Book Review

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Rakshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta (Eds.), Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited. 2022, pp. 276., ₹875.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-93-5442-212-6.

In the wake of Bangladesh's 50th anniversary of Independence, the book *Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders* edited by Rakshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta, may be regarded as a thoughtful tribute that incisively captures the nation's immensurable toil for acquiring Independence. The book is an anthology of 'memory texts'—essays, fictions, and poems—written by some prolific literary figures from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. It pinpoints some of the most hard-hitting ironies and contradictions that history had in offer at the birth of the new nation—Bangladesh in 1971. By recounting the madness and the mayhem of the bloody turmoil, through some of the most acerbic real-life stories, by those who experienced it first-hand, or those who attempted to enter the great tragedy by way of empathy and imagination, the writers left it for the readers to make sense of the caustic history of the birth of a nation.

The introductions briskly map the socio-historical context of the Liberation War of 1971 and, while doing so, foregrounds some of the innate dilemmas that continually rocked people's mind who experienced the cataclysmic and irrevocable upheaval. For the supporters of either side, it was a real challenge to decide whether the Two-Nation Theory was wrong to begin with? Whether Jinnah's announcement of One-Nation, One-People, One-Language was fatally flawed from its very inception? Whether countries break up only through conspiracy theories, or was there not a groundswell of popular opinion to propel a people's

movement? (p. 16). For the West Pakistanis, If Bangladesh was right, then Pakistan was wrong. And then even more heart wrenchingly: since they were told that the 'truth' always wins, they were caught in a fix, to believe themselves being wrong in insisting on having one Pakistan (p. 16). For the East Pakistanis, it was the silence (collective amnesia), adopted by the many Pakistanis, which was considered a fetter to their atonement for the wrongs inflicted upon their fellow countrymen in what was then East Pakistan. They therefore questioned:

> Is silence ever healing? Why did the Urdu writers, so active, so voluble, so forthright on most political issues, write so frugally on Bangladesh? And even when they did, why did they adopt allusion and metaphors rather than the directness of a Sadat Hassan Manto or Kishan Chandar who described the horrors of the Partition in all their grisly details? (p. 17)

The editors thereby called for varied understandings of and responses to 1971. They emphasized the need for memorializing the past to make sense of the time that was now slipping out of the minds of the people who took part in it.

The book is sub-divided into three unequal sections where three essays, 16 short stories, and 11 poems are arranged along an interesting line of semblance to give a balanced perspective. The essays by Kaiser Haq, Manas Ray, and Meher Ali, written in English, albeit different from each other, appear to have been written in the form of memory texts, which rightly sets the tone of the book. Kaiser Haq narrates his first-person account of fighting in the Liberation War as a part of the Mukti Fauj alongside the Indian soldiers in 1971. His story reveals some of the muddled realities of the battlefront but yet again brings out the overall euphoric influence of the War. His concluding statement testifies the same spirit: 'And yet, like all the boys in our companies, if I had to live all over again, I would make the same choice. I am proud to have been with the Hamzapur Tigers' (p. 34). Manas Ray, while drawing an interesting parallel between the Naxalite Movement in Kolkata and the Liberation War in Bangladesh, both taking shape during the early 1970s, claimed that the two events were not merely coeval processes but shared larger historical truths. For that matter, 1947 and 1971 were not disjointed processes, according to Ray, but a conjoined process of historical search for self-esteem (p. 39). Meher Ali's essay, for that matter, reflected upon the intergenerational memories of her grandfather Nadir Ali who was part of the Pakistani army and whose reminiscences of his time in East Pakistan explore and dwell on the question: What 1971 meant for

Pakistan? Ali, ultimately contends that it was through the perceptive memories of 'remembering and forgetting' the Liberation War of 1971 that people had attained nothing but vast 'inheritance of losses'. While, Pakistan's continued refusal to acknowledge, let alone apologise for, the evidence of rampant army atrocities, rapes, and selective genocide testified its immeasurable moral abscess (destroyed *insaniyat* or shared humanity). Bangladesh's highly contested and politicised nature of memorialisation of the Liberation War, where the war remains, in many ways, creates an active battleground upon which its national identity, politics and values are being forged and fought. Therefore, by confronting the lapses with multiplicity of narrative(s), replacing distortions with corrections, and/or filling the gaps in memory recollection with emphatic imaginings, one could perhaps arrive at a logical recourse to recovery which would ultimately help construct a more complete and inclusive truth—an avenue for resolution, understanding, and even healing (p. 68).

