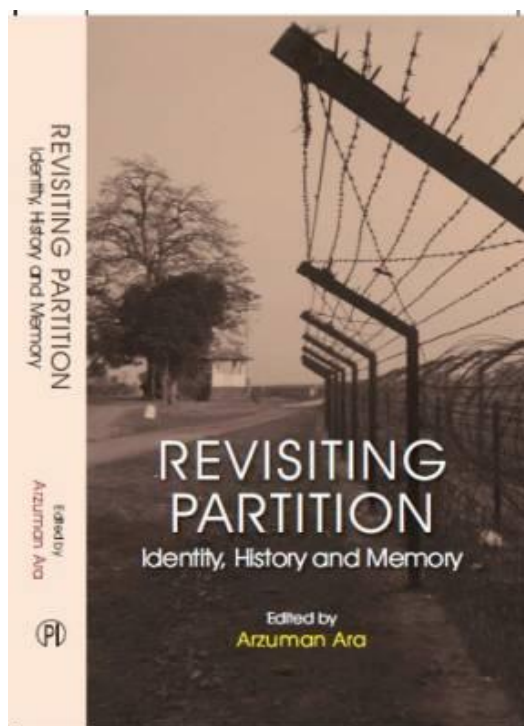


Arzuman Ara, ed. *Revisiting Partition: Identity, History and Memory*. Delhi: Pencraft International 2022. Xxviii+248 pp. ISBN: 978-93-82178-39-2



Revisiting Partition: Identity, History and Memory edited by Arzuman Ara ‘revisits’ history by critiquing the official/national account of Partition and asserting the existence of multiple other narratives, some of which remain muted or under-explored. In the editor’s Introduction to the volume, she hopes to uncover a wealth of Partition narratives from myriad authorial positions as the politics of the author depends on her situation inside/outside a discursive field. The fourteen chapters in this anthology aptly do justice to her claim.

Mashrur Shahid Hossain’s chapter on Akhtaruzzaman Elias’s *Khwabnama* and Hasan Azizul Huq’s *Agunpakhi*, along with the fifth chapter by Kaiser Haq, plainly titled “The 1947 Partition and Bangladeshi Literature,” and the sixth chapter by Debjani Sengupta, titled “The Partition’s journeys: Two Short Stories from Bangladesh” explore the 1947 Partition of India and Bengal from the Bengali Muslim viewpoint. Haq reminds the reader that the Bengali Muslims have been through three partitions, not one – the first in 1905, when Lord Curzon divided the province into Eastern and Western parts, then in 1947, when East Bengal became East Pakistan and finally in 1971 when Bangladesh was born through greater bloodshed.

Hossain's reading of two texts shows how the Bengali Muslim peasant found himself oppressed by the *asbraf* landowners and police force: the promise of land remains unfulfilled in the Promised Land, the Islamic utopia he fought for. These texts also refer to the cultural bedrock of Sufism and Bhaktibad that created a general atmosphere of humane attitude across the religious divide even when riots were raging. Kaiser Haq points out that the Bangladeshi writers' attitudes to and representations of the Partition of Bengal are "quantitatively and qualitatively different from their Indian counterparts," and seen in a much more positive light. Bangladeshi literature is "less comfortable to represent the horror of the holocaust and migration and they are more concerned about identity politics, cultural reintegration, Muslim-Hindu interaction, and the political economy of East Pakistan" (30). Bengali Muslims, and also Indian Muslims in general, were euphoric about the birth of an Islamic utopia. Debjani Sengupta's chapter explores this euphoria expressed in Bengali journals like *Mohammadi* and *Mabe Nau* which described Pakistan as the "country of light" where Tagore needed to be discarded altogether and Nazrul revised to fit in the role of the poet of Pakistan. As Sengupta shows in her analysis of Elias's story "Onno Ghoreonno Swar," there was a realisation that the society retained its structural violence even after the evacuation of the Hindu upper class, and the language movement led to an ongoing reassessment of Partition and the Pakistan narratives.

Kaiser Haq's chapter has two parts: a historical account from Partition to the Bangladesh liberation war followed by an account of the Partition motif in Bangladeshi literature. The chapter is very informative, but one wonders if the trajectory of Muslim Bengali writing can be complete without a reference to *Mihir* and *Sudhakar*, two journals that helped express their emotional needs. Haq refers to the works of Syed Waliullah, Abul Fazl, Shahidullah Kaiser, and others. The character of Zahed in Kaiser's *Shangsaptak* symbolises this shift from Muslim league politics to communism and the mystic-humanist desire for an organic community that still survives in the songs of Hasan Raja and Lalan Fakir. It is the pull of this cultural sediment that will continue to draw creative artists to the border, again and again, asking them to transcend it.

