

# Partition perspectives

NIAZ ZAMAN takes a look at the perspectives on the partition of the South Asian subcontinent in Syed Waliullah's short stories

The Partition (of the subcontinent) of 1947 continues to form an important resource for writers in India and Pakistan beginning with the early stories of Saadat Hasan Manto in 1948 and Khushwant Singh a decade later to Mukul Kesavan in 1995. This has not been the case in Bangladesh where the binding myth and resource has been the language movement of 1952 and then the Independence War of 1971. Politically and culturally, these two political events have served—or been used to define the Bengali/Bangladeshi identity. The Partition seems almost to have been elided.

However, it would be wrong to assume that East Bengali/East Pakistani writers completely ignored the Partition. While the fiction that deal with the Partition is much less in quantity—merely about half a dozen novels and a dozen odd stories compared to the seventy odd novels and countless stories dealing with the Liberation War—nevertheless it cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, though the Partition does not carry the same resonances for us in Bangladesh today that it does in India or Pakistan, nevertheless fifty years after the Partition and twenty-six years after the creation of Bangladesh, it is interesting to look back and examine the

treatment of Partition in Bangla fiction and see what it suggests about the East Bengali identity.

Even though the East Bengali gradually moved away from the West Pakistani, these novels suggest that, despite their Bengali identity, some of these writers at least were either inspired by the possibilities of a new “homeland,” or by the realization that this Division was necessary for a new identity. They would not deny the past but realized that independence and the creation of Pakistan gave East Bengalis a chance that they didn't have in India.

It should not be forgotten that the initial blow for Partition was struck in Bengal and the Muslim Bengali was more committed to the idea of Pakistan than the Punjabi. Even when East Pakistani writers were critical of the discriminations heaped upon East Pakistan, even when they spoke about the need for human ties that would cross religious and political borders, and even when they stressed the absurdity of the situation, they did not suggest turning the clock back and going back to a united India. (Qurratul Ayn Hyder did renounce her Pakistani citizenship and go back. Much later the critic Aijaz Ahmed has done so as well. I doubt if any Muslim Bengali has been able to go back to India except

temporarily).

## PERSPECTIVE

Two short stories by Syed Waliullah suggest how a sensitive writer from East Bengal/East Pakistan looked at Partition during the early fifties. “The Escape,” which appeared in Pakistan PEN Miscellany, suggests an all-Pakistan perspective—today we would call it a West Pakistani perspective—though Waliullah's outlook undoubtedly differs from the Urdu fiction being written in West Pakistan at the time. *Ekti Tulsi Gaacher Golpo*, translated by the writer himself, but not as far as I know published in his translation, suggests the East Bengali/East Pakistani outlook on Partition.

“The Escape” is built around the image of the train journey, perhaps the predominant image of the Partition in the Punjab and forming the focal point of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. Waliullah's story opens in a train compartment full of refugees. The reader is told that the compartment is overcrowded but, apart from the “white, but slightly soiled, embroidered cap” which an old man is wearing—suggesting that he is a Muslim—there are no other details which would disclose the religious background of the refugees. Furthermore, the reader is not

told in which direction the train is travelling. The description of the landscape outside suggests North India rather than Bengal. Like Manto's story of the train massacre which could have happened on either side of the border, Waliullah's story could have taken place on the eastern side or the western side of the border—except for the old man.

While stories written by Indians or West Pakistanis/Pakistanis tend to describe massacres, Bengali stories on the Partition generally tend to avoid deaths, and not to speak of massacres. For example, in Hasan Hafizur Rahman's short story “Ar Ekti Mrittyu”, the riots and killings are in the background and form a memory of terror. In “The Escape,” Waliullah provides greater details, but the riots and murders remain in the background, forming the memory of the young man who is the focal point of the story so that he imagines that the little girl sitting alone in the compartment is a refugee who has lost everyone. “Was she or was she not feeling miserable, utterly helpless like all these refugees travelling in the inordinately slow moving train? Perhaps she had lost her mother. Perhaps also her father and brothers and sisters. Lost all her property also, but that did not evidently concern her.”

See Page 7

However, one killing does take place—though even this does not form the action of the story. The man is already dead—though, unlike the other deaths which form the memory of the man and make him imagine that the girl has lost everyone, this dead body is lying on the platform of the station at which the train stops on crossing the border. The reader is not told whether the man was crossing eastward or westward, whether he was a Hindu killed while crossing into India or a Muslim killed while crossing into Pakistan.

#### DEMONS

The man tries to befriend the little girl but he fails. He tries to tell her a story but he never completes it. He has to get rid of the demons first, but as he tries to recollect a story and make the demons "behave like decent, well-meaning persons", he gets lost in his memories of death and destruction. The girl does not want to hear his story. "He is mad," she screams. When she continues to cry, he tries to console her. There is nothing to be afraid of now, he tells her. They have crossed the border. The girl continues to shout about a mad man, and he, not realizing that she is referring to him, looks earnestly everywhere. He opens the door of the compartment and steps out of the running train.

