

REVIEWS

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**Bengal Partition Stories:
An Unclosed Chapter**
Edited by Bashabi Fraser

Anthem Press, 75–6 Blackfriars Road,
London SE1 8HA, UK. www.anthem-press.com. 2008. 640 pp. PB. \$35.00.
ISBN 9781843312994.

It is seldom recognised that Bengal's partition falls within both the secular and the theological problems of evil:

The Bengal [partition] can ... be viewed as part of a graver, greater global continuum of genocides, pogroms, rape and abduction, mutilation of human beings and the destruction of property, as communities perceive fresh fault lines of demarcation and resort to violence to create unreal monolithic communities which are not realizable as has been proved in spite of Hitler's planned holocaust ... the Bengal story ... [resonates] with Northern Ireland, Israel, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Germany, Rwanda, Burundi, Chechnya, East Timor, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Iraq and Sudan, in an unending list of afflicted communities which have fallen apart (5–6).

While this reviewer plods on his word processor in the hinterlands of West Bengal, the South Sudanese people are killing each other once again; Turkey's latest military coup is nearly tearing that nation apart and the ISIS are preying on Europe; trying to rift the United Kingdom and Europe itself. In the words of W B Yeats: 'The centre cannot hold ... Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed' (*The Second Coming*, 1919). Indeed, everywhere we ken, centres can no longer hold; the Aristotelian *polis* is under unprecedented attack and Bashabi Fraser is the only thinker amongst those concerned with the annihilation of human autonomy, who has been able to connect the partition event with incidences of global violence. Fraser's book should be seen as part of the

cultural work begun by anthropologists like Alexander Laban Hinton (see Alexander Laban Hinton, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Oakland: University of California, 2002)).

Historians and political scientists till date have seen the Bengal partition as being the result of a Hegelian and thus materially propelled dialectic's logical conclusion. Fraser traces this dialectic in her 'Introduction' well. Her analysis of the Radcliffe Award (4) is proof that she has not disregarded established Enlightenment-style historiography made popular by John Trevelyan (1903–86). Had she rejected established modes of historical research then her 'Introduction' would have little to recommend itself since tradition is never to be discarded for individual improvements (see T S Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in T S Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1921)). Fraser's genius lies in then adding: 'What is unique about the Bengal Partition is that ... the influx of refugees across the Bengal border has never stopped, to date' (5). This is history catching up with ground reality. This is the sort of realist historiography that can counter the xenophobic historiography practised by Niall Ferguson (b. 1964). Ferguson in two of his pathetic histories, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004) and *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin, 2012), spews venomous fodder, which will find takers in the likes of disturbed and egotistical politicians. Fraser's 'Introduction' in its advocacy of Hospitality—*vide* Emmanuel Lévinas—is the only work by an Indian writer which can demolish Ferguson's rhetoric of division and racist harangue. While the Bengali Fraser will be remembered by Scotland, where she lives, as a pacifist; Ferguson, who is originally Scottish, will be remembered by posterity as a white supremacist who like Mark Anthony only succeeded in rabble-rousing. Fraser is a syncretic thinker (21–2), while Ferguson is only a demagogue.

This reviewer called up and videoconferenced with historians, and searched through internet databases and found out that till the publication of this review, none but Bashabi Fraser has been able to connect decisively the evil that befell Bengal with global events. The Bengal partition is not merely a Hegelian inevitable event but part of a cycle of events that will recur unless we heed Fraser's scholarship. And in one masterstroke Fraser has established her book as the *sine qua non* of partition history. She has allowed individual stories to tell their tales. This is the single most important factor that makes this book truly interdisciplinary and makes it transcend Marxist historiography, which ultimately becoming boring and repetitive, will soon vanish from our collective memories. Ranajit Guha will be remembered as long as some of his acolytes are alive. Guha does not stand a chance against the magisterial Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) and Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012). Stories, like the story of the crazy king Macbeth are real but strangely, not true. As Aristotle said in his *The Poetics*, literature has a timeless and universal quality which dry sweeping or, in the case of Ranajit Guha and his attendants, microscopic, historical accounts can never provide. When we read Atin Bandyopadhyay's story 'Infidel' in this book, translated by Sarika Chaudhuri (165–76), we immediately know the nuances of heartbreak. The Bengal partition is all about heartbreaks and this is where Fraser scores over historians she quotes, like Sugato Bose and Sumit Sarkar in endnotes 2 and 18 to her 'Introduction'. Studying both Bose and Sarkar is a tedious affair. Reading the insults of Fergusson, mentioned above, makes one marvel at the high IQ of a divisive professor, but reading partition stories make the experience of catastrophe real for us in the *here and the now*. History comes alive not in the hands of Sarkar, Bose, or Fergusson, but in the stories anthologised here. Fraser's portrayal of the uprooted Bengali is more representative of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* than Agamben could ever explain in his own philosophy books. It is the emotional fallout of the partition event that Fraser's selection of stories brings out. While Niall Fergusson's concept of the human person is of an intellectual and arrogant Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Fraser's construction of the human person is as one truly is: broken, abject, and

struggling for self-actualisation—the term is used here as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow have used it—in an inhuman world where Indifferent-Hap (see Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts*, 1903) forces integrated human beings feel like bare-forked animals (see William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 4). What began as the secular problem of evil now with the addition of stories qua the Aristotelian view of literature becomes the theological problem of evil. The realm of literature is the realm of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1797). Storytellers have on *honey-dew fed* and therefore their utterances are reflections of the scent of God (see Beryl Singleton Bissell, *The Scent of God: A Memoir* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006)).

Fraser herself foregrounds theology:

I see the shadows on the prowl
I feel the fog of hatred rise ...
And mindless violence does its worst;
The swarming maggots crawl in to claim
Bodies, loot—in God's own name ... (91)

Fraser tacitly admits to the presence of God, the trace to God, and therefore by implication makes her book a valuable contribution to theodicy. And the *telos* of all theodicy is the sovereignty of the good and liberal humanism. Fraser's choice of stories shows the resilience of the human spirit against the rise of the *crimson tide*. Manik Bandyopadhyay's 'The Ledger', translated by Sheila Sengupta (145–50), Dibyendu Palit's 'Hindu', translated by Sarika Chaudhuri (227–38,) and Selina Hossain's 'Looking Back' translated by Bashabi Fraser (387–97,) speak of '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*; the world is one family'. Cosmopolitanism as praxis and theological contingency is illustrated in this anthology. 'Looking Back' is all the more relevant today with the rise of extremist killings. Fanaticism, so abhorrent to Sri Ramakrishna, is re-scrutinised in this book and Fraser through her own scholarship and translation, annihilates the Medusa of dogma. 'Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter' is the ideological antidote to any form of antinomian rabid orthodoxy.

Imperial cartography played a huge role in subduing nations and Fraser has done what other scholars in this field have not. This book has valuable maps that will help students and research scholars (85–8). The maps are uncluttered; the map

of undivided Bengal (87) is cartography at its best.

There is only one lacuna in this anthology. The editor has been influenced by P Lal's flawed understanding of translation though she is superior to Lal in the act of translating as will be shown in a moment. Lal came to believe in the primacy of the imagination over authenticity while he painstakingly botched up the Mahabharata, which he tried to translate over the years. Unlike Umberto Eco, Lal felt the need to invent, and not coin, new words when his own vocabulary proved inadequate for that tough task. Contrast him to Father Mignon SJ, still alive, who has just finished translating the Holy Bible into regular Bengali. Fraser is in the line of Mignon SJ, rather than Lal. Therefore, Fraser's translators are immaculate in their grasps of both Bengali and English and yet Fraser unnecessarily speaks of the pitfalls of translation (57–9). But here too she is able to hold her own since she comments on the narratorial exigencies of Bengali literature vis-a-vis English narrative techniques (59). Her own 'Looking Back' proves that Fraser needlessly worries about translation. Readers are mercifully spared 'transcreations' in this anthology.

This reviewer is surprised that generations of Indian students read Padmini Mongia (see her dated *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1996)), Meenakshi Mukherjee, more ancient than Mongia, and Bill Ashcroft to understand India's colonial history and the partition event. Yet our syllabi framers somehow forget to recommend Fraser while they effusively praise Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, and Aijaz Ahmed to students of English literature and history. It may be that Fraser's humanism and non-partisanship scares hate-peddlers and atheists. It also may be that her poetry scares hardened academic hearts and prevents her book from being kept in Indian, and of course, other South Asian libraries. Poets have been known to cause anxiety since Plato.

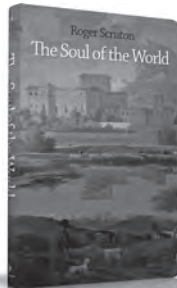
Any student or scholar wanting to understand Bengal partition and the *whatness* of the colonial situation should read this book. The best is kept for the last: Fraser's endnotes are the single most important reason why she is on a par with Richard Slotkin (b. 1942) and cause enough for us to trash the Modern Language Association's inane rules, especially regarding endnotes. What Slotkin

has done for American culture aka Exceptionalism, Fraser has done for India and Bangladesh. Mushirul Hasan's first line in his foreword to this anthology can only be appreciated after finishing the book: 'Literature has emerged as an alternate archive of the times' (xiii). This book makes Fraser equal to Ismat Chughtai (1915–91) (see Ismat Chughtai, *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2013)).

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The Soul of the World

Roger Scruton

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Roger Scruton is a man fixed in his views. That music is not music for him if it is not sacred: he condemns 'the depravities of popular musical culture' (152); as he condemns so many others, like evolutionary psychologists, in this treat of a book. But what is wrong in reclaiming the domain of the intellectual to those who are intellectuals? Jonathan Swift condemned fools; as did Shakespeare before Swift and Horace in his *Odes* much before Shakespeare. In a world where Masters' degrees are for sale, it is natural that Scruton will be dismissed as incomprehensible and orthodox. 'The Sacred Space of Music' (140–74) is the best piece of writing on music today except for the references to music that one finds in the novels of Haruki Murakami.

In his last chapter, 'Seeking God' (175–98), Scruton urges us to 'move on from [René] Girard's emphasis on sacrificial violence' (182) to 'another order of things, which reveals itself in moments of emergency, when we confront the truth that we are suspended between being and nothingness' (185). In Stephen King's *Desperation* (1996) God keeps his covenant through the little boy David's conscious search for God through prayer. This reviewer recommends that Freudian analyses of cult horror fiction give way to the paradigms constructed by the likes of Scruton; because while Scruton does not bow to non-transcendent, structuralist pressures,