The nuances of Somdatta Mandal's chapter, entitled "Films on Partition of India, Border-Crossings and Survival" become clear if one arrives here after reading the above three chapters. Keeping aside the Bollywood blockbusters that feed right-wing dreams, every serious filmmaker – from Ritwik Ghatak to M.S. Sathyu, Masiuddin Sarkar and Sheikh Niamat Ali and Tanvir Mokammel – posits themselves near the socialist-humanist position and tell the story of broken dreams of common people who live in an organic community and share social and entrepreneurial bonds across the community. Mandal has painstakingly created a filmography of 29 films from India and Bangladesh, discussing issues that increasingly become universal, and forcing the reader to think if Partition studies need to be taught inside Holocaust Studies in all universities.

Aiswarya Sanath's chapter on Partition memoryscapes of India is a discursive analysis of physical memorial sites, Partition museums, and border closing ceremonies at Wagah and other places. While colourful border outpost ceremonies remain a long-standing custom, celebrating the glory of the nation, Partition memorial sites and museums or digital archives are relatively new phenomena on the lines of Auschwitz and Yad Vashem. Sanath reminds us of the textuality and politics of these relics, events and structures, exploring how different their narrative strategies can be from one another.

Women's experiences of the Partition have been erased from popular memory by cultural prohibitions and exclusions. The turn of the millennium saw a renewed interest in women's writing on Partition, which coincided with the women's studies movement in and outside universities. Many lost or out-of-print classics by women were rediscovered during this wave. Chapters 10, 11, 13, and 14 in this volume especially focus on the representation of women in Partition narratives. Pallavi's chapter on "Lajwanti," a short story written by Rajinder Singh Bedi and translated by Alok Bhalla raises a crucial question if the cultural discourse of *izzat* was not solely responsible for the plight of women during and after Partition.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is, like Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided*, rediscovered and brought to the limelight during the turn of the millennium. Both writers were young during the 1940s and one needs to read these novels not only for their focus on gender but the socialist politics of the young, educated Muslim women which were becoming increasingly hard to keep intact in a time of increasing religious polarisation. Independent India had not yet told the story of socialist/communist Muslims and especially women party members during Partition. Ara discusses the oppressive influence of Baba Jan, a dying patriarch on a Muslim household as the symbol of cultural oppression and silencing of even the young and educated women and controlling their politics.

Silpi Maitra's chapter on abducted women delves deeper into the issue of *izzat* to analyse how women's bodies are marked and territorialised by warring communities. They are blank tablets on which communities write hate messages: rapes, foeticides, and abductions are ways to block a community's reproductive channel and make them feel powerless. From Noakhali to the Gujarat riots, the same logic operates as women become a representative of their ethnic groups. As Maitra points out, the abducted women in stories by Jamila Hashmi or Joginder Paul need not burst out into speech as the silence of women can become a weapon of protest.

While Partition studies focus on the Eastern and the Western borders, the experience of the Sylheti Bengalis of the Northeast and the Hyderabad annexation have remained less explored. Besides addressing issues of gender, Pratibha Kumari's chapter on Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* and Huma Kidwai's *The Husaini Alam House* ponders how independent, modernising India

threw away her inheritance of Urdu and the sophisticated culture of its users, thus severing centuries-long ties with Iran and the vast underbelly of Russia that speaks Persian. As the *ashraf* Muslims became powerless, a whole ecosystem of lifestyle and jobs such as clerkship (in Persian), horsemanship, fencing, and other refined craftsmanship vanished, forcing a large section of the populace to migrate to Karachi. The case of Hyderabad was drastic and the changes most rapid. The rape and mutilation of Henna in Samina Ali's novel indeed become "a synecdoche for the larger narrative of forced assimilation and subsequent erasure/abortion of distinct Deccani culture of Hyderabad" (177).

A remarkable addition to this volume is Sib Sankar Majumdar's chapter on migration stories from Southern Assam. The Northeast and its literature have remained invisible to the critical-publishing industry and therefore to the wider readership. Majumdar has discussed some stories from Nirmalkanti Bhattacharya's and Dipendu Das's edited volume *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam* (2012) to show the development of a complex 'Sylheti' identity through an exchange with Assamese language and culture. He shows how, unlike refugees from other districts who migrated to West Bengal or Andaman, these people had to face discrimination and violence as Assamese ethnocentrism asserted itself. The NRC and the spectre of the witch-hunt that looms large in contemporary India is a direct result of the Sylheti issue put to its logical extreme.

The issues of homelessness and an uprooted person's being at home in the new country have been also discussed in the chapters by Surajit Sen, Ajitabh Hazarika, Saba Anish and Dwijen Sharma. Himadri Lahiri's chapter on generational perspectives in Partition narratives discusses a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine" and two short narratives by Bapsi Sidhwa, seeking to trace possibilities of reconciliation and forgiveness after the passage of seven long decades. In Sidhwa's "Defend Yourself against Me," Ammi-ji, an old woman who was abducted by Sikhs, travels to the US, and is shocked to see the unthinkable friendship of Sikh youths with her children. Her emotional wounds heal as they ask her forgiveness for the wrongs done by their fathers' generation. "A Gentlemanly War" is a tale of army chivalry and the miracles of Daata Sahib, a Sufi saint of Lahore. As Lahiri points out, the innocence of the child narrator in Jhumpa Lahiri's story creates a rare moment of transcendence where communities can leave behind the past and move on.

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