Finally then, the story is never told, the story of the young man who is "Neither a Prophet Mohammed, nor a Jesus Christ, nor a Gautam Buddha, neither a voodoo priest". Though the young man's terrible memories of wasted lives, of massacres and killings, of dogs eating human flesh, depict the horrors that attended Partition, through the very absurdity of his death, and of the man shot to death at the border, Waliullah questions the rationale of Partition. The only way out of the horrors of the past and the present is through a final escape. Thus, though Waliullah provides images of bloodshed and violence, he neither stresses the inevitability of Partition nor the euphoria of achieving a new homeland for Muslims.

"The Story of A Tulsi Plant" is Bengali in detail and, more importantly, in attitude. Unlike the vague setting of "The Escape," there is no doubt that this story happens in East Bengal. Here too, there are a group of refugees, but they are not fleeing from violence and mayhem. No memories of deaths haunt them. Their plight is more mundane; they are simply looking for shelter.

## Partition perspectives

The refugees discover an abandoned house. Despite some feelings of guilt, they break the lock and occupy the house. They set about making themselves at home. One day one of the refugees discovers a small tulsi plant. It has to be destroyed. "It has to be torn out. While we're in this house, no Hindu symbols can be tolerated."

The group of refugees look at the *tulsi* plant dejectedly. It is brown and dying. It has not been watered for weeks. The plant brings home to them the realization that the house they were in had belonged to other people, people of another religion.

"The house had appeared to be empty, deserted, in spite of a few names scratched by an untrained hand on the wall by the stairs which led to the roof. But now it seemed different, as if this half-dead, insignificant *tulsi* plant, caught unaware, had revealed the secrets of the house".

The man who has discovered the plant wants it to be destroyed, but the others think of the woman who must have tended that tree every evening.

"They were not entirely familiar with Hindu customs; but they had heard that in a Hindu home, the mistress of the house lighted a lamp under the plant at dusk, and with the end of her sari wrapped round her neck, made a pranam, bowing to touch the earth with her head. Though it was overgrown with weeds now, someone had lighted a lamp every evening under this abandoned *tulsi* plant, too. When the evening star, solitary and bright, shone in the sky, a steady quiet flame had burned red, like the touch of crimson paint on the bowed forehead."

Where is that woman now? One of the refugees had been a railway employee, and he imagines the woman who tended the *tulsi* plant sitting at a train window, remembering the house she had left behind and the *tulsi* plant. "Maybe her journey was not finished yet. But wherever she was, when the shadows of dusk thickened in the sky, she would remember the spot under the tulsi and her eyes would fill with tears."

One of the refugees who has had a cold since the previous day points out that they are not going to worship it. They should remember that a *tulsi* plant has medicinal values too. Its juice is good for coughs and colds. No one can destroy the plant, so it is allowed to remain. But the refugees have not forgotten why

they are huddled in this house. They discuss the Partition, blaming the division upon the Hindu community: "The country was partitioned because of their wickedness and fanaticism." They recall examples of Hindu atrocities and injustice.

But, despite their heated discussions and arguments, the *tulsi* plant is not only untouched, but starts to thrive. Someone has been watering it surreptitiously. The weeds that had grown under it have gone. Its leaves are turning dark green again. Though the man who had first discovered it does try to slash it down with a bamboo rod, he only succeeds in brushing the top of the plant, which remains unharmed.

The reader never learns who has been tending the plant. It is not important. What is significant is that someone has understood the pain of the housewife who had tended the plant and had been forced to leave her home just as these people had been forced to leave theirs. Through this simple gesture of tending the plant, Waliullah suggests the human bond that remains somewhere underneath all conflict.

But the people on top who make decisions do not care for these human bonds, just as the official who comes to tell the refugees that they are occupying the house illegally and have to leave does not understand. Has the owner complained, one of the refugees asks. "The owner?" mocks the policeman. Where is the owner? The government has requisitioned the house. Knowing they have nowhere to go to, the refugees are depressed and they forget about the *tulsi*, as they forget about the woman who tended it.

"The *tulsi* plant on the edge of the yard had begun to wither again. No one had given it water since the police came to the house. Nor had anyone remembered the tearful eyes of the mistress of the house."

Using the fact of illegal occupation—both Muslims and Hindus were occupying houses unlawfully—Waliullah moulds it into a story of human feelings and small kindnesses.

Though in this story Waliullah speaks of differences and antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims, he also speaks of human feelings which reach across all barriers. The rituals performed by the two religions might be different, but a common humanity exists that can bridge differences.

But there is an official world that does not allow this to happen. It is this world that creates barriers. The official does not bother about the refugees; he bothers even less about things like *tulsi* plants.

Even though the refugees are Muslims, and even though at the beginning they have a fear of the non-Muslims, the refusal of the writer to ascribe special goodness to Muslims alone is suggestive of the Bengali writer, far more secular in outlook than his West Pakistani compatriot at the

time— unless, of course, he happened to be a "progressive."

Thus we see that though Waliullah opted for Pakistan, like many Muslim Bengalis, he was not inspired by the myth of Partition. In his novel *Lal Salu*—translated as *Tree Without Roots*—Waliullah would suggest the fraudulence and hypocrisy behind the facade of religion. The idea that religion was not enough to hold the two wings together would slowly grow and would finally lead to the break-up of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.