The following two sections, containing select memory texts, presented in the form of fiction and poetry, mostly translated in English, from the works of distinguished Bengali and Urdu writers and poets from across the border, are an invaluable component of the volume. The stories astutely capture the array of contradictory emotions and experiences that defines the year 1971. Whereas, the poems being translations of some iconic verses by iconic poets fulfils the reasonable task of oozing a sense of agony, anguish, and despair. To comment on a few, Akhtaruzzaman Elias' story *The Raincoat*—true to his style—is a rich piece which vividly describes the contradictory emotions running through the minds of Professor Nurul Huda when he was summoned at the principal's office as a suspected 'miscreant' conspiring against the Pakistani government (pp. 77–91). Similarly, the harrowing story of Amina and Madina, by Selina Hossain, exposes the cuss nature of victimhood and the perverted use of religion and politics which embodied the War: When Muezzin went to the chairman of the peace committee, to plead for the release of her abducted daughters, the chairman spoke with a smile and a calm voice: 'Go back home, my dear fellow. Express your gratitude to Allah. Your daughters are serving Pakistan' (p. 106).

Among the stories from across the border, one may choose to refer to the story *Bingo* by Tariq Rahman, which is an intriguing story of discrimination, distrust, ingratitude, and guilt, realistically presented through a competitive plot of shifting narratives (pp. 187–200). Again, the story *Sleep* by, the iconic contemporary Urdu writer from Pakistan, Intizar Husain, in a way, sums up the inexplicability of the War through the uncompromisingly gaping behavior of Salman who had miraculously

escaped alive from the shackles of the enemy in East Pakistan (p. 96). These stories, unfailingly, capture the contradictions of the Liberation War of 1971, especially those that lay invisible between the exalting and forgetting memories.

What should be done? Should one be forgetful of the past and its memories soaked in dark, dank and inglorious violence? Especially after what poet Afzal Ahmed Syed contended in his poem *We Should Forget* (p. 249). Or should one get enthused by the fiery verses of *The Poetry of 1971* written by Bimal Guha (p. 255) to get engrossed in doing the formidable task of national recollection? The book provides a somewhat nuanced answer to this question. It believes that the path to reconciliation and peace would depend upon the acts of recrimination and eventual revaluation of the accounts and counter accounts of the Liberation War of 1971 which has become tarnished and repugnant over the period of time (p. 9). This naturally underscores the importance of memory texts and the need for memorializing the history of the Liberation War of 1971, which is the case in point here. But, given the fact that historical accounts and counter-accounts are unmistakable parts of a construction, and hence, rift with inherent biases, will it not be imprudent to pin much of our hopes for reconciliation and peace, upon such constructed and essentially biased history, without thinking of the need and ways for a much-needed de-construction of the existing historiography? And will it not then render memory texts, and the larger process of memorializing the history of the Liberation War of 1971, which is the case in point here, come under careful scrutiny? The book leaves it open for the scholars, critical thinkers, and historians to reflect upon this.

However, in the ultimate analysis, one may somewhat agree with the fact that the book does not readily stand out among the vast pool of pre-existing pieces of literature on the Partition and Liberation War of 1971. But it does not take away its importance. The editors have put in commendable effort in bringing together the most compelling voices of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India in this one volume that renders the volume its uniqueness. As a significant addition to the ongoing academic discourse, the book can be expected to attract readers and scholars from across disciplines including Partition Studies, South Asian history, as well as Literature